

LISTENING TO VOICES AT THE MARGIN: THE WASHING OF THE FEET JOHN 13:1–20

John Mansford Prior SVD

Ledalero Institute of Philosophy, Indonesia
 johnotomo46@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Witnessing an entire congregation participating in the Maundy Thursday ritual of foot washing in Johannesburg led to a renewed consideration of the meaning of this, the final sign of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (Jn 13:1–20), and its relevance for today. Making use of the dynamic of intercultural hermeneutics and so listening to “ordinary” voices at the margin, this reflection moves back and forth between the biblical text itself and a variety of contemporary cultural appropriations of the ritual in Asia and the Pacific, focusing upon issues of power, powerlessness, inclusion and exclusion.

Keywords: Social hierarchy; power; vulnerability; inclusion; exclusion; servant leadership; discipleship of equals; washing of the feet

“We love God as much as the one we love the least.”

(Dorothy Day, quoting John J. Hugo in Quigley and Garvey 1982, 41)

A LITERAL READING

In 1996 on my way to Buenos Aires, Argentina, for an *International Association of Mission Studies* (IAMS) conference, the Malaysian Airlines’ flight transited in Johannesburg. This provided me with an opportunity to celebrate the Easter Triduum with my brother Anselm, who was at that time Director of the Lumko Pastoral Institute (1990–1999). On Maundy Thursday we went to celebrate the Lord’s Supper at Francis Xavier Parish in Martindale. I was more than surprised to see that the church had been

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furnished with trestle tables with seating for about a dozen a table. Each table had a jug of water, a hand basin and towel. The liturgy of the Word was celebrated as usual from the ambo. After the homily each of us was invited to wash the foot of the person to our right. This was the first time I had experienced such a Maundy liturgy. I was taken totally unawares, although I should not have been. Was it not Jesus himself who left a clear instruction: “You ought to wash each other’s feet” (Jn. 13:14)? Jesus did not leave a liturgical rubric stipulating that ordained pastors wash the feet of 12 prominent male members of the laity.

Reading the four Gospels we do not know how many disciples were present at the Last Supper, whether only the 12, or some—maybe all—of those who accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem, women and men (Lk 8:1–2). A few of the women were at Golgotha the following day (23:49; Mk 15:40–41; Mt 27:55–56; Jn 19:25–27); presumably they were in the vicinity of Jerusalem the previous evening. Seemingly our reading of the Gospel has been influenced by paintings of the Last Supper, such as the portrayal by Leonardo da Vinci. However, many details in da Vinci’s depiction are inaccurate. Da Vinci shows only Jesus and 12 male disciples, yet the Passover (*Seder*) was eaten by families where women and children had roles to play. Da Vinci shows a meal of fish and ordinary bread, yet a Passover meal consisted of unleavened bread, roast lamb and bitter herbs. The figures are seated on benches, whereas Jesus and his disciples would have reclined on couches. Da Vinci depicts 13 Renaissance Italian males in a Florentine palace, not a Jewish celebration of the *Seder* in first century Palestine. The painting shows daylight outside the window, while the Hebrew Passover took place at night. Evidently, da Vinci has sited the biblical scene within his patriarchal, Florentine, blue-blooded society.

Further, according to custom, Jesus as host, would be positioned not at the centre but second from the left, with the guest of honour to his left, to whom he could pass a piece of bread (13:26), and a trusted friend was placed to his right, who could lay on Jesus’ chest to whisper in his ear (13:23). If Peter was able to signal to the disciple to Jesus’ right (13:24), then he would be at the other end of the U-shaped low table directly facing Jesus and the beloved disciple, the place usually occupied by a servant who would replenish the dishes as necessary. Seemingly then, the trusted disciple was to Jesus’ right, his betrayer in the place of honour, while his successor, “the Rock”, was consigned to the servant’s spot (Samuelson 2012).¹

