

Sermon at the Eucharist of the Last Supper

readings: [Exodus 12.1-4, 11-14](#), [1 Corinthians 11.23-26](#), [John 13.1-17, 31b-35](#)

6 April 2023

John 13:31-35 Washing feet and Love one another.

In this account, on Maundy Thursday we get a glimpse into that room and that meal and an anxious Jesus. He's anxious about what is coming, not just his own suffering but the many betrayals of his friends that he was going to have to endure.

How does he respond to this set of circumstances? As far as I can see, he humiliates himself and then asks his followers to do the same as a sign of power and love. Am I confusing humility with humiliation? No.

Humility is the word usually employed to describe Jesus' disrobing and washing the disciples' dirty feet and that is correct, but the action Jesus performs is also humiliating in a first-century Mediterranean context. You've heard it said that the task of washing feet fell to lowly servants/slaves, but it is more accurate to say that it was usually performed by lowly female servants. As much as it pains me as a woman to say it, the fact that Jesus takes on the task of a female servant is extra humiliating, especially in the eyes of the disciples.

The shock and resistance we see in Peter's response, who suggests that Jesus wash his hands and head as well, comes from that sense of being uncomfortable with seeing Jesus in this role. He is trying to force Jesus out of the female servant position into the role of a male, religious leader. Don't wash my feet, baptize me! But Jesus pushes back against his discomfort because his humiliating role-reversal is central to the lesson he is teaching the disciples. When Jesus asks them to wash each other's feet he is shocking them into a realisation about the nature of true power. True power is love that doesn't count the cost.

Jesus identifies himself as the slave and messenger of God so that they might realize that they will be his slaves and messengers in the world and follow this example of humility/humiliation. Such a reversal of power—one that serves in humility and performs the work of slaves rather than claiming and coveting male authority—is, according to Jesus, the antidote to the evil pattern of the world.

Since such an example is so difficult to follow, they will need to support each other. The new commandment Jesus gives is not the "love God and love your neighbour" that we see in the Synoptic Gospels, but one that emphasises the importance of resisting evil together, in community and through their love for one another. Everyone will know Jesus' disciples by their love, yes, but also by their willingness to be humiliated, to value servanthood, and to work to reverse the hierarchy that evil has set up and perpetuated in the world.

So how do we live out this call to humility and humiliation as a sign of power and love?

Can we learn to love without counting the cost? Jesus washes and feeds Judas who will betray him, Peter who will deny him, and all the rest who will fail to stand by him in his hour of greatest distress. The love that Jesus demonstrates is certainly not based on the merit of the recipients... and Jesus commands his disciples to love others in the same way. This is a hard teaching, that is why we need one another, for support and encouragement and guidance.

Nevertheless, Jesus could not be clearer: It is not by our theological correctness, not by our moral purity, not by our impressive knowledge that everyone will know that we are his disciples. It is quite simply by our loving acts—acts of service and sacrifice, acts that point to the love of God for the world.

So go forth and love fearlessly, selflessly and in joy. Because when you do, you are indeed good news.
Amen.

**The Revd Carla Vicêncio Prior,
Canon for Community Learning**