

## Jesus washes Peter's feet

John 13:1-11

On two occasions - once in a parish in Kent and then in Bahrain - our young people performed a lively Nativity Play with the title *Topsy Turvy Christmas*, the story of the Nativity through the eyes of two angels, who see God's plan for the birth of his son as nonsensical, until they realize that the first Christmas is *so upside down, it is the right way up*.

If you'd had the opportunity to ask Peter about Jesus and his ministry, he too would have said that the way Jesus was acting was nonsensical.

We've seen it in our series of sermons on Peter, particularly two weeks ago, following Peter's inspired insight that Jesus was *the Messiah, the Son of the Living God* (Matthew 16:16), an insight that brings with it a change of name from Simon to Peter (The Rock, Rocky). Jesus immediately begins to teach his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem where he will undergo great suffering and will be killed. But Peter cannot cope with this, he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him: *God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you*. (Matt. 16:22) In other words 'Jesus, you are talking nonsense'.

But despite Jesus' rebuke of Peter, *Get behind me, Satan* (23), Peter cannot get this idea out of his head; and almost certainly it's shared by the other disciples too, but Peter, with all of his enthusiasm and impetuosity, is the one who speaks out.

So in John's account we come to the Last Supper that Jesus shares with his disciples. In John's Gospel it is the setting for some extended teaching. Luke tells us that Peter, with John, have been asked by Jesus to go and find a room and make preparations for the meal, a Passover celebration. John gives us a sense of the solemnity of the occasion: *Jesus knew that his hour to come to depart from this world had come*. But one preparation for the meal had not been planned. There had been no-one, no servant there, to wash their feet as they arrived. This was normally the task for the lowliest servant as people arrived at their hosts. Their feet will have been dusty from walking on sandy roads. It was a courteous provision by a thoughtful host. But there were no servants in this upper room and none of the disciples, who have recently had an argument about who was the greatest, would take on this menial task... and so their feet went unwashed.

So at some point during the meal, Jesus gets up very deliberately and in an atmosphere of coldness and pride does what none of his disciples was willing to do. He removes his outer garment, wraps himself with a towel and pours water into a basin. The way he acts, as the Franciscan Brother Ramon describes, is an enacted parable, a parable in action, of *the glory of Jesus who laid aside his divine glory, stooped to become one of us, girded himself with our humanity and knelt at our feet in lowliness and love*. (Compare with Philippians 2: 1-11).

Put yourself there as one of Jesus disciples.... How are you feeling as Jesus quietly kneels before you, loosens your sandal straps, and gently washes your sandy feet? Peter is horrified and in a

similar reaction to Jesus' announcement that he would suffer and die, *God forbid Lord*...he says: *You will never wash my feet* (verse 8). Peter cannot cope with a servant footwashing Lord just as he cannot conceive of a suffering Messiah.

And yet as Archbishop William Temple wrote: *Man's humility does not begin with the giving of service; it begins with the willingness to receive it*. True humility on the part of the disciples involves accepting the ministry of the Lord towards them and allowing him to minister to us in our need. As Jesus says: *Unless I wash you, you have no share with me* (verse 8).

Then *Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and feet* (9). This is the all or nothing Peter we know and love. But Jesus replies: a bath, a shower is one thing - before going out to a party we have a bath or a shower; washing of feet is another - the dirt picked up on our feet on the dusty roads... When we come to Christ we have a bath, symbolized in baptism, unique and unrepeatable - we are washed clean, but we know along the way of our lives there are things we do, and say, and think that dishonour God, so that regularly we need to come to the Lord for our feet to be washed, which is why in every service we pause to confess our failings and allow the Lord to cleanse us afresh. And we are declared forgiven, clean.

Finally, what Jesus does in this act of washing, this topsy turvy act in which the Lord of the universe acts like a lowly slave, we are called to do to one another: *So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet* (14):

To give unselfconscious service to one another, to be willing to do humble tasks, to be involved in ministries that have no status in the church or wider community, and often go unnoticed. James Jones, the former Bishop of Liverpool, in a book entitled simply *Servant* writes this: *The radical call to every follower of Jesus is to follow the example of Jesus and to be content to be a servant*. But to serve, we need to allow the Lord to serve us, which we do this morning in Holy Communion as we celebrate Christ giving his all for us.

*Chris Butt*

### *References*

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Brother Ramon *When They Crucified My Lord*. Bible Reading Fellowship, 1999.

Temple, William *Readings in John's Gospel*. Macmillan, 1947.

Jones, James *Servant*. Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988.