

Maundy Thursday VPBC 29th March 2018

Who is the greatest? Pecking orders and level playing fields. Geoff TH)

John 13:1-17, John 13:34

On our washing line in the garden we have a bird feeder. We fill it up with nuts from Lidl and particularly in the early morning we see a succession of small birds feeding off it: finches, coal tits, blue tits, even the robins have learned a new skill. They squabble a bit but it is usually well behaved, and each takes turns and gives space on the feeder with several birds feeding at one time. That is until the parakeets turn up. These are much bigger birds. No one messes with the parakeets. The small birds must just wait till the parakeets have eaten their fill. **Welcome to the pecking order.**

Adi told me the story, while he was cutting my hair, of his experiences of **servicing at table.** He is trained in silver service and you were told to serve the ladies first. That is until there is a lord at the table. With a lord at the table, the lord gets served first. Working in St James's palace there were a lot of lords. Welcome to the pecking order.

Tonight, on Maundy Thursday we will think a bit about pecking orders. The natural order of things. In contrast to this was the breaking in of **God's new order of things.** A new mandate. A level playing field. A Jesus space. A Jesus order of things.

The word cosmos or world occurs forty times in these next five chapters. Yet it is precisely at this point of the narrative that it switches from the public to the private. Away from the noisy, smelly, dirty streets to the quiet order and companionship of a lit room ready for supper and food ready to be served. The theologian *Bultmann* poetically observes, *"the noise of the cosmos has died away, the stillness of the night prevails."* The disciples will remain in the world/cosmos, but **Jesus is about to depart. On the eve of this separation Jesus undertakes two prophetic actions.** The first one we will look at which is the washing of the disciple's feet. The second we will leave unexamined, the giving of the morsel of food to Judas.

"Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave the world and to go to the father. He had always loved those in the world who were his own, and he loved them to the very end." (John 13:1). **The act of washing the disciples feet is a back drop** to the reality of God's purposes soon to be fulfilled in the agony, shame and humiliation of the cross. In leaving the table and taking off his outer garment and tying a towel around his waist is described in language echoed in *John 10* of a "laying aside" as the good Shepherd of the sheep. *"The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life in order that I might receive it back again." (John 10:17).*

Jesus undertakes this menial servant role, at the same level of tying or retying sandals, in the middle of the meal. This is a bit strange. Normally, for instance, you wash your hands before you eat. In the same way you would do this foot washing before you reclined to eat on cushions. But there were no servants present and nobody else offered. In the middle of the meal, however, to underline the point, Jesus gets up

and gets the basin and the water ready. As he works around the room he is met with silence. Except of course to when he gets to Peter. Peter puts into words what the rest were thinking but were too embarrassed to express. *“Are you going to wash my feet, Lord?”* Really. Are you serious? *“Never at any time will you wash my feet.”* This is normal human behaviour. Disciples, or followers, wash the leaders’ feet not vice versa. It is abnormal and improper if leaders go around washing and doing the menial jobs and serving others first. All normal management charts require chains and layers of authority and responsibility. **All of us, except for those on the very bottom, have vested interests in keeping to this normal pecking order of things.** An established hierarchy that is maintained; so that those who are above bear down on those that are below. **Jesus by his foot washing turns all this upside down.** It threatens the stability of how society is usually organised whether through caste or class, or money, power, politics and religion. But it is also hard to understand. Peter does not understand it. He will at some point, but he does not understand it now. **It is not just an enacted lesson in being humble but a demonstration that the old way is ending and the new is coming.** It is the ultimate undermining and under cutting of all human power and authority in the act of God’s servant on the cross. A cross where Jesus was crucified by the decision of the powers that rule this present age. The wisdom of religion, politics and society that were shown to be stupid. Where such hierarchies of power and establishment were “disarmed.” Powered down in the light of the cross. As Paul writes *“And on that cross Christ freed himself from the power of the spiritual rulers and authorities: he made a public spectacle of them by leading them as captive in his victory procession.”* (Col 2:15).

What Jesus was doing in private, illustrated by foot washing, he was soon to do in public as the “Suffering Servant.” Yet while Peter will come to understand this, as will others later, at the moment he does not understand. **We tend to make gods in our own image, and to think of the supreme God stooping to be the figure of a slave, clad only in loin cloth is very difficult.** Peter bluntly refuses. Pecking orders and hierarchies make much more sense than level playing fields. **Yet it only makes sense, it only becomes sensible if you accept the cross and what it means to be cleansed of our false sense of wisdom and power. To see and understand and be able to embrace God’s new level playing field order. The total over turning of the powers of this world and the shape of holy living- to be more like a Jesus order of things.**

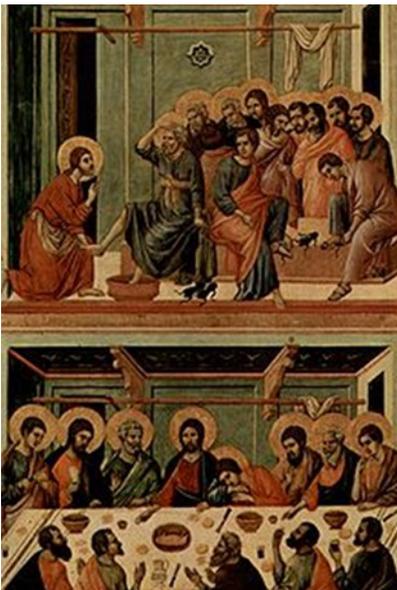
So, with the same deliberation with which Jesus laid aside his outer garment to do the foot washing he puts his clothes back on and returns to the table. The slave is the master. The master is the slave. All normal understandings of power and authority are over turned.