The crystal clear instruction from Jesus reads: “If I washed your feet [I, who am ‘Lord’ and ‘Teacher’], you also ought to wash each other’s feet. I gave you a model, so that just as I did for you, you also should do” (13:14–15). I should have known: Bible sharing over the years in eastern Indonesia with small Christian communities unacquainted with extensive biblical research,² has not infrequently shown me how,

1 Samuelson 2012. *Women of the Last Supper*. Well researched yet delightfully non-technical.

2 One key inspiration was the publications of Lumko Pastoral Institute, in the mid-1970s the training kits of Fritz Lobinger. Other practical insights came from the Gaba AMECEA Institute in Uganda (before Gaba moved to Kenya), from reports of the BCC movement in Brazil (translated and distributed

on occasion, more literal readings within a primal cultural domain can unsettle more conventional takes, and lead one into wholly new and creative understandings of the Word.³ While “learned and clever” exegetes have their place, so do “infants” and “children” (Lk 10:21; Mt 11:25–27).

A year after my Johannesburg experience, when lecturing in Australia, I was taken by SVD confrere, Bill Burt, to the Mission House of the Columbians in North Sydney. There, too, we were invited to wash each other’s feet. Yet again, this time in Papua New Guinea, confrere Philip Gibbs took me to the Holy Spirit (SSpS) convent in Goroka. There the Sisters washed each other’s feet. Another take on Jesus’ instruction comes from the Philippines. Luis Antonio Tagle, when Bishop of Imus, after the homily walked to the back of the cathedral and invited a street kid or two (selling bottled water to thirsty parishioners) to accompany him inside. Then he invited a variety of people from the congregation, representatives of the young and the old, common folk and dignitaries, women and men, the rich and the despised poor. Afterwards Tagle proceeded to wash their feet. Since 2011 Cardinal Archbishop of Manila, earlier this year Tagle washed the feet of youngsters recovering from drug dependency, the mother of a victim of extra-judicial killings, and police perpetrators who had turned a blind eye to the murders.⁴

Certainly it took voices from South Africa, Papua New Guinea, Australia and the Philippines, who have been taking Jesus’ instruction in verse 14 at face value, to wake me up to some of the deeper meaning of this final symbolic act of Jesus before he handed himself over to the Roman cohort, and to the guards of the chief priests and Pharisees, in the garden across the Kedron valley (Jn 18:8).

Invited to celebrate my Franciscan brother’s golden jubilee in the priesthood, I thought that nothing would be more apt than to reflect on John 13:1–20. Not that feet washing is directly linked to ordination, but rather because Jesus left this final sign as

by the Indonesian Bishops’ Conference), and from reflections of Francesco Claver in Mindanao, southern Philippines. From 1968 to 1974 Anselm Prior was in parish ministry in Ladysmith, and later Director for Religious Education in the Diocese of Dundee (1975–1985). It was my brother Anselm’s decision to undertake the Diploma in Religious Education and Pastoral Studies at Gaba (1974), and then complete his bachelor (1981, 1984), masters (1987, 1993) and doctoral (2001) theses while working full time that encouraged me to take a sabbatical myself and engage in a little academic work (1984–1987).

- 3 The people of Flores taught me how to listen to the Scriptures in small Christian communities in the mountains and on the coast, with migrant groups, HIV carriers, and long-term prisoners. There are also written sources. Regarding John 13:1–20, two books in particular have had a profound influence on my reflections over the years and so throughout this essay, namely: Crosby, Michael H., *“Do You Love Me?” Jesus Questions the Church*. New York: Orbis Books, 2000; and Vanier, Jean, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*. New York/Mahwah, N J: Paulist Press, 2004.
- 4 As Jesus included Peter, the Denier, and Judas, the Betrayer, so in 2017 Tagle involved police who were complicit in the extra-judicial killings. The victims of the killings are the poor caught up in drug dependency, and who, since the election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, have become the target of thousands of extra-judicial killings undertaken with the approval, if not the active participation, of Filipino police and the President himself. Thirty-nine victims were shot during Holy Week 2017, 13 on Easter Sunday alone.

an integral part of his last testament before handing himself over. This sign confronts us with a fundamental attitude that should inspire the entire Gospel witness by whosoever has the courage to call themselves a disciple of the Word.

