

## Jesus' Foot-Washing Still Challenges Us

The task of washing feet in the era when Jesus came to us in human nature involved removing the dirt and grime that would become attached to sandaled feet in traversing unpaved roads shared with various kinds of draft animals and other livestock. It was a job carried out by the lesser for the greater. In Roman households that held slaves, the job was reserved for slaves. (By the way, people in those days became slaves for one of two reasons, either by belonging to a recently conquered nationality - or by abject poverty – as a means to avoid starving to death.) In more modest households, the practice reflected the hierarchy, that is, children washing parents' feet, women washing men's feet, as when Jesus had his feet bathed by Mary Magdalen. Disciples washed their teacher's feet, but never the reverse.

When Jesus reverses the order, the greater serving the lesser, it was shocking, unheard of, an even subversive act on his part. The greater bows to the lesser, the master washes the feet of his disciples? Peter, normally outspoken it seems, was correct to question Jesus' self-humbling action given everything he had ever experienced of human interaction. Everything that Jesus did was intended to reveal the Father's love to a doubting and unbelieving human race. Jesus often said "The Son only does what He sees the Father doing." We have a heavenly father who washes feet! In fact He is doing so every day. As St. Paul put it, God sends His life-giving rain on the righteous and the wicked. His mercy is incomprehensible to us on purely human terms, of what we are used to in normal human interaction – good things come only if I earn them.

Jesus had first removed his outer garment remaining with only the simple tunic that was worn next to the skin, which was the only clothing that was typical for a slave. With a cloth for drying tied around his waist, he kneels before Peter. Peter questions this, but Jesus says, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will understand later." Peter's questioning now becomes utter refusal: "You will never wash my feet."

"Unless I wash you, you will have no (literally) part with me." An interesting – typically cryptic - comment that it is worth taking time to unpack. Unless you and I are willing to be cleansed by Jesus, we cannot become part of his body and inherit

what He has promised, which includes eternal life. To belong to Him, we have to let him make us clean. We can't do that for ourselves no matter how hard we try. Here is the very lesson that Peter will learn (bitterly) later that same night in his three-fold denial of Jesus. Good intentions do not avail in the matter of being cleansed in the way that Jesus means it. In an earlier teaching, Jesus had explained to them that it is the Word that He has given to them that can make them clean. He compares it to pruning a vine to remove all that is not fruitful for the Kingdom of God. So, it is the Word of God transmitted through Jesus' teaching that reveals the remaining bastions of willfulness, self-centeredness, and pride that remain to be cleansed. How would we know what to take to the confessional if there were no measure of our progress in becoming holy?

Once Peter gets it, he is all in! "Bathe my head and my hands, Jesus." Oh, that that might be my heart! Do you long for the cleansing power of Jesus working in you by the power of His Spirit to wash you and make you whole and pure for Him? The head represents our thoughts; the hands our actions. Unfortunately, if we refuse the cleansing of His Word, like Judas we can remain outwardly part of Him – but under false pretenses!

The final lesson for us tonight has to do with the troublesome issue of authority. One way of hearing this Gospel reading is to assume that what Jesus is doing is simply overturning all authority. That certainly fits neatly with our current mania for pulling down authority and refusing to accept any authority over us as legitimate. We would be wrong to do so! Jesus will have none of this! Far from denigrating authority, He shows how authority provides a necessary and healthful effect in society and especially in His Church. The word "authority" comes from "author", that is, the one who "wrote the book", someone who is accepted as having more knowledge about something, as the apostles would have about Jesus and his teachings. The Church would need their authority in this sense, would rely upon it and still does. Proper authority has the potential to protect a family or a society or the Church from destructively veering off course and betraying what is authentic and life-giving. Without it, each person and each generation is condemned to start from scratch, having to reinvent the wheel, making avoidable and painful mistakes. That is the path that our society has increasingly chosen. The only way that authority can be seen as anything other than a desire to control and constrain others' choices is the humility that Jesus has commanded.

Jesus reminds them: "You call me 'teacher' and 'master', and rightly so, for indeed I am." He is not denying His authority but explaining what they can do to prevent their authority from going to their heads and even corrupting them as it had the religious teachers in Jerusalem who about to arrest Jesus. "If I therefore... have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet...as I have done for you, you should also do." Here is how you are to exercise authority, by emptying yourself of all pride of position and self-importance. Priests: wash your parishioners' feet as an antidote to the dangers of creeping self-importance. Fathers: wash your children's feet as a reminder to them that the authority you exercise over them is out of love, tempered with humility, not willful.

Now, I don't imagine that washing feet must be the precise and literal act although it wouldn't hurt to use the same action that Jesus used, as we do here once a year. There are many ways we can (symbolically) wash feet. Any act of humility that reminds us that we are really equals even though we have to accept someone's authority for our own good. What a healthy thing this could be in every family, in every corporation, not to mention the Church of Jesus!

Tonight, we celebrate an act of God the Son's humility. God came into this world and took human nature upon Himself to die in our place, to break the hold of spiritual bondage that holds the human race in slavery to rebellion against the loving authority of God in our lives. Jesus launched His Church around the Saving Meal of His Body and Blood, the New Passover, and by extension establishes the priesthood upon a new and fundamentally different model of authority. Let us live this model in our families and in our church, in our work places, as we are able, and share it with a world that desperately needs to be saved from its fear of or refusal to accept God's authority!