

Washing Feet John 13:1-17, 31-35

I am convinced that the disciples must have been confused by the events of Thursday night – from almost the beginning. If you move the setting away from the dinner table and into somewhere more formal it has the feel of a team briefing. The message worded carefully so that there is no misunderstanding, but equally so that the news does not seem quite so bad as it is.

And the message is very clear – love each other as I have loved you, and then everyone will know what you are about. Set in the context that Jesus would no longer be with them.

But before he verbalises that message, Jesus demonstrates it – by washing feet. Which seems a simple enough act until you consider it more closely.

In a hot country with dry dusty roads, with a group of people unable to afford animals to ride, with nevertheless lots of animals wandering around, with only sandals to wear their feet would have become dirty and smelly. Anyone would look forward to cleaning and cooling their feet when they arrived. But on this occasion, it didn't happen. It was only after they had sat down to dinner with dirty feet that Jesus sprang into action. Washing feet was a job reserved for the most lowly and in particular Jewish slaves were not even expected to do it. Nobody had seen it as their job.

Jesus assumes the role. Not in a half hearted sort of a way but he does it thoroughly, removing his outer clothes and drying the disciples feet with a towel.

He washes all their feet. It is easy to become distracted by Peter having one of his petulant moments and fail to notice that Judas was included in this act of service. Given everything that he knew at the time why would Jesus include him, rather than wait until he had left and then do it? Probably because it is important for us to understand that we should serve everyone whatever their intentions, and not just those that we have some affinity with. We do not know what is going on in their hearts and minds, whatever outward messages they may be giving.

It doesn't appear that anyone tried to reciprocate by washing Jesus' feet – certainly there is no record of it.

Because we have recently been visited by groups of children experiencing the Easter Journey I've washed a few feet in the last few weeks. For something so mundane it is quite a surreal experience. Although we are conscious that it is part of a drama, we are just acting, I often feel that there is some embarrassment by the people being washed, are their feet clean, oddly shaped.? There is no need for embarrassment as their feet have stepped out of a shower and into clean socks, and I am only making a gesture at washing, but having it done for you just feels wrong.

I feel an irrational vulnerability – these are my friends – we want to portray the Easter story to the children, the actors are not about to kick me or my bowl in order to enjoy the confusion that it brings. But I understand just a little of how those slaves must have felt. And am pleased to be safely back on my feet again.

But the most surprising thing is that despite being surrounded by ten year olds, albeit quiet ten year olds enthralled by what they are seeing, the foot washing is a one to one intimate experience. As I kneel before someone it is only about the two of us. Everyone else has slipped off my radar. And it feels natural to ask about where those feet have been that day. As I stand, I become aware again of the children, of the group that we form. Although the washing is a one-to-one process it brings the recipient into the community of the washed.

Just as baptism, confirmation and ordination are individual, they bring us or affirm us into the church community.

The foot washing is an example of cleansing that the disciples, that we, can comprehend. How much harder is it to understand how someone would be willing to show their love not just with their life, but by giving their life in such a public and humiliating way? It is hardly surprising that the disciples were confused. It was done to help them to understand Jesus' greater sacrifice.

In fairness, modern British living does not produce a great need for foot washing, but there is a great need for all sorts of service. I have a vivid memory of waiting for a bus to take me to what I thought was an important meeting – it turned out not to be. But as I waited for the bus, I helped someone fill in the form to get a replacement pensioner pass and explained what she needed to do next. Probably the most useful thing I did that morning. We are not in control of the need for our service, only whether we are alert to that need and respond appropriately.

'Love one another as I have loved you'. It is our instruction, our call to service. How we respond will rightly (and sometimes wrongly – if you have been following Dust and Glory this Lent!) be different for all of us, different in other situations. We may be called to big sacrifices, or small, to lifechanging actions or a succession of little tasks. Sometimes we will be acutely aware of putting others first, at others it will have felt so natural that we will hardly notice. Our acts of love will never match the sacrifice of Jesus but can acknowledge our understanding of our commission.

Last Friday the Jimmy Tots came into church for their Easter service. Paul and I told them the story of Palm Sunday and we sang 'we have a King who rides on a donkey'. One of the verses that we didn't sing, but which is probably my favourite, goes 'We have a King with a bowl and towel'.

Our King who instructed us to love one another showed us his love by dying for us, but tonight we remember him through his simple act of love to his friends.

'We have a King with a bowl and towel, Servant King is Jesus.'