Religious power tends to reinforce existing social hierarchies. The Queen giving out Maundy Thursday money to 92 people who were selected by ministers has been going since the 13th century. The rich giving to the poor is just patronage- not new order thinking. It is pecking order practice not flat playing field principles. The Roman Catholic

practice of old involved washing the feet of twelve people was a pantomime of ritual reinforcing hierarchies of power not servant living.

This living involves contradiction. Jesus says to them *“I your Lord and teacher have just washed your feet. You then should wash one another’s feet”*. **If Jesus had said to them – “you must now wash my feet” they would have been fighting over who got first to the basin and water.** The old pecking order would have been re-established but under the camouflage of “service.” The Chief Minister would have become the old ruler under a new name. In Jesus new order level playing field he says; *“You should wash one another’s feet.”* Servants of one another. A kind of equality. A flat playing field. It is not based on rights. After all are not my rights just as important, if not more so, than yours? This is pecking order thinking. Rather equality is based on that the one alone who is Lord has proved to be slave of us all equally. **Jesus laid aside his life for us all and from his new order we are called to love not just our neighbours but our enemies.**

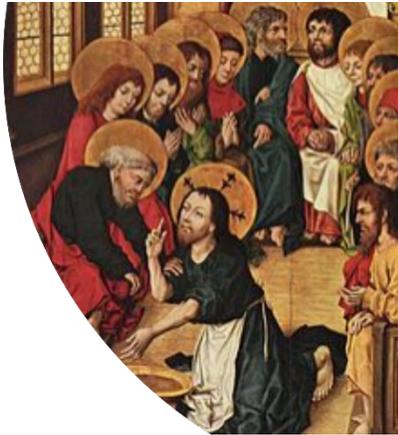
Seated round the table is Judas. One that has already been inwardly seduced by the evil one (*Luke 22:3*). The intention to betray has already been formed in his mind. Jesus washes his feet too. We are called to wash the feet of one another, our neighbour, our enemy not by the strength of our own moral insight but as the fruit of what Jesus has done once and for all. **The source of that love comes from Jesus, not from us, but it empowers us to the same kind of new order level playing field practice.** There may well be different roles, responsibilities and gifting in God’s church but there can be no true leadership except that which follows the example of Jesus- who does the menial work of a slave.



But it is one thing to know and another to do. *“Now that you know this truth, how happy you will be if you put it into practice.”* (*John 13:17*). This is where we come to the mandate.” Mandatum” Thursday. Taken from the first line of the Catholic liturgy “Mandatum novum do vobis ut diligatis invicem sicut dilexi vos” Maundy Thursday or Mandate Thursday. A command night performance encapsulated in *John 13:34* *“And now I give you a new commandment; love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”* This is at the moment Judas goes out into the night for his rendezvous with the priests. Jesus now gives this new commandment resting upon a new gift. The love of Jesus, which marks and creates this new community. The presence of the love of Jesus as it operates in the life of the community will identify it as his. Jesus space. The pecking order has gone. The level

playing field has come. It is a sharp break. Old to new.

The rite of foot washing has continued throughout the Christian centuries. From Tertullian, to Augustine, to Benedict. Practised from Africa to Europe - including Italy to Ireland. Fringe reform groups, particularly from the 16th century radical reformation Mennonites and Hussites, practised it. Yet also Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and



Byzantine Catholic practiced foot washing as well as the Oriental and the Coptic Orthodox church. Even to this day protestant churches including the Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Moravian and many Baptist have as an integral part of the Easter celebrations the act of foot washing. We live, perhaps, in more enlightened times and it is easier for it to remain as an idea or a homily than an act. In my work with Wood Green Mennonites such a service was not just limited to Easter but linked to communion on occasion. **It was an acknowledgment of our frequent need for cleansing and renewal. A willingness to let go of pride and worldly power as an act of humble**

service and love. The physical act of washing one another's feet was uncomfortable and disturbing but also healing and communal as a shared act of worship together.

So, by way of finishing I think we may say together part of the liturgy drawn from a Canadian Mennonite foot washing service as a form of "virtual reality."

Whenever we take this towel and this basin we proclaim the way of life, the way of the cross.

The very suffering love of nonviolence and reconciliation.

May our kneeling and rising deepen our love, for Jesus and for our brothers and sisters around the table.

May our kneeling and rising deepen our love for our neighbours and for our enemies.

In our kneeling and rising may we find release from our disunity and be released into joyous communion.

Come, let us wash each other's feet!

We end by being reminded that servanthood is a lifestyle not a ritual. It is without pride and ego and with confidence in one's self and authentic love for others rooted in Jesus love for me and for us. "So, we listen to the song "*Brother sister let me serve you*" and reflect as we listen.