

Holy Thursday - Evening Celebration of the Lord's Supper  
(Exodus 12:1-8.11-14 / 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 / John 13:1-15)  
14.04.2022

Last Sunday morning in our Gospel reading of Luke's Passion Narrative, we paid particular attention to Jesus' prayer for Simon Peter. Reading this evening's account of the Washing of the Feet, from St John's Gospel, I propose that we pay particular attention to Peter yet again... this time looking at Peter's position in the Foot Washing scene to discern what it might have to teach us.

We note that Peter was told by Jesus that He had to consent to his feet being washed: If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me. If I do not wash your feet you can have no part with Me. That is a very strong statement!

What does this teach us, if not that we are called to allow our feet to be washed by Jesus, just as Peter was?

While we are perhaps more used to reading the story of the Washing of the Feet as a teaching on humility and a call to serve others – following the example given by Jesus, this scene has other lessons to give us beside that. For some of us this might be something of a revelation.

In the account read, it is clear that Jesus gave the order to follow His example and do as He did. This is a commandment that still stands. (Hence the word Mandatum – command or order – used to describe our Holy Thursday liturgical gesture of the Washing of the Feet.) We are all meant to stoop before others to wash their feet.

Jesus' command is preceded, however, by a lesson given to Peter: the lesson that he had, to begin with, to allow himself to be ministered to.

We could maybe say that in order to equip Peter for a ministry in which he would wash others' feet, the apostle had to experience that grace for himself.

How can any of us give to another what we have not first received for ourself?

Peter was called to have his feet washed by the Master, but also by his brethren. For, in the text, it is made clear, that the disciples were called upon to wash each other's feet.

That there are many levels of understanding to the story of the Washing of the Feet yet to be discovered by Christ's disciples (ourselves included) is something which is alluded to in the Gospel text. I think of Jesus' little statement: What I do, you do not realise just now, but you will understand better hereafter.

In the story read, we see how, true to form, Peter was quick to speak... and (as he is shown to have done so frequently in many Gospel scenes) to speak without first having thought his words through!

Peter's words show that his focus was on the physical act performed by Jesus. He was appalled that the One whom he regarded as to be a Master – and whom he called Rabbi – should assume the posture of a servant... and no ordinary servant at that, but the servant of the lowest rank in the room. It was normally the slave who would wash feet of those attending a supper like this. Certainly not the One whom others followed and considered to be the leader of their group!

Peter's revulsion only goes to show that he had not been a very good listener. Clearly Peter had not heard or understood Jesus' teaching.

Had the Master not made it clear that He stood among His disciples as One who serves? Jesus had declared quite openly: The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served.

Had Peter not grasped the implication of those words?

If he did, he didn't really heed them. He certainly didn't grasp their true meaning. Peter had either forgotten or preferred to ignore this element of Jesus' teaching. (And what we are talking about here is more than just an element of Jesus' teaching; what we are talking about here is the core of Jesus' teaching!)

Peter's reaction to Jesus' action speaks to us about an attitude of heart prevalent in the group of the Twelve. This is an attitude the Gospels flag up for us in other contexts too.

The truth is that none of the Twelve saw himself as the last of the group. Each one of the Twelve was jostling for his place – not just James and John who, at least, had the honesty to say what they wanted. All Twelve wanted the first and best places in the kingdom.

When they got to the Upper Room, what were the Twelve waiting for before Jesus got up from table and took off His outer garment and tied a towel around His waist? They were all assuming that another would take on this role. Not them!

None of the Twelve did what Jesus did. None of them had taken the initiative He took. Were they waiting to see who in the group was the last? Clearly, not one of them considered that to be his place. Each one was waiting for someone else to come along and assume the servant-slave role. Each one awaited that another fulfil the menial task of foot washing that was required in the kind of setting they found themselves in. It was as if all – except Jesus – considered the ministry of foot-washer as being below their status. So much so, that they nearly appear to have been ready to forego the performance of this necessary ritual.

Undoubtedly, all the disciples were taken off-guard by Jesus' readiness to step up to the mark. Peter alone articulated his shock.

Were the others just too shocked to say anything?

The fact that no one preceded Jesus in the rush to wash feet points to the fact that, as yet, none of the Twelve – Peter included – had really understood what was required of a true disciple, not only (or primarily) vis a vis their fellow-disciples, but actually vis a vis their Rabbi, Jesus Himself.

Disciples who really understood the requirements of discipleship would have been tripping over each other to be the first to wash Jesus' feet.

The New Testament scholar, Gerhard Lohfink, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* speaks of a very beautiful tradition in the Judaism of Jesus' time which was serving the wise.

