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# So Much for Servant Ministry

John 13.1-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 1, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Last week I met a lively young teenager who'd recently had some bad news. She was facing up to the reality that the crutches that she'd been leaning heavily on since an accident 15 months ago might need to be supporting her for life. She'd got involved in a prank which ended with her falling out of a moving vehicle and getting her ankle crushed. We were standing beside each other in a buffet line for dinner, and I quickly realized she needed her hands to hold her crutches, so she had no hands free to fix her dinner plate and carry it, along with her napkin, silverware and sweet tea, from the table to where she was due to sit. She was going to need me to do all that. In that moment I had a vision of what her life had turned into, and all the simple details that were now proving immense obstacles. I said to her, "How on earth d'you manage with the crutches and all the inconvenience?" She simply replied, without an ounce of self-pity, "You get used to it. You can get used to almost anything after a while."

You can get used to almost anything after a while. It's true. You find coping mechanisms, support networks, carefully-honed techniques and places to take out your frustration. Somehow you adapt to the new normal.

And that makes it easier to understand how we get used to the fact that we had the Lord of Glory in our midst and we contrived to crucify him. You'd think that would be a fact we'd never get used to. It's hard to imagine how any coping mechanisms, support networks, or carefully-honed techniques would equip us to come to terms with that particular fact. But we're a pretty resilient bunch, and we really can get used to anything after a while. Even that. In fact we get so good at it that we wrap around it a whole parcel of convictions that make us feel pretty good about Jesus' death all round, and insulate us from most of the truths it tells us and most of the consequences it implies for us.

And this accommodation is never more apparent, and its self-serving smugness never more uncomfortable, than in Jesus' actions on the first Maundy Thursday, when he gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, wraps a towel around himself, pours water into a basin, and begins to wash the disciples' feet. John gives us two unmistakable signals that this activity is to be understood as the definitive symbolic summary of Jesus' entire mission. First, at the beginning of chapter 13, it says "Having loved his own ... he loved them to the end." The word "end" is deliberately ambiguous here. It means "end" in the sense of final purpose or goal. But it also means "end" in the sense of "conclusion" as in "the end of the story." Both meanings are significant. This last supper with its meal and footwashing is the conclusion *and* purpose of the story. In other words, "Pay attention. We've got to the important bit. You want to know what Jesus is all about? You're about to find out."

The second signal is that, in his account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, John offers us a summary of Jesus' whole life. Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his robe, and puts on a towel. In other words he leaves heaven (that's the table), puts aside his trappings of divinity (that's the robe), and takes human form (that's the towel). He faces controversy from Peter, just as he faces controversy in his ministry. He offers teaching and prophecy, just as in the gospel story. He asks questions and provides an example, just as he does in Galilee and on his journey to Jerusalem. Then he resumes his robe and returns to the table, just as he will return to heaven and be re clothed in the divine mantle. This succinct highlights-package of the gospel story indicates that the footwashing is a summary of what Jesus is all about.

And perhaps as much as any story in the gospels, the footwashing story separates those who have come to a more or less happy accommodation with the fact that we've killed the Lord of Glory from those that have not. Let me explain.

Here's the gospel we *want* to believe, the gospel that accommodates this footwashing story very adeptly indeed. We go off and live the lives we would have lived anyway, but we're free from existential angst about what happens when we die because Jesus assures us of life after death. Jesus makes no particular claim upon our lifestyles other than that we keep our promises and honor those who deserve honor and respect from us. We look to the footwashing story and we say, "You know, it's good to be humble. By all means go and be a big shot

in business or industry or medicine or education, but it's good to give something back, it's good to think about the little guy, it's good to help out at the night shelter or read to the first grader or raise money for the struggling non-profit. And I like to see a senior pastor who does the same, and stays behind the revival event to clear the chairs away now and again, or puts their hands in the sink to wash the dishes after the pot-luck lunch."

We have a name for this philosophy, and that name is *service*. We speak of servant leadership or servant ministry. We admire the way Jesus, who was a very busy man after all, and quite senior – maybe he didn't get the salary some people get paid these days, but as Son of God, you've got to say he was in a pretty high status position – we admire the way Jesus sets such a good example of however senior you are, it's good to put in a good bit of service.

So this is the gospel we want to hear. Jesus doesn't change our lives significantly, in fact he affirms them, because he gave his life to make sure we don't have to give ours, and our way of showing a little gratitude and humility now and again is to give a little back and get down on our knees and do a little footwashing, at least in a figurative way.

