

# Maundy Thursday

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## Introduction

The story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet is one of those stories it is hard to come to with a fresh perspective. We have heard it so often, from Sunday School, through Bible Class, and those of us who follow the lectionary hear it again on Maundy Thursday every year. It is hard for us to understand the comments within the text about Peter not realising what Jesus was doing as anything other than a flat interchange in a drama with an expected and obvious ending.

Read the text again now, perhaps more than once, and see if you notice anything new in it. Is it all just exactly as you remember? Is it one you have in fact memorised through reading so often? What does it say to us this Holy Week about the nature of Jesus' ministry on earth? What does it say to us about the church? Can you imagine, in your reading, the person who might hear this story for the first time, in the early church or on the mission field, or the child who comes to it fresh?

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## Text

John 13:1-17

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no

servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

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## Comment

On Maundy Thursday this year, why should we not take a look at the story of the washing of Jesus' feet through the lens of nineteenth century abolitionism? It may be that the abolitionist vision that the end of slavery would necessarily bring about equality was flawed, and there was no understanding of the wider structural poverty and denigration of rights that slavery would leave as its legacy in the UK and around the world. Yet, having acknowledged that fact, and without removing from John Greenleaf Whittier his romanticism, there is something in his expression of his Quaker beliefs that remains an important feature of the lesson Jesus taught his disciples that day.

With echoes of Hosea's words about the worship truly desired by God (Hosea 6:6), Whittier wrote:  
'O brother man, fold to thy heart thy brother!  
Where pity dwells the peace of God is there;  
To worship rightly is to love each other,  
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.'

The confluence of worship and kindness is the essence of Jesus' request for his disciples to serve each other and to be served by him. It is a radical expression of equality and a framing of worship as a lifetime of love and service rather than an activity held in a particular building at particular times of the week.

'Follow with reverent steps the great example  
Of him whose holy work was doing good;  
So shall the wide earth seem our Father's temple,  
Each loving life a psalm of gratitude.'

In all the politics, Whittier did not find much by way of recognition or success. It was in his poetry that he was admired and remembered. He had little formal schooling, and to pay for his education, he became a shoemaker, earning his way in learning and in politics. He had a strong theology of love, service and equality. This brought him at an early age to the abolitionist cause, and he worked tirelessly for the end of slavery using his writings. In his early life, aiming at a political career but losing an election at 25 years old, he had a breakdown and gave up formal politics, going on to be one of the founder members of the Liberty Party in 1839. He suffered again from poor health, retiring back to the countryside and yet not giving up his beliefs in the liberation of slaves and the equality of humanity. The beauty of the land and the simple life made him one of the 'Fireside Poets', painting a sentimental poetic view of the life of those on the land, Whittier himself saying he was inspired by Robert Burns.

His desire was to see the end of slavery, directly referred to, I believe, by his use of the metaphor of the falling of 'shackles' – not, to Whittier's generation, an empty metaphor, but rather a reference to the daily reality of those who lived enslaved lives. The removal of those shackles of slavery was to bring an end to all oppression, and to have in that resolution an end to violence and war.

'Then shall all shackles fall; the stormy clangour  
Of wild war-music o'er the earth shall cease;  
Love shall tread out the baleful fire of anger,  
And in its ashes plant the tree of peace.'

In these words, we catch an echo of lines in another great hymn, not written as a hymn, but as a poem, known by us as 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,' where Whittier wrote;  
'Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,  
O still small voice of calm.'

Jesus says to his disciples that if they do these things they will be blessed... Whittier interprets the blessing of service to be peace, and the act of service to be worship. In that worship, equality and human rights were at the core of his abolitionism. In 1865, slavery was abolished but the work went on, and goes on today, to find true equality in our societies, and in that equality, to build lasting peace.

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## Response

Sing together or on your own one of John Greenleaf Whittier's hymns. Does it make a difference to the power of the words that you know about his campaigning to end slavery, through failures and finally to success? What does that story of the work to legislate for freedom say to you? Are there words in his writings that stand out with that perspective in mind?

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## Prayer

God who loves all equally,  
may we find equal rights, equal opportunities and equal treatment in our lives,  
and may we in turn act towards all others with radical equality.  
Through the fires of violence, hatred and malevolence may we walk the path of  
peace  
that all may know the calmness of a life lived in love,  
Amen