This essay follows an intercultural perspective. Empirical, intercultural hermeneutics is described as:

A creative and sophisticated approach in biblical criticism by way of its focus on real [in the sense of “ordinary”] readers in small communities who read the same biblical text and exchange reports of their readings with other communities and readers around the world. This approach engages the social and existential situation of readers in contextually pertinent ways, helping to make possible a mutually enriching interplay between religious-theological and academic-scholarly interpretation of the Bible. (Schipani 2015, 1)

This exegetical approach reads the Bible through the prism of more than one cultural site, asking, in the words of the pioneer of intercultural empirical hermeneutics:

Has the faith of the group members become deeper? Are people freer with respect to their own faith traditions? Is there a richer, more creative, liberated way of reading and reflecting on one’s own faith? Has a new perspective developed, nourished by the inter action with the partner group and the longing for a new “third” look at the text and the praxes manifested in the text? (De Wit 2012, 29)⁵

Thus, key values that inspire this approach to biblical interpretation are compassion, solidarity, forgiveness, and acceptance of the other.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: SPEAKING TO THE SOUL

I find John’s Gospel the most reflective of the four, where each of six signs is followed by a discourse,⁶ where seven key chapters climax in a new revelation of who Jesus is.⁷ Although the product of various hands,⁸ the resultant Gospel flows gently like a brook in the moonlight, ever refreshing, without a hint of a pause. I concur with Michael Newheart: “The Gospel of John is poetic, full of poems and poetry ... full of imagery and symbolism and irony and rhythm ... and soul. The gospel contains, not concepts that speak to the mind, but poetry that speaks to the soul, the emotions, the imagination”

5 Intercultural biblical conversations across the globe between “the learned” and “the simple” were pioneered by the Intercultural Bible Collective in Amsterdam. See, Hans De Wit et al., *Through the Eyes of Another* 2004; Hans de Wit, *Empirical Hermeneutics* 2012; Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk, *Bible and Transformation* 2015.

6 Three signs take place in Galilee: in Cana 2:1–12, Capernaum 4:46–54, and Tiberias 6:1–15. Three in Jerusalem: by the pool in Bethesda 5:1–18, near the city 9:1–12, and in Bethany 11:1–44.

7 “Rabbi, you are the Son of God” (1:49); “Anyone who believes in the Son has eternal life” (3: 36); “He is indeed the Saviour of the world” (4: 42); “You are the Holy One of God.” (6: 69); “Before Abraham ever was, I am.” (8:58); “The Son of Man” (9: 37–38); “You are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world” (11:27).

8 Following the classic study of Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, 1966.

(Newheart, *Word and Soul*, 2001, xiii–xiv).⁹ Even if this Gospel was edited a number of times, it was clearly composed by disciples who had long accepted the Incarnate Word into their lives. And the message is as radical, as challenging, as penetrating, as any book in the Bible.

AWARE THAT HIS TIME HAS COME

From the prologue of the Fourth Gospel to the final chapter, the person of Jesus appears ever more majestic, mature and wise. Whether confronted by the religious leaders, whether detained in the Kedron valley, whether interrogated by Governor Pilate, or indeed while hanging on the cross on Golgotha, Jesus is master of his own fate. Appropriately, the narrative of the Passover of the Lamb, is prefaced by a pithy yet noble opening:

Before the feast of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come for him to go from this world to the *Abba*, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to perfection. (13:1)

