

Washing the Disciples' Feet

This homily is based on the Gospel reading: John 13:1-17, 31b-35 Please read this before reading the Homily.

Introduction

This passage describes Jesus washing his disciples' feet. The passage reveals so much about Jesus himself. It gives us the background for Jesus serving his disciples in this way and shows that the foot washing points to his even greater act of service when he died for us on the cross.

We see that Jesus serves his disciples by washing their feet, and chiefly by giving his life for them when he died on the cross. That Jesus, who was eternally with the Father, and who created all things, came to give his life for his people so we who trust him may have life with him forever. Let's pray as we come to consider this passage now.

Father, thank you for sending your Son and for revealing him to us. Please help us to get to know Jesus better as we read your word now. Amen.

The Hour of Glory

The hour is at hand! In vs 1 John draws our attention to the very definite plan and purpose of Jesus' coming into our world. There was a very specific purpose and moment which God had in mind. Five times in the gospel John has baited the reader's curiosity with his mention of a specific hour involving Jesus. A precise moment in history. In vs. 1 John sharpens our anticipation as he writes:

It was just before the Passover Feast. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

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This crucial moment of history involved Jesus' going **from** this world and **to** the Father. Previously Jesus had affirmed that he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. He promised that he himself is the *"resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."* (John 11:24-25) He is *"the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6).

Yet strangely, his hour of glory is the hour of his death.

This meal Jesus is having with his disciples will be his last. Judas is among those around the table, sharing this meal with Jesus. The one who betrays him. The moments are ticking away. Removing his outer clothing, he deliberately wraps a towel around his waist and takes a bowl. He shows his disciples:

The Example of Love

In this passage John mentions several truths Jesus knew - the first is in vs 1: *Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.* In vs 3 Jesus knows that the Father had given all things to him - do notice this is past tense, not future. The Father has already given all things to him, and he knew he had come from God and was going to God. Knowing these truths, Jesus took a towel, tied it round himself and poured water into a basin.

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Coming to his disciples one by one, he washes their feet, and dries them. No one was expected to do this. Washing anyone's feet was thought to be too humiliating, even for a slave. John introduces this episode by telling us in vs 1, *"Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love."* Washing their feet was the prelude to Jesus showing them the full extent of his love. The cross is looming closer - ever so close now. There they will see the full extent of Jesus' love.

Now as Jesus steps in front of each disciple, including Judas — yes, he washed Judas' feet too — he does what not even a slave was expected to do. And Peter cannot stand it. And Jesus says to him, *"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."* (vs 8). Jesus is saying that unless I serve you like a slave then you have nothing to do with me. That is more than Peter can bear, and while he does not understand what is going on, he offers his whole body to Jesus to wash. That is not necessary, affirms Jesus. But Peter needs to see that Jesus must serve him, in fact, that Jesus must die for Peter. To go to the cross for Peter. For you and for me. For the way Jesus ultimately serves us is through his death. It is in his death that we see the full extent of his love.

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The Command to Love

After Jesus washed their feet, they shared the Passover meal. Jesus himself was troubled. In vs 21 he declared, *"I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me."* After Judas had left, Jesus said, *"Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. ... A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

One man has gone to betray him, but the betrayal and death of Jesus strangely will also be the hour he is glorified. And Jesus says that in his death God is glorified - because he has trusted God to the very end, and he has loved his disciples to the very end. Jesus says that his disciples are to love one another in the same way. This love is to characterise the relationships Jesus' followers have with one another. No matter what race, gender, language or culture we belong to, love for our fellow believers in Jesus is to be the distinguishing feature of our relationships.

Conclusion.

Jesus' example of washing his disciples' feet is an illustration of the love we are to have for one another. The important thing is not washing feet, but love. Washing their feet highlighted Jesus' willingness to serve his disciples; a service which culminated with his death on the cross. Peter eventually understood that he must allow Jesus to serve him - to wash his feet, and especially to die for him.

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We know that Jesus came to die - have you realised and accepted that he served you by dying for you? That he bore the full weight of your sin, paying its penalty with his own life. He has served you in this way because he loves you - to the fullest extent. He calls on us to love one another.

Take the time now to pause and to thank Jesus for his abounding love for you. Thank him for taking your sin and paying for it fully. Ask him to enable you to love those who are Jesus' disciples.