St John’s Thursday 7 May John 13:16-20

The disciples often seemed confused over Jesus ministry. They were influenced by the popular Jewish notion of the Messiah claiming the kingship over Israel, ruling the nation as the lawful Son of David and delivering them from the Romans. They anticipated how they would be given important positions of power, honour, wealth and influence in the royal court of Jesus. Sometimes, they were even competing openly for Jesus’ favour; James and John had asked him explicitly for the best positions in his government.

The Gospel reading is during the last supper. Jesus is ready to send out his close friends and disciples on a lifelong mission of proclamation and service. It would be the last time he would see them before his arrest, trial and execution.

The culture at that time was that, before sitting down, the dinner guests would have their feet washed. This was a kind of welcome ritual, also important also for hygienic reasons as, the guests would have walked through the dusty streets of the busy city.

In the time of Jesus, feet were considered the most detested parts of the body. To wash someone else’s feet was a task given to a slave or servant, preferably non-Jewish. Obviously, here there were no slaves.

Jesus got up, took off his outer garment and wrapped a towel around his waist. Dressing like a slave, he took a washing basin and a water jar and knelt before the disciples to wash their feet.

Some let him do it without saying a word. We don’t know whether they were embarrassed or not. Peter was the first to protest. Jesus explained to Peter that he simply had to do what he was doing.

The disciples were secretly self-satisfied with their own position as our Lord's friends and startled at the idea of washing people's feet! They could not bring themselves to believe that Messiah's service involved work like this. They couldn’t yet see that the true Christian life consisted in doing good to others. They needed our Lord's example: If He had humbled Himself to serve others like this, His disciples must not hesitate to do the same. Also they should be open to be served by others.

When Jesus had finished, re-joining his disciples around the table, he asked them whether they understood what he had been doing. He gave them the assignment to do to one another what he had done to them. That is where the Gospel reading of today takes over. One thing we are taught, in these verses, is that Christians must never be ashamed of doing anything that Jesus has done. “I tell you the truth, 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.”

Jesus does not play down his own identity or status. He is the master, they are the slaves. He is the teacher, they are the disciples. He is God, they are people. Jesus washes their feet as a clear message to them: Nobody can claim that they are too good or too important to serve others or to be served.

We know from other Bible passages that there are multitudes of ways to serve others. Serving is not only in big ways like going overseas to serve those in great need. In Matthew 24 Jesus tells us that we can serve others simply by giving them a drink. In lockdown we can serve others by doing their shopping, phoning them up for a chat even sending an encouraging text. We can even bless someone as we pass them 2 meters away in the street by them seeing us smile (assuming we aren’t wearing a mask!) We can be a listening ear to those in need including the lonely and bereaved.

There can be seasons in our lives when we are unable to give out to others because we need help and support. The Lord knows and understands this. We need to be kind to ourselves. We need to let Jesus minister to us directly through His Spirit or indirectly through other people.

Jesus calls for humility. Not the kind of humility that plays down who we are. Not the kind of humility that says, “Oh, I’m not good enough; I’m not educated; I’m unemployed; I can’t do it, I’m not worth it etc.”

Jesus calls for humility that says, “I know that I am the son or daughter of the King of heaven and earth. I am the richest person in the world, because I will inherit the kingdom of my Father. But I am still going to serve others, whoever it is.” Humility is also seen in being able to receive through others.

This should encourage all who set out to do good, and specially doing good to the weak and the poor. Work of this kind gets little praise from men. We can be seen as ‘do gooders’ and can face opposition. Let us persevere, and take comfort in the words of Jesus which we are now considering. JC Ryle “To spend and be spent in trying to do good, makes a man far more honourable in the eyes of Jesus than to command armies or amass a fortune. “

NB What Jesus is saying does not mean that we should allow others to manipulate us, to push us down, and to abuse our goodness.

In the Middle Eastern culture, where the Bible is set and where Jesus lived, social life revolves around the concepts of honour and shame. I think it is just as much a mark of Western society, even though maybe we don’t recognise it.

In our culture it brings honour to succeed in life. Social status and financial wealth bring honour. Winning a conflict or an argument brings honour. On the other side, failure, bankruptcy, poor education or social status, or losing a dispute bring shame. It brings shame to be found guilty of an offence and receive a fine. Many people feel shame or embarrassment due to divorce, unemployment or mental health issues. The good news is that Jesus doesn’t view us like that.

When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, how did the disciples feel? I think Peter’s reaction said it all. They were confused and embarrassed. They found it difficult to receive Jesus service. Perhaps, they thought that one of them should get up and do it. Or maybe, they had intensely studied the ceiling of the upper room, hoping it would be over soon and they could get on with the actual dinner.

In many churches, the vicar or pastor is called a minister. The word “minister” comes from Latin. It means servant or one who serves. Actually, we are all called to be ministers. – to serve.

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, 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.”

We all want God to bless us. Let us be like Jesus and be proactive. Let’s go and serve others with a humble servant heart. Let us also receive God’s blessing as we allow others to minister to us.

It doesn’t matter about your education, your profession (if you have one), your job, your income, your age, your skills and talents, your language, colour or nationality. Can you imagine what a testimony it would be to others—to newcomers in our town, especially to those who have not yet given their lives to Jesus—if they entered our community only to be overwhelmed by the common spirit of love, humility and service? Let us give and receive, love and be loved, serve and be served pray for others and receive other’s prayer.

“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

Richard Foster “True service is free of the need to calculate results.
True service is indiscriminate in its ministry True service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need.”