Until this point Jesus has been busy shepherding his rather heterogeneous collection of sheep.¹⁰ From the first to the eleventh chapter, Jesus appears strong, delivering his six striking signs. Even from Chapters 6 to 12, when Jesus is drawn into ever more fierce debates with the authorities, he knows where he stands, and stands there firmly. Jesus' raised voice resounds with the strength of truth which sets one free (8:32), which comforts and convicts, reaching out to restore self-belief and self-respect to those pushed to the margin, while posing a threat to the powerful. For truth and light are found in the outcast. In the twelfth chapter, Jesus enters Jerusalem for the third time;¹¹ this time with a motley crowd who call out incessantly, "Hosanna—Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord, Blessed is the King of the Hebrews!" (12:13)

9 Michael Willett Newheart (2001) describes his "soul hermeneutics" as "psychological, literary, and cultural", which intermingles "analytical and archetypal psychology, African-American cultural experience, and reader-response criticism" (p. xiv). I have found that his "scholar's imagination" converses easily with the "spontaneous imagination" of grassroots communities, and with intercultural hermeneutics.

10 Heterogeneous in more ways than one; while Mathew was a tax collector for the regime (Mk 2:14), the "sons of thunder" (Mk 3:17) might well have been associated with a guerrilla group, as also the "Dagger Bearer" Iscariot (if that is what the name 'Iscariot' means). Just as importantly, John's Gospel is resolutely inclusive; the evangelist invariably mixes members of the Twelve with other disciples. In the calling of the first five disciples (1: 35–51), and in the post-resurrection calling of seven disciples (21: 1–2), two are not members of the Twelve. In John there are no apostles, all are disciples. On the discipleship of equals, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 1983, 105–159.

11 Unlike the three Synoptic Gospels, in the Fourth Gospel Jesus enters Jerusalem not once, but three times—the first time to celebrate the Passover when he cleansed the temple (2:13–22); on the second occasion to celebrate the Festival of Shelters (or Tabernacles) and taught in the temple (7:1–8:20); on the third and last occasion, as the Passover approached he once again entered, this time with "a great crowd" waving palm branches (12:12–19).

And so Chapter 13 commences with Jesus aware that his time has come. His spoken message of love to the crowds and to the authorities is complete. Jesus will no longer defend himself; that tumultuous phase of Judean-jousting has come to an end. Now, after his final testament at the Last Supper, Jesus appears frail and weak, yet always calmly resolved; he is ready to hand himself over and surrender his life. He is prepared to display love in its totality, without reserve (13:1). At peace with himself, Jesus hands his life over in a way that declares clearly and transparently who he is.

LEADING, BUT FROM WHERE?

The Gospel is prefaced with an impressive creation hymn (1:1–18): God’s handiwork achieves its perfection when the Word descends to earth and appears in human flesh, bringing the whole cosmos into the embrace (literally into “the womb”) of the *Abba* (1:18).¹² And now in Chapter 13 the Word-made-flesh descends again and kneels at the feet of each disciple in turn to wash their feet, not excepting the two who will shortly deny and betray him: Peter the “Stumbling Block” (Mt 16:23) and Judas¹³ the “Dagger-Bearer” (Jn 12:4).¹⁴ The feet-washing episode opens and concludes with references to Judas’ betrayal (13:2, 21–30).¹⁵ Betrayal and servant leadership confront each other. The Iscariot leaves the supper on his washed feet, as will Peter a little later. Before dawn all but one of the male disciples will have abandoned him.¹⁶

12 The Greek term *kolpos* can translate as “womb”, although in Jn. 1:18 *kolpos* is usually translated as “bosom” or “heart”, as in “rests in the bosom of the *Abba*”. The Arabic and Indonesian word for womb is *rahim*, which is related to the Hebrew *rech'em*. The word for womb also translates as compassion: Hebrew *racham/rachum*, Arabic *Rahmaan/Raheem*, Indonesia *ke-rahim-an*.

