

On the Washing of Feet

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tenth sermon.ⁱ

Reading: **John 13: 1-15**
(12 minutes)

Theme: "*We follow Christ's example of bringing God into the world*"

Introduction

I can't remember having ever washed someone's feet. But I did give someone a foot massage once. A few years ago I was doing a workshop in facilitation, and we had to give each other a foot massage. I was paired up with a colleague of mine, Andre. It was a very interesting experience.

On the one hand, it was quite humbling. I didn't know Andre that well, and one's feet are quite an intimate part of the body. Also, it was late in the evening, and his feet were not as fresh as they'd been in the morning. So it was kind of uncomfortable – an intrusion into my personal space.

But on the other hand, it was quite special. As I massaged the oil into his feet I felt as though I were extending part of myself to him. As I worked through the muscles of his heels, his arches and the balls of his feet, I felt like I was giving him a gift, a piece of my own spirit. It was quite a remarkable experience of contact between two humans.

Well, in our Gospel reading tonight we have a story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, which I suppose is a bit like giving them a foot massage. But of course, this is not just a story about personal hygiene. It's not even just a story about Christ's readiness to serve others or to humble himself.

As is typical of John's Gospel, this story has multiple layers of meaning. Jesus says in verse 7, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand". Clearly, there is more to this even than meets the eye. Of course, this story is a real event that actually took place in space and time, but I'd like to suggest that we need to also read it metaphorically, symbolically. Jesus is sort of acting out a parable for the disciples and for us. So let's take a look together at a couple of the layers of meaning. Would you take up your Bibles and turn to John chapter 13.

Christ's Path

Let's start at verse 3, where John tells us that "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God". It is clear from this verse that Jesus fully understands who he is in relation to the God the father. He knows that he comes from God. He knows that he is fully in relationship with God. He knows that he is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity.

Then verse 4 tells us, "So, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist". It is in full knowledge of who he is that Jesus gets up. He serves not *in spite of* who he is, but *because of* who he is. Now we need to understand that what Jesus did is a metaphor for something else.

Let me suggest that when we read that Jesus got up from the meal, we are reading that he got up from his rightful place with the Father. In the same way that he had a right to his place at the table, because he was Teacher and Lord (v13), he had a right to sit with the Father, because he is the Son of God. And yet, he gets up from this place.

Then he takes off his outer garmentsⁱⁱ. Our clothing represents who we are. The way we dress is an expression of our identity, of our selves. In a way, our clothing is our self. So when Jesus takes off his outer garments, he is taking off his identity as the Son of God, as co-

existent with the Father. He chooses not only to get up from his place at the table, but also to strip himself of his identity.

And having taken off his outer clothes, he puts on a towel. Now this towel is obviously the towel of a servant. So Jesus takes on the appearance of a servant. He has undergone quite a radical transformation – from being seated at the head of the table to being dressed as a servant; from being at the side of the Father to being a servant of humanity.

And then in verse 5 we read that Jesus “poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him”. Christ wants to wash, to cleanse the feet of the disciples, feet which have become dirty over the course of the day. Here Jesus is bringing about a cleansing of the whole world, a washing from sin, a redemption. It is his gift to us – an extension of himself, of his love, as we heard about on Sunday. The washing of feet is symbolic of Christ’s saving work on the cross.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is then an interaction with Peter, which I don’t want to get into tonight; but let’s skip forward to verse 12. After Jesus had washed their feet, “he put on his clothes and returned to his place”. Now if we remember the imagery that was used in the previous verses, we will understand that he regains his identity and returns to his place at the side of his Father.

What Jesus has done here is to enact his entire life story – it is a parable about who he is. He comes from the Father, in union with the Father. But he chooses to get up from his rightful place, not holding onto his position; and sheds his identity, emptying himself. Then he takes on the appearance or the form of a servant, coming into the world as a human being. And while here, he performs a saving act on the cross – bringing about, through his death, the redemption of the world. And when he had completed this, he returns to his place with the Father.

Where else in scripture do we hear a story like this?

In Philippians 2. Let’s turn there.

Hymn to Christ

Follow this hymn to Christ with me, and see how striking are the parallels between the Philippians passage and the John passage.

“Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God” (vv5b-6a) – here we have Christ in union with God, seated at his rightful place with God.

“Did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (v6b) – here is Christ getting up from his place at the table.

“But made himself nothing” (v7a) – here is Christ taking off his outer garments – relinquishing his identity.

“Taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (v7b) – Christ puts on the towel of a servant.

“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (v8) – here is Christ’s washing of the disciples’ feet, his cleaning and saving work on the cross.

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv9-11) – and now Jesus puts back on his outer garments and returns to his rightful place at the meal.

Isn’t the parallel remarkable – how both passages narrate the same story of Christ’s life?!

The Example for Us

So, what does this all mean for us? Christ says in John 13:15, “I have set an example that you should do as I have done for you”. In what way is this an example for us? After all, we

don't come from God and we don't get crucified. So how has Christ set an example for us to follow?

Well let's start with Christ coming from God. Although it may sound odd, we also come from God. When we are saved, Christ comes to dwell in us. So we all, as Christians, have Christ in us. And the Scriptures say that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit – so the Spirit resides in us. And we know that when we are saved we have eternal life. This does not just mean that we live forever. Rather it means that we get to enjoy a quality of life that is eternal, and we enjoy it now already. So, in a very real way, we already live in eternity with God. It's like we have one foot in the here and now, and another foot in heaven with God. And in this way, we also "come from God".

But Christ's example is to not stay in eternity, but rather to come into our world. And in the same way, we need to be present in the world. Like Christ, we need to bring the presence of God into the world – by being there ourselves, with Christ and the Holy Spirit. We bring eternity into the world.

We need to empty ourselves and take on the form of a servant. Christ's nature was to serve us. And in the same way, we need to serve the world. And we do this by participating with Christ in the cleansing and redemption of the world. Christ has already created the path of redemption – our job is to continue to walk along that path.

Each of us will do it differently, depending on the spiritual gifts that God has given us and depending on the opportunities we have. I may do it through preaching. Kathleen may do it through evangelism. The Grants may do it through caring for the physical and employment needs of people. Marion may do it through caring for the environment.

Each of us needs to find our own way of partnering with Christ in his cleansing and redemption of the world. We do this in the way of a servant. And we do it by bringing God into the world.

And Christ says that "Now that we know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (v17).

Conclusion

In a moment, Jill^{iv} is going to wash the feet of some of the parishioners. In so doing, she is enacting for us tonight what Christ did for the disciples two thousand years ago. And as she does so, I'd like you to cast your thoughts in two directions.

Firstly, I'd like you to cast your thoughts upwards, towards Jesus. Think about the path that he followed in the world – coming from God, getting up from his rightful place with the Father, stripping himself of his position and identity, taking on the form of a servant, working to bring about cleaning and redemption for us, and then returning to his place with the Father.

And secondly, I'd like you to cast your thoughts inwards, towards your own path. Think about how you come from God and what you bring into the world from God. Think about how you are and can be a servant in the world. And think about how you participate in the cleansing and redemption of the world.

Amen.

ⁱ I received only one week's notice to preach this sermon, when the person who was supposed to preach asked to be relieved. Because I was preaching on Sunday, I couldn't spend too much energy getting into the John text – I was trying to get the Palm Sunday text into my bones.

I made several pages of handwritten notes, trying to figure out what the passage was saying. Then I created a table with three columns: (1) the manifest story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet; (2) the symbolic meaning of this as a parable of Jesus life story; and (3) the parallel implications of this for us as followers of Christ's example. Based on this I prepared a sermon, without notes. The text here was written up the day after I preached. This is not how I usually do it, but time was limited (I had only two evenings from start to end) and it seemed to work okay.

ⁱⁱ I love the fact that the Greek verb translated as "took off" is the same as that translated "lays down" in John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." I wanted to weave it in here, but time did not permit the diversion.

ⁱⁱⁱ I wanted to make the link with verse 8b, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me". The idea of having a part with Christ, is like having a 'place' with him. I wanted to suggest that when we are washed by Christ, we get a place with him at the meal – we to obtain a 'rightful place' at the Lord's table, a place in heaven with our Father. But time did not permit.

^{iv} The priest.