The Twelve called Jesus Rabbi. If they were truly living as rabbinic students they would have been aware of the rabbinic tradition that lists forty-eight ways through which the Torah is acquired and honoured – one of which is that I have just referred to: serving the wise. This actually entailed providing personal service for the rabbis. Among these duties of personal service would be such things as serving at table, cleaning the house, assuring domestic duties... and washing the rabbi's feet! (This is listed among the forty-eight ways of serving the wise, honouring one's Teaching Master.)

The point to be grasped then is this. It is that Jesus modelled discipleship for the Twelve in His foot-washing gesture.

Jesus modelled what being a disciple entails for all the Twelve, but, in a special way, for Simon Peter, whom He had called to serve as the first in the college of the Apostles. Jesus was showing Peter that the first must be last and the servant of all. Indeed, the slave of all!

When Jesus approaches Peter to accomplish the foot-washing gesture, Peter expresses confusion – not to say, horror. We can nearly hear him say to Jesus: Perish the thought! He declares to Jesus: You will never wash my feet. Peter still just isn't 'getting it'! Jesus' teaching baffles him. It 'throws' Peter altogether.

As a result of Jesus' insistence that he must allow his feet to be washed, the apostle goes to the other extreme. After refusing to have his feet washed, he now declares that he wants to be bathed completely by the Master. There are never any half-measures with Peter!

Peter's strong reaction serves an important purpose – for which we should be thankful.

At this point, we need to widen our vision a little and not focus on Peter alone.

What leads us to widen our way of seeing things are the words of commandment Jesus speaks, not just to Peter, but to all Twelve: What I have done for you, you must do for each other.

It is not a matter of one (even Jesus) doing for all the others. It is a matter of all doing for each other. This means that there is no longer a first and a last. We could say, there is no longer a hierarchy at all.

Peter and all the Twelve have to undergo a radical change in the way they see things; the way they see themselves and each other. They are obliged to reinterpret their vision of the world – and, more specifically, that of the community of believers.

We have to understand what Jesus requires of the Twelve to whom His words were addressed... and, by extension, of all of us to whom they still are addressed.

Jesus says: What I have done for you, you must all do for each other.

That amounts to Jesus saying this to His listeners: There is to be no domination of any one of you over any other. I invite all of you to be equal in humble love for each other.

St Benedict advocates love of this sort strongly in his Rule for Monks in which he includes the foot-washing ritual not just in an annual liturgical commemoration, but, week in and week out, when it comes to the weekly services to be lived in community in the domestic duties assigned to the brethren – from which none are to be excused. (Cf. The brothers should serve one another. Consequently, no one will be excused from service... For, service increases reward and fosters love... Let all serve one another in love... [Each week] the one who is ending his service and the one who is about to begin are to wash the feet of everyone. RB 35)

In the Gospel story read, we note how once finished with the ablutions, Jesus clothed Himself and took His place at table with His disciples. He resumed His central place as Rabbi/Teacher. In His teaching role He explained everything clearly to the Twelve, just in case anyone had still failed to grasp what He wanted them all to understand. Let us leave the word of teaching to Jesus Himself, reading in the text: If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example, so that you may copy what I have done to you. Or, as another translation puts it: If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

The Jesuit author of *Jesus a Pilgrimage* (Fr James Martin, S.J.), considering the sense of Jesus having washed His disciples feet and then having invited them to imitate His gesture, suggests that here what we see is Christ asking His disciples to move from knowledge to action. He writes: In the form of a command Jesus is speaking as Teacher and Lord, from a position of authority. So the disciples are expected to heed His message.

I would say that what we need to come understand as we read this evening's Gospel passage is that it is not enough for us to have head knowledge of Christ-Jesus, we must give expression to our knowledge of Him, at heart level, in concrete ways, through kind gestures and loving actions.

In other words, we must allow our Christian faith to inform all our decisions in life – not least, our engagements in mutual service.

What I see Jesus teaching the Twelve (and us with them) is that they (and we, just like them) are meant to express our professed beliefs in a very concrete manner. Our faith in Christ should give rise to loving actions. Without this, our Christian faith amounts to mere talk, pious discourse, void of any really meaningful engagement... and therefore of any real relevance in other people's estimation.

We should remember that actions speak louder than words.

We will have more impact by what we are seen to live than by what we say.

Finally, what I see Jesus point out specifically to Peter, in a very personal way, is that he must learn to allow himself to be ministered to, so that he may better model for all who look to him (and this in the privileged place that will be his at the centre of the Twelve) just what it means to be cared for with love.

Amen!