13 Before the washing of the feet Judas planned to betray Jesus (13:2). After washing the feet of all his disciples (13:4–20), Jesus handed Judas a piece of bread (13:26) and sent him to do what he had to do (13:27). The synoptic Gospels do not say whether Judas left the meal before or after the Eucharistic blessing of bread and wine. The Gospels of Mark and Mathew place the statement of Jesus that he will be betrayed by a disciple before the blessing (Mk 14:27–31; Mt 26:21–25), while Luke places it afterwards (Lk 22:19–23).

14 One meaning of Iscariot is “Dagger Bearer”, that is a member of a guerrilla band fighting the Roman occupation. If the name comes directly from Aramaic it could mean “Pretence”, a name attached to a dupe. Others claim that the name simply indicates that the person hails from the village of Kariot. See, Herbert Haag, *Kamus Alkitab* 1980, 188.

15 On betrayal, see Petros Vassiliadis, 2004, 416. Also, George Mlakuzhyil. 2005, 218–220.

16 “All but one of the male disciples”, that is if “the one whom Jesus loved” is a male disciple. Ratzinger, following Peter Stuhlmacher (1992) identifies him as the original author of the Fourth Gospel citing Jn 19:35 & 21:24. See, Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 2007, 222, 226–227. Raymond Brown and others see “the one whom Jesus loved” as a literary device invented by the evangelist to portray the ideal disciple, who is placed at five key points where the reader ought to find her/himself in the narrative of the Passover: lying on Jesus’ breast during the final meal (13:23); at the foot of the cross with Mary of Nazareth on Golgotha (19:26–27); the first to the empty tomb after Magdalene (20:2); the first to recognise the Risen Lord on the Sea of Tiberias (21:7); and faithful to the end (22:10).

In those days only servants or slaves would be ordered to wash the feet of their master: the low castes wash the feet of the higher castes, disciples the feet of their guru, day labourers the feet of the Sadducee landowners. And so we might ask: did Simon Peter misunderstand Jesus and so reject the offer to wash his feet (13:6–8)? Or, conversely, did he understand exactly what Jesus was up to? It seems probable that Simon Peter understood all too clearly what Jesus was up to. Jesus is his leader, his superior, his Lord and Teacher. Surely Simon Peter and the other disciples would be happy enough to wash their guru's feet, but not the other way round. And in the future when Peter is in charge, those in a more inferior position would willingly wash his feet, and so on down the social hierarchy, from the caste of apostles at the pinnacle to the lowest of the low, from the powerful to the powerless, from the rich to the poor. Such is the social pyramid that we have constructed over millennia; such is the common norm, our self-created “normality”. Now, when his hour has come, Jesus wishes to commence a new relationship with Simon Peter. Just as importantly, Jesus intends that Simon Peter opens up a new relationship with the other disciples. Stripped down to his inner tunic with a towel wrapped around his waist (13:4), Jesus was reduced to the standard dress of a slave (Ngewa 2006).

DISMANTLING THE SOCIAL PYRAMID

History teaches that every group and cultural domain has been built on the model of a pyramid, arranged by the strong, the rich, the intellectuals (“clever and intelligent people”, Lk 10:21), those who feel called to organise and direct the masses (Jn 7:45–49). At the bottom we find migrants, domestic servants, those trafficked and abused, indigenous peoples who have been evicted from their ancestral lands to make way for ecologically-devastating mines, the urban homeless and unemployed, those with physical or mental disabilities, indeed whoever is stigmatised, such as those living with the HIV virus—in short, everyone who has been pushed aside or scapegoated. By kneeling in front of each disciple in turn, looking into the eyes of each distinctive personality, including Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot, Jesus placed himself at the very bottom, with the status of a slave. Obviously, for Simon Peter this was impossible to contemplate, let alone implement.

