

Some Reflections on Ministry and Service

Washing of Feet (John 13)

This is not, as some say, Jesus opting for *work normally done by slaves*. It is a matter of record - that is, jurisprudential record - that in Roman law washing feet was *not* required work even for slaves, and thus to evoke the handy symmetry between this story and the theme of Philippians 2, it is important to note that here Jesus is making himself not just a slave, but “humbler yet”. In other words, the place to which he travels here is not any accustomed depth, but a humility beyond even slavery. The ultimate agenda for slavery is the death of the slave, who is already deprived of personal significance and lives only to the will of his owner.

This enables us to assert that already, in his last hours of freedom, Jesus is *choosing* to put himself in a place to which the hands of soldiers and executioners are about to take him “by force and by law” (Is 53). This choice is what Peter *does not understand now, and will understand later*. This last phrase can be predicated not only of the *lavipedium* but of the entire programme of the Passion: so that the word *later* comes to refer to the whole new Christian epoch which begins, under the aegis of the Holy Spirit, in the unfolding sacramental Church.

The placing of the apostles, and especially Peter, in this waiting condition is not welcomed by him (*Why can't I follow you now?*) but it is necessary, and is the reason why, despite winning the Keys of the Kingdom by his faith - itself a virtue which should know how to wait - he is still ordered, like his colleagues, not to proclaim Jesus' messianic status, and after the Transfiguration to *tell no man the vision, until the Son of Man be raised from the dead*.

The loneliness of the foot-washing Jesus in John is therefore not accidental but deeply symbolic, and exactly parallels his loneliness on the Cross in Mark. Peter's refusal to accept it in some sense parallels the abuse of the passers-by and priests in that Gospel.

Peter's denials in the High-priest's courtyard effectively reduce him to one of those passers-by, but also *contain the truth* in the same ironic way as their mockeries: Peter really “doesn't know the man” who has given himself away without a fight. His devastation at Jesus' arrest is seconded by his own self-disgust at letting it happen. This conflict perfectly evinces the fact that Peter's understanding of authority/service is still, in Jesus' own words, *the way a man thinks, not the way God thinks*. Peter had foreseen what was coming, as Jesus had: but there the similarity between them ends.

The way God thinks - the way man thinks; these words echo the vital moment in the story of Messianism which precedes the anointing of David (1Sam 16: 6-7); Saul had been the tallest and handsomest man in Israel, but was still a bent reed. David is the most negligible of the brothers, and is still the elect of God. The inexorable emergence of David throughout the increasingly fraught years of Saul gives us a model for the understanding of authority that is bestowed by God; it shows us David despised and mocked, exiled and hunted, judged and punished, threatened and attacked, a victim of rebellion from within his own family. But he is still the great King. He is the supreme example of a human being exercising God-given power under the obedience every Jew owes to God. When he abuses his position, repentance is the only way out, and he willingly takes it. There are clear pre-echoes in the life of Jesus presented in the Gospels. The clearest of them is the rebellion of Absalom (2Sam 15: 7ff). The departure of David from Jerusalem and his tearful ascent of the Mount of Olives cannot but be in the minds of the evangelists at Gethsemane, and the cursing of Shimei in 16: 5ff is present in the Passion account itself, and in Paul's awareness as the background to Galatians 3: 10ff.

In some sense the washing of feet is determinative for the Christian understanding of authority. Christian authority leads others *by example* into a service which involves dying for one another. The two traditions which are expressed in the Johannine story of the washing are reconciled in this way. The simpler tradition (Jn 13: 12-17) is content to make the whole episode an exemplary lesson for mutual service. The deeper tradition (13: 7) hints darkly that the sign is portentous and cannot be translated into words, because it draws its meaning from the Cross, whose dénouement is shrouded in the eschatological future. Only if this deeper resolution of the account is kept in view can the simpler one be regarded as adequate: that is, the lesson about mutual service has to resound in the greater spaces opened up by the eschatological meaning of the Cross, ie the Paschal mystery itself.

This has implications for the way in which Christians are exhorted to serve one another. The field is wide open for every level of understanding, from those who think it makes life nicer if we share our burdens, through every known programme of co-operation, whether politically, ideologically, or religiously framed, to the Christ-centred theme of making God's Kingdom on earth a reality, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. The Church should not be satisfied with this spectrum. In a world always ready to confuse Christian life with niceness, it seems vital that, eschewing its past readiness to usurp political or sociological power, the Church should present the Kingdom of God in its religious frame alone, as Jesus himself did. His trial before Pilate in the Fourth Gospel should be read beside the washing of feet, so that his denial of earthly ambition in the trial can be fed by the choice of unquestioning service in the washing. It is as if Jesus is supplying a vivid and powerful key to the future, *whilst he is still free to teach*, so that when the Passion robs him of any further power to teach, and his body hangs in the ambiguity of the Crucifixion, the disciples will be discerned by their ability to read the story by the aid of the key he has already given them (*you must do the same*). When they see him made helpless and robbed of dignity, they will remember that *he made himself so by choice*, before he was ever arrested. Thus the washing of feet already resounds with Paschal meaning, without which it cannot be understood; it is a specifically eschatological deed, and it is revelatory of the mind of Jesus as he resolves to go to the Cross, just as the Gethsemane story is in the Synoptic tradition. That is why it is preceded in Jn 13 by the words about Jesus' knowledge of the will of God.

The ignorance of the disciples, and the rebellion of Peter which threatens his sharing with Jesus, have their own function in the story. In Matthew 1, Joseph threatens to bring to an end the long story of the messianic genealogy. He will divorce the pregnant Mary, we are told, because he was an upright (*dikaios*) man. He revokes his decision because of a divine, angelic revelation: in other words, he leaves room for *thinking with God* rather than following his resolve as a decent man. In Matthew 16: 16 we find Peter called *makarios*¹ because *it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven*. Moments later Jesus calls him *Satana* and a stumbling-block for the Christ, because he thinks like a man but not like God. These contrasting mentalities are not coincidental but central to the Biblical mind. They find their Gospel resolution in the Gethsemane prayer, *not my will, but your will be done*. One could trace the theme back into the Old Testament, for instance to Abraham, whose constant engineering of the future always fails, and whose life is eventually fulfilled only by the power of God and at his chosen time: what Abraham does is to surrender his will, and still to lend his hands to the carrying of fire and knife to execute the will of God (and his beloved son). It's no coincidence that the eventual surrender of Abraham to the will of God - his decision to be *dikaios* - is symbolized by a sacrificial account: Abraham and Isaac on Mt Moriah, with its obvious prefiguring of the Passion on Mt Calvary. Again and again the blessedness of Israel is seen to depend upon the same surrender to the divine will. It seems to me very important that we should realise that, even when the will of God looks terrifyingly alien to us, it is truly always an entry into eternal life. As Jesus finds with Peter at the Supper,

¹ *Blessed* - in the sense of the Beatitudes

it is almost impossible to explain that (*later you will understand*); and therefore the characteristic attitude of the believer remains that of Jesus (*not my will, but yours be done*).