As the young woman on the crutches said to me last week. "You get used to it. You can get used to almost anything after a while." This is how we've got used to Jesus' astonishing action at the Last Supper. We've found a tidy way to accommodate it in a benevolent gospel of personal development and modest social service.

But is that really the gospel? Don't get me wrong – I'm all for reading to elementary schoolchildren and serving at night shelters, and I firmly believe Jesus will say "Whatever you did to the least of these you did unto me." But is this the high water mark of the radical claims of the Christian gospel? I'm not sure it is.

So this is the gospel we *don't* want to hear. In John chapter 13 Jesus gets on his knees and washes the disciples' feet. Just a chapter earlier Mary of Bethany gets down on her knees and washes Jesus' feet with her hair. There's plenty of reasons why what she's doing is scandalous – the perfume is a terrible waste of money and the erotic intimacy of the action is wholly inappropriate. But Jesus praises Mary for one single reason. *She alone has realized that Jesus is about to die*. She is washing his feet to prepare his body for burial. Now here we are, just one chapter later. And it's a second footwashing scene. The gospel we *want* urges us to read this as a lesson in humility, in servant leadership. But God isn't interested in the gospel we want. The gospel in front of us says, this footwashing scene means pretty much exactly what the first footwashing scene meant. Jesus is saying, "Mary prepared me to die. Now I'm preparing *you* to die."

See how this reading makes sense of the several curious statements uttered in this chapter. Peter says to Jesus, "You will never wash my feet." Fair enough. Peter doesn't want to die. Who can blame him? Peter's simply expressing what we all feel. We love Jesus until the moment he asks us to die. Then we say "Enough's enough." But listen to Jesus' reply in the light of what we can now see footwashing to mean: "Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, *you have no share with me*.'" In other words, unless you are willing to die with me, you can't expect to share in my resurrection. Then Peter blunders on, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

This is the most difficult part of the story to understand. But it all falls into place if we realize what's going on is a distinction between footwashing and baptism. Jesus reinforces this when he replies, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean." He's talking about baptism. Baptism prepares us for life – but footwashing prepares us for death. Peter is saying, "Wash me all over, Jesus, baptize me again, by all means." Jesus is saying, "No, Peter, you've *been* baptized. You've fundamentally passed over from death to life. You don't need to be baptized again. All that needs washing right now is your feet. And that's because washing feet is preparing you to die. Washing feet is inviting you to face the full consequences of your baptism." That's what Jesus means when he says, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean." You only need baptism once, but you need footwashing pretty frequently. Otherwise baptism becomes something you find a way of getting used to.

Let's keep going a little further in the story, and see what Jesus says when he returns to the table. He says, "You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am." Now this doesn't fit with the humble service interpretation at all. Humble servants don't go round saying this kind of thing. They play down

hierarchies and use words like colleague rather than boss – let alone Lord. Jesus is quite clear he's the boss. Which means he gets to say, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." In other words, if I have been preparing you to face death, *you need to get into the habit of preparing one another for death.*

Here then are two fundamental moments in our Christian life. Baptism is the beginning, the moment when we pass from death to life, the moment when the power of death ceases to dominate our imaginations. And footwashing is the end, the moment when we are prepared to face death, the moment when we help one another face the consequences of our baptism.

You washed any feet lately? You prepared any one for death? You helped anyone face the true consequences of their baptism? Anyone done that for you?

None of us, deep down, really want to hear this gospel. We want church to be about making friends, feeling spiritual, and offering service. We don't really want it to be about preparing one another for death.

Jesus speaks the truth. The truth takes him to the cross. Why? Because he is an agent of reconciliation and witness in the face of oppression and of communities who make a travesty of God. He calls us to follow him. He says, simply and unambiguously, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." And if we do indeed follow him, quite plainly, we shall go to the cross too. For the first disciples that meant nails and wood and asphyxiation and agony. For us it may mean being humiliated and defamed in newspapers and blogsites and radio stations. It may mean losing our jobs, and ourselves and those who love us becoming the objects of scorn and derision. It may mean being subject to violence against our person and property and loved ones. It may mean imprisonment or restrictions on travel or speech or education. This is what happens to people when they spend their lives devoted to reconciliation and healing and truth and Jesus.

We don't want that gospel. We want the servant ministry thing instead. It's much nicer. But the question for us tonight is, Jesus wants to wash our feet. He's been preparing for death for a while. It's time for him to prepare us. Are we ready to start preparing? Jesus is kneeling before us, because he loves us to the end. Do we want what he wants? Do we want Jesus? Do we love him? Will we love to the end? Will we? Really?