FROM HIERARCHY TO BODY

Jesus came to shatter the pyramidal model of society, and birth the model of a body, where each person has an honourable place, esteemed, equal in value, whatever the qualities of the individual, whatever personal limitations or disabilities, where everyone consciously depends on the others (Rm 12:4–5; I Co 12:12–31; Ep 4:11). Each one is called to a unique vocation, to be responsible for a mission that no one else can perform, a specifically distinctive role in the body of humanity and in the body of believers. As

the prophet Isaiah puts it: “I have called you by your name, you are mine ... I regard you as precious, since you are honoured and I love you” (Is 43:1, 4). Each member is needed for the good of the whole. Paul specifically adds that the weakest and most vulnerable members, the unpresentable bits that must never be seen in public, are essential to the Body of Christ, and as such need to be given increased honour (I Co 12:22–25). Without them, the Body of Christ itself would be disabled.

By bending down before the feet of each disciple, Jesus stated that there must be no last place among the disciples. However, if we were to adjust, and so acclimatise ourselves to a society organised into a social pyramid, where the politically powerful and global financiers are forever at the top, it would be important for us to be close to and befriend such “important” people who glide above the struggles and tragedies produced by the global-capitalistic economy they administer, rather than become one with those at the bottom. This is why parishes need the courage to form counter-cultural communities, have the courage to live differently, beginning with small Christian communities, communities of vowed religious, and parish and diocesan pastoral associations (Prior 1997a&b).

Simon Peter became distraught, upset, angry, and finally defiant, “You will not wash my feet—ever!” (Jn 13:8). He had no intention of organising, let alone leading a church like that. Faced with Simon’s stance, Jesus did not open a negotiation to find a suitable compromise; there was no bargaining. Nor did Jesus whisper into Peter’s ear: “This is nothing much, Simon! Don’t misunderstand me. What I really mean is to suggest a simple annual ritual which you can perform if you so wish. Nothing more than that!” Calmly, yet evidently with a certain firmness of tone, Jesus responded with a pithy announcement: “If I don’t wash you, you have no part of me” (Jn 13:8), unmistakably meaning “You are no longer my disciple.” Stunned with such a drastic turn of events, Simon Peter was covered in confusion. He floundered and panicked: “Lord, [then] not just my feet but also my hands and head!” (13:9). And so, with great misgivings, dogged by anxiety, Simon felt he had to give in.¹⁷

After washing the feet of the other disciples, including Judas who, unlike Peter, did not object, Jesus insists:

So, if I washed your feet [I, who am “Lord” and “Teacher”], you also ought to wash each other’s feet. For I gave you a model, so that just as I did for you, you also should do. (13:14)

17 The 19th century canvas *Jesus Washing Peter’s Feet* by Ford Madox Brown is at the Tate Gallery, London. It depicts the annoyance of Simon Peter and the confusion of the other disciples: one has shut his eyes, another holds his head, while yet another looks on in utter amazement not believing what he is seeing. Only “the one whom Jesus loved” is willingly taking off his sandals. See, www.tate.org.uk (accessed 14 April 2017).

“Wash each other’s feet”: a ritual that points to our fitting place in society, a ceremonial ritual that opens up the possibility for us to renew our mental attitude, and straighten out our relationships and behaviour in daily life.¹⁸

A SYMBOL WITH POWER TO TRANSFORM

This sacramental symbol is indeed a symbol that can enflame the Gospel spirit and generate a new determination (see Schneiders 2003, 63–77, and Lee 2002, *passim*). A few years ago during the Maundy Thursday liturgy in Maumere prison, Eastern Indonesia, the prison community prepared five basins of water with towels. After the homily, five of the younger prisoners assisted the few hundred persons present—prisoners, prison officers, and visiting families—to wash each other’s feet. Since then this ritual has been performed each year: officers wash the feet of prisoners, husbands the feet of their wives, a mother the feet of her troublesome teenage son (and vice versa). For a brief moment the social pyramid is turned up-side-down. Jesus calls us to love one another, to serve one another, and forgive each other in society at large along with members of the discipleship of equals: the detained and their prison officers, wives and their husbands, children and their parents.¹⁹

Pastoral experience suggests that the sacramental symbol of feet-washing is potentially as creative as the symbol of water in baptism, oil in chrism, or bread and wine in the Eucharist. Pastoral experience also shows that the meaning of this ceremony can easily dissipate, although it can be recovered. However, if the washing of the feet is confined to an annual routinised rubric, then it is liable to become alien, if not a joke.

