

Maundy Thursday Sermon – John 13:7-8 - Dr Stephen Pietsch
Learning how to be washed

No Lord you shall never wash my feet.

What was this? Misplaced reverence for Jesus – No Lord I hold you in such high regard that you could never do something so menial for me?

Was it perhaps pride or human independence. We know Peter after all. He is a blustery, head-strong kind of man who likes to be on the giving end of the action – *No, Lord my feet are not that dirty. I don't need you to do that for me, Lord?*

Was it a mixture perhaps of both?

I was once talking to a Latvian German lady who had lived a very independent and capable life. Having become ill and lying in hospital she said to me "*Pastor you know in here I have learned the hardest lesson of my life*". I asked: *What's that?* She said "*the hardest thing I have ever learned is to be washed by somebody else*". And she told me that the first time she was bathed by the nurse, while she lay there unable to move, she cried – not because she was in pain, but because somebody was doing for her what she could no longer do for herself.

Sinful human nature often shows itself in us *wanting* others to serve us all the time, even when we don't need it. Yet what contradictory creatures, we are! When we do need the help of others, we may rather suffer in silence than trouble somebody else for help or support. We want to "do for ourselves", stay in control, cope, look after ourselves and not have to rely on another, especially somebody of whose care and attention we may feel unworthy – as Peter seems to here.

I do not know how many times in parish ministry I found out through the grapevine that somebody under my pastoral care was struggling with a problem or a burden, and when I said: You should have told me, they answered: *I didn't want to worry you with my troubles, Pastor.*

At bottom, maybe what it's all about is that part of our fallen nature is that we want to call the shots; we want it on *our* terms. To accept the service, the help, the care of somebody else undoes this, because it humbles us. It puts us in the place of not being powerful and in control, not being in charge, but vulnerable and weak. And that is hard because it shatters our stubborn underlying illusion that we are God, at least over our own little kingdom.

But check out Jesus' response!

Unless I wash your feet, you have no part of me, Peter.

'Peter, unless you become humble and weak and vulnerable, and receive my service to you, you are not ready to be my disciple. Until you learn to receive you will not be ready to give'.

Jesus' words of rebuke turn out to be prophetic, do they not? Peter goes out later that very night in the self-sufficient and self-possessed human confidence of his own commitment and loyalty to Jesus. He starts swinging his sword and lops off an ear...all

very strong and impressive, until he fails and falls more grievously than ever before, denying Jesus, not once but three times.

No Peter, you must learn that Jesus is the one in charge here. Kingdom is coming, on His terms, not yours. Peter, depend on Jesus Christ. Learn to be small. Learn to be still. Learn to be served by your Lord. Learn that before God actually you have nothing and that you are weak, and that you need to depend on Jesus for everything.

Do you need to learn this too? I do – often. We need to have our illusions of self-sufficiency taken away and be taught the grace of accepting the service of others, and most importantly of all, the service of Jesus, who shows us his grace, his capital 'G' Grace. He saves us, loves, rescues us entirely by his holy suffering and death, without any help from us.

That is what makes it possible for us to receive that greater washing, not just of our feet but of our whole being, body and soul, the washing of regeneration, holy baptism, through which each one of us is cleansed and purified and brought into sharing Jesus' death and resurrection. It is a wonderful witness to God's work of grace that he baptizes little infants who very obviously cannot do anything themselves – they are totally dependent. Through that total gift each one of us become part of the Body of Christ in which Jesus continues to *serve us* through his pure gifts of word and sacrament, and through one another.

You know the song of course:

Brother let me be your servant.

Let me be as Christ to you.

**Pray that I might have the grace to
Let you be my servant too.**

At one Maundy Thursday service some years ago, I washed the feet one of the men in the congregation I was serving at that time. He was a strong and powerful man – always ready with a joke, or to cope with and look after anything, always telling others "No worries, I'll do it" – and he did. That night when his feet were washed, he looked very uncomfortable; he went quiet, quieter than I had ever seen him before. He was choked with emotion. At the end of the service he said to me "I think you blew my cover".

Tonight, the night of Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper, we have and will hear a lot about the Body of Christ. That is indeed the holy and precious gift we will receive at the altar. But that is also what we, the church, *are*, Christ body.

We are members of one another, in Christ. We are all called, first to get washed, then to wash the feet of others. Do you want to serve others? Do you want to be foot washer? Do you want to be Christ to others?

Then you are in the right place - come to this altar tonight and receive Christ, his body given for you, his blood shed for you. Come, in your need, in your weakness and be served by him.