

Washing the Disciples' Feet

John 13:1-17



Sometimes a picture says a thousand words. The above photo was taken at the Velletri Correctional Facility, 36 miles south of Rome, on Maundy Thursday 2019, when Pope Francis continued his annual practice of visiting people who are themselves unable to come to the Vatican. In previous years, he has visited other prisons, rehabilitation centres for those who are disabled, and also a refugee holding centre. The Catholic news website Crux reported:

As Francis made his way into the room at the start of the Mass, the detainees were unable to contain their joy. The solemnity of the opening procession was interrupted by the applause and cheers of the detainees upon seeing the pope.

In his brief homily before the foot-washing ritual, the pope told the prisoners that the act of washing one's feet was a task reserved solely to slaves who would wash the feet of any guests that arrived at the house.

However, Jesus, "who had all the power, he who was the Lord, makes the gesture of a slave," he said.

"This is brotherhood; brotherhood is always humble; it is to be at the service (of others)," the pope said.¹

The Pope is not the only Church Leader to re-enact one of the most famous scenes in the Gospels, Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet described in this week's reading. When we lived in the West Midlands, the Bishop of Birmingham would sometimes shine shoes on a busy street in the city centre.

¹ For the full report, see <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2019/04/18/be-servants-to-one-another-pope-tells-prisoners-before-washing-feet/>

Perhaps this story is one we find so inspiring and challenging because the task undertaken by Jesus is, at one and the same time, so ordinary and also caring. As Tom Wright notes:

'Feet are very basic things: not pretty, not ugly, just basic. Down to earth, you might say. Washing them is both very mundane (we all have to wash our feet, and we do it so regularly we hardly think about it) and very close and personal. Washing between someone else's toes is an intimate action. It is a moment of tenderness... All of that – the love, and the down-to-earthness – comes through in this marvellous passage.'²

John sets the scene at the beginning of this passage, reminding us, in verse 1, of the great love Jesus has for 'his own who were in the world,' a love which lies behind this remarkable act of service. But it's also important to remind ourselves that this is not a cosy, relaxed moment. Verse 2 reminds us of a darker presence within the room, Judas who is about to betray Jesus.

It's hard not to read this scene without recalling the famous 'Christ hymn' of Philippians 2:5-11. In both passages, we find a description of the power of Jesus which comes before an account of his willingness to become a servant. Don Carson notes that foot washing 'was a task normally reserved for the lowliest of menial servants. Peers did not wash one another's feet, except very rarely and as a mark of great love.'³ It is understandable that some of the disciples must have been embarrassed at Jesus serving them in this way, which might explain the reaction of Peter in verse 6. In the conversation which follows Jesus warns Simon about the danger of refusing this act of love, taking the opportunity to remind him of the need to accept unreservedly the forgiveness and cleansing he offers.

At the end of the passage, Jesus urges the disciples to serve each other in ways which reflect what he has just done: 'I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.' Commenting on these verses, Tom Wright notes that, 'The word he uses could mean, in the ancient world, a picture showing how something was to be done, a tracing someone else would follow. Jesus, having washed his disciples' feet, declares that he has established a pattern for them to follow.'⁴

1. In 13:1-3, John offers some important insights into Jesus' understanding of himself at this moment. In light of what we read in these verses, are you surprised by what happens next? If so, why?
2. It would appear that Judas was still around for this scene, and so must have had his feet washed by Jesus as well? How do you think Jesus feels as he washes Judas's feet? How do you think Judas feels?⁵
3. What spiritual truth is Jesus trying to communicate to Peter (and to us) in verses 8 to 11?
4. What does this chapter reveal to you about your attitude to serving?
5. As noted above, in recent years senior church leaders have witnessed to Jesus' example in this story by washing the feet of prisoners or shining the shoes of commuters. I also knew of another minister who opened her home on Maundy Thursday to offer a foot spa to other women who lived on her street. Can you think of other ways we can follow the example of this passage and witness to Jesus by serving people?

² Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 2*, 2002, 43

³ Don Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 1991, 462

⁴ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 2*, 2002, 47

⁵ Questions 2,3 and 4 are taken from Douglas Connelly, *Lifebuilder: John, The Way to True Life*, 1992, 49