

A Maundy Thursday Reflection

Maundy Thursday. Not 'Maunday Thursday', or even 'Mundy-Fursdy' as some people in Kent have it. 'Maundy', from the Latin 'mandatum' which gives us our words 'mandatory' and 'mandate' or 'command'. Its name comes from the gospel reading: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another". Maundy. Our mandate to love each other like Jesus does.

A heart is the symbol for love in many cultures, *but Jesus is not talking here about emotional love*. This is love in action, and the symbol he chooses for it is the washing of dirty feet. And his mandate is very clear:

"You are to wash one another's feet."



"I have set you an example."

This seems clear and simple for us as inheritors since we were small of 2000 years of the tradition of *service as an ideal*. Though it was by no means clear and simple for the disciples. But perhaps there is another aspect of this encounter which is

neither clear nor simple for us. It is Peter's discomfort with being washed and Jesus' riposte:

"If I do not wash you, you have no part with me."

And it is this that I want to explore.

Am I rare in feeling I would rather publicly wash a foot than have one publicly washed?.

But I don't think our problem with this is the same as Peter's.

Peter says "never" because he feels the dishonour in a master washing a disciple's feet. I think he would have gladly washed his

master's feet and he would have accepted as normal having his feet washed by someone of a lower status; a servant, or a woman, perhaps. But it is likely that he would have had a similar problem with the idea of himself washing a servant's feet.

For Jesus is challenging here *the social concept of **status** as the determinant of worth, attitude and action*. Now status in the Palestinian culture of Jesus' time was rigid, patriarchal and hierarchical. And if, like Peter and the other apostles, you were brought up to believe that proper respect and moral behaviour depended on your social station, it would have been shocking, and even perhaps felt immoral, to act as Jesus was suggesting. But this is what happens when values that have been drummed into us as children, or by society around us, are challenged. We feel uncomfortable and want to say, "that's just wrong". Peter had so much to unlearn. Perhaps we do, too.

So Jesus challenges the idea that our social status determines our worth, attitudes and action. And because back then status was all about being served by those of lower standing than you, he challenges his followers by getting them to wash each others' feet. But what brings social status today? If it is no longer about a 'rigid hierarchy' and 'being served', **where might Jesus challenge our culture in order to make the same point?**

Recognition of status today is linked to *personal autonomy*, which is usually based on financial independence – symbols of status still cost money. But status is also expressed in *the ability to wield power and influence* within an organisation, a community or a society. In this less rigid, more fluid and dynamic, social setting **it is vital to be a doer**, a 'mover and shaker'; to maintain one's independence and freedom to act, and not to be beholden to any one.

Formed by this culture, when we hear this story we can't quite get to the heart of the shocking nature of it, *precisely because there is a part of us which readily identifies with Jesus' desire to be the foot-washer*. And yet, I suspect that we feel it is appropriate for Jesus to wash feet because we recognise that, actually, **his proactive innovation represents the real, dynamic power in the encounter** and that, in the very challenge to traditional values, Jesus is showing strategic

leadership and personal authority. **Those who decide and take action are in charge.** In the washing of feet, Jesus is the one in control because he establishes clear values, has clear objectives and drives forward a clear strategy to achieve them. Because of this, we immediately recognise his high status.



But Peter and the others would have seen none of this. Instead, they would have been bewildered and shocked at Jesus' deliberate self-abasement and dishonour, and would have recognised only that he was not just demeaning himself by the wilful adoption of a falsely low status, but asking them to demean themselves by lowering their status also. And as he asks "do you understand what I have done to you?" (and the Greek is 'to you' here, not 'for you' as in some/most translations) I imagine their blank, confused and possibly offended faces. *Only with time does the Christian community understand that there is to be no high and low status, no power games, among them.*

But since we live with very different status values today, how might Jesus have challenged us? If he is challenging the very existence of status differentiation among us and, with it, challenging us to build a haven free from status anxiety, **what might that mean for us, now?**

Well, perhaps he might ask us to be willing to *embrace disempowerment, dependence on others and a loss of autonomy.* In other words, **to be willing to submit to having our feet washed.** In most social settings, and churches are no exception, status is accorded formally to those who are the decision-makers and the ones controlling the action. Informally, and especially in voluntary societies like churches, you can tell those who have power because they are the ones people are afraid to cross or to confront; they are the opinion-makers. Even here we like to feel powerful, independent and free to act.

So if Jesus was here one Maundy Thursday to confront our forms of power and status-seeking, I wonder if he might say, "Despite being the Lord Jesus, I would like to receive from you whatever it is that you have to give". And then perhaps he might add, "Do you understand what I have done to you? **If I, your master, am ready to receive from you, be ready to receive from one another:**

If you preach, take heart from another's words
If you sing, be enthralled by another's voice
If you choose hymns, prayers or liturgies, delight in another's choice
If you intercede, be stirred by another's prayer
If you shape the fabric of the church, recognise another's vision
If you give opinions, invite another's thoughts
If you take decisions, seek out what another might do
If you give help in any way, be ready to receive it from another.

"Unless you allow your feet to be washed, you have no part in one another.