

Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Washing and being washed

It's Jesus' last night with his disciples. He gathers them together in an upper room and does something that will shape the lives of his followers for centuries to come.

It's a very mundane action. As the group arrives, their feet are dirty from walking on unsealed roads in open sandals. Normally, a servant would have met them at the door and washed their feet. But the servant is absent. The natural thing would have been for one of the disciples to perform this menial task. But each left it for someone else.

I imagine they would gladly have washed Jesus' feet, but I can see them struggling with the idea of washing one another's. Peter would have found it hard to wash the feet of those two social climbers, James and John. And how would Matthew, the former tax collector and collaborator, have felt serving Simon the fanatical Zealot? So in the end, it's left to Jesus to wash their feet – even the feet of the one who would shortly betray him.

From the story so far, we learn a very simple lesson that takes us to the heart of the Christian way: the lesson of servanthood and practical love. This is meant to mark us out as followers of Christ. Servanthood lay at the centre of Jesus' ministry. He says of himself, "I am among you as one who serves."

Tonight, as we wash one another's feet, there are implications. Servanthood isn't just a nice idea; it's meant to be a tangible reality – something experienced by others and something that reveals Jesus within us. He says,

"As I have loved you so you must love one another. If you have love for one another then everyone will know that you are my disciples."

Sadly, servanthood is too often recognised by its absence. Ministry, whether lay or ordained, can become an excuse for domination or manipulation. Most of us can probably tell stories of church life damaged by people seeking power and influence; of parishes hurt by personality cliques; or individuals maintaining their 'right' to do this or that. All these machinations deny the servant heart that should lie at the centre of our life together.

A servant is one whom waits on another – literally, "to wait on table." When I place myself in the role of a servant, I'm saying to the other, "Your need is important." But more than that, "*You* are important." I'll serve you not because I like you, not because I want to, but because you are my sister, my brother in Christ.

Let's take the story on a little further and see what Peter teaches us. Peter is a person who lets it all hang out. First, he reveals an obvious pride that we may well recognise. "Don't expect me to do that for so and so. I can't forget what they did to me." But Peter also discloses a more subtle form of pride. When Jesus came to wash his feet, Peter declares, "Never at any time will you wash my feet!" This is the pride that will not accept service from others. It refuses to admit need and assumes self-sufficiency. It's the pride of individualism, which denies the very nature of Christian community. To be in community is to say, "I need you and you need me." It's a life of give-and-receive.

A third form of pride then emerges – even more subtle.

“Lord, do not wash only my feet, then! Wash my hands and head too!” Peter says this in response to Jesus’ comment, “If I do not wash your feet ... you will no longer be my disciple.”

Here’s a genuine love for Jesus, but mixed with an unwillingness to let Jesus choose his place and ministry. It’s an attitude that leads to domination of others. It insists on holding to one’s rights and privileges.

How different this is from what we see embodied in Jesus. On this night, he is on his knees, washing the dust and dirt from his disciples’ feet. Yet only days earlier, he allowed Mary of Bethany to anoint and wash him. Jesus both serves and allows himself to be served.

Finally, you’ll note that John, unlike Paul and the other Gospel writers, leaves us with no record of the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup at the Last Supper. John had other things to say. Yet there’s a deep and direct link between the life of servanthood and the Eucharist.

As we receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, we meet Jesus under the forms of bread and wine. At the altar-table we meet Jesus – crucified and risen. But we also meet him in everyday life, in the people we’re called to serve. As he says, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

In serving others we become a living sacrament to them. In reaching out to one another in service – in our willingness to wash one another’s feet, and to allow ourselves to be washed – we become, for one another, outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. We become living signs of love.

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