

Maundy Thursday

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Introduction

Yesterday, we read of Judas leaving the 'Last Supper' to facilitate the arrest of Jesus. 'And it was night'. This story is placed between verses 17 and 31b of today's reading. It is worth noting, that Jesus demonstration of self-giving love for his disciples is in the turmoil of imminent betrayal, impending suffering and an unknown future.

There is no clearer portrayal of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, than to be above all, a foot washer!

What are the essential attributes of an effective leader?

How do you respond when you are given a generous gift, far beyond what was expected?

What is behind that response?

Text

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Comment

On this Maundy Thursday, when we think of the last supper, and when we remember that it was on this evening that Jesus said 'Do this in remembrance of me', let us for a moment look at this sacrament of forgiveness and new life which Jesus has given us, through the story of the foot washing.

Jesus in the middle of this solemn meal, gets up from the table, and takes off his outer garment and now dressed only in a flimsy tunic which could go down to the knees or the ankles, which sometimes had sleeves and sometimes sleeveless, He fills a basin of water. What is he at? Jesus puts a towel around his waste and bends down and starts washing the feet of his disciples.

He comes to Peter to wash Peter's feet. Peter looks at him

"You? Wash my feet?"

"You cannot understand now, you shall understand later"

"No! You shall never wash my feet"

Peter, like many of us, instinctively believe in hierarchy. There are important people at the top and there are unimportant people at the bottom. Peter is quite prepared to wash the feet of Jesus. But it's just not right the other way around.

What would we do if Jesus came to our house and offered to tidy up the kitchen and do the washing up. And then he says, I might as well clean the toilets.

No way! I'll just do that later, it won't take a minute. That's how Peter felt.

'No, You shall never wash my feet!'

Jesus then says something very strange, "If I cannot wash your feet, you shall have no more part of me." Very strong words - "If I cannot wash your feet, you cannot share in the Kingdom"

What sort of kingdom is it where the Master is servant, where the greatest is the least? It's a contrast culture where service not success is the measure of life. Where people are valued not for who they are or what they are, they are valued because simply they are children of God.

You called me Lord and Master, so I am. "If I have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have done this as an example for you" This is the only time that Jesus says I have done this as an example. "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Imagine yourself sitting among the disciples. Jesus now comes to you. He kneels. Takes the sandal gently off your foot. And pours on the refreshing water. How does it feel that Jesus is washing your feet? Are you uncomfortable. Maybe you're more comfortable giving than receiving from others. Do you deserve this intimate act of caring from Jesus. You haven't been the person you know you should have been. This act of washing your feet makes you feel terribly exposed for who you are? There is a sense that you want to be 'left alone' like Peter rather than face what has surfaced through this act of loving service.

But Jesus insists. You have to move on to the question 'If Jesus is washing my feet, what does he think of me....?'

This act of service shows that you are loved, that you are accepted as you are, there is no need to hide, not need to cloak the past, it is all fully known, no need to pretend you are better than you are, you are loved, warts and all. You are accepted. That is what the forgiveness of Jesus means. This act of foot washing is very like the offer of forgiveness Jesus offers each of us.

Jesus ability to forgive was amazing. On the cross he said "Father forgive them for they do not know what they do." Forgiveness is easier when you can put yourself in the shoes of the other person. Jesus is that cry from the cross, "I can see it from their point of view, they don't understand. Forgive them Father."

A Croatian theologian Miroslav Wolf has said that forgiveness needs a kind of double vision. An ability to move beyond your own pain, and put yourself into the shoes of the perpetrator. To see things from their point of view.

At Corrymeela's centre at Ballycastle we have worship twice a day. People are invited to attend, they don't have to. It was towards the end of a programme and some members of a youth group turned up for what was to be their last worship. At the end of the very simple form, as people sat in a circle around a lighted candle, a cross and a Bible, the young people were asked if they wished to pray for anybody who they were concerned about. One young person said I would like to pray for a man. He is in prison tonight. He is very worried. His family is also worried. His wife and children are worried. Because tomorrow he returns to court to be sentenced. After the worship this young girl was asked, who was it that you wanted us to pray for tonight. Who was this man in prison. She said He's the man who murdered my father.

This girl had double vision. She could feel the anxiety of this man and his family. That moved her. Even though this man was the cause of such pain.

Jesus had double vision. When from the cross he said Father forgive. He looked around at those responsible, the religious leaders, the crowds shouting crucify, he looks at you and me, caught up in and contributing to the sinful web of the world, and he says Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.

How is this possible? This double vision. This possibility to find space, in our suffering to recognize the suffering of others. That space, that double vision is necessary when we have a sense that we are forgiven. We love because he first loved us. We forgive because we are forgiven.

So how can we contribute to reconciliation. We have an opportunity every time we receive communion. In receiving the bread and wine, the tokens of Christ, given up for us. In receiving this, in acceptance of Christ washing our feet, offering us forgiveness, we take another step on the journey towards wholeness. And in finding that inner peace, we have more room to undertake the costly task of forgiving others. When we know we are forgiven, then we can forgive others. When we are served with love, we learn how to serve. When we are loved as Jesus loves, then we can love others as He did.

Response

When you find it just too difficult to live in harmony with God's coming kingdom, what in this scripture passage is able to support you?

Is there someone you find difficult to forgive? Why is it difficult? Is there something we can do in response to this passage?

'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.' The foot washing and the passion of Christ are closely linked. In these acts God's true nature (glory) is revealed. Why do we find it so difficult to accept that God's true essence is 'love'?

Prayer

Shocking God,
You turn our world upside-down!
Shock us into new life,
That your loving-kindness may resonate through our thoughts, words and deeds,
And our lives reflect the generosity of Jesus' love.

Amen.