BEYOND MAUNDY THURSDAY

This sacramental deed is not confined to any one Christian tradition. In 1989 the Orthodox Churches were preparing to take leave of the World Council of Churches. To avoid fragmentation, the WCC began a prolonged process of rewriting their constitutions. For more than a decade and with great give-and-take from all sides, they eventually succeeded. The updated constitutions were accepted by the Orthodox, the Reformed, the Anglican and the Pentecostal Churches. This achievement was duly celebrated. Among other ceremonies they held a foot-washing liturgy led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town, where the foot of a Greek Orthodox bishop was washed by a woman bishop of the Episcopal Church of the USA—and vice versa. It seems that, despite fundamental differences that persist in belief and practice, churches are still able

18 The quote from the Hebrew Bible is taken from the New Jerusalem Bible (1985), while quotes from the New Testament are from Nicholas King’s translation (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2004).

19 In the 1970s in Maumere, while preparing for First Communion, not only were children invited to seek forgiveness from their parents, but the parents were invited to request the same from their children. The latter caused many tears to flow: for a moment the embedded hierarchy of family life had been turned on its head.

to “wash one another’s feet” in mutual acceptance and mutual understanding, leading hopefully to mutual conversion.

A EUCHARISTIC PEOPLE

Unlike the other three evangelists, John does not narrate, nor even alert indirectly, to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.²⁰ The Fourth Gospel narrates the meaning of the Eucharist seven chapters earlier (6: 25–59) linking the Eucharist to the feeding of the five thousand (6: 1–15).²¹ In Chapter 13 John replaces the narrative of the Eucharist with the washing of the feet, shifting discipleship from the altar to the community (see Julia 2016, 55–66). We become one body when we take part in the “bread from heaven” (6:32–40): one table, a single community, in a discipleship of equals. And the *conditio sine qua non* for John, is that becoming one with the body and blood of Christ at the table, is preceded—and given meaning—by fellowship generated in society when we wash each other’s feet in daily life. A community generated by foot washing is a communion fashioned by each one serving the others, by the dismantling of social pyramids, by acknowledging in attitude and behaviour that every single person is equal in God’s sight, and therefore ours. Each one is as great as the others, we are sisters and brothers of everyone, particularly with those most vulnerable at the bottom.

Jesus urged his disciples to help those at the margin of society rediscover their dignity, to acknowledge the noble values in each and every one, to recognise the importance of, and delight in the beauty of each person. Only then can people grow and do striking things, and reach out to love in all sincerity with a genuine heart (13:1). The problem we face is that anyone who has a negative self-image feels compelled to think and act negatively as well. Transformation springs from self-acceptance and self-trust. It is also obvious that personal example has a much greater impact than any amount of advice unfolded from the pulpit.

THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS

Throughout history we come across masters and slaves, the powerful and the powerless, superiors and subordinates. Those at the bottom of the social heap do the roughest jobs, are forced to work 12 or more hours a day, with no meaningful holiday break. Victims of human trafficking are obliged to do jobs that others reject, such as work in oil palm

20 This is one reason why the Fourth Gospel was not widely accepted alongside the Synoptic Gospels until towards the end of the third century. But see Raymond Brown’s “light hearted”—but accurate—take on why the evangelist replaced the Eucharist with Feet Washing, namely that concurrent disputes over the Eucharist (e.g. 1 Co 10:14–22; 11:27–30) could be overcome only if participants were willing to wash each other’s dirty feet. See, Brown, *A Retreat with John the Evangelist*, 1998, 65–66.

21 Not a crowd of five thousand, but “five thousand men” (Jn 6:10). If the situation was similar to that in many parishes these days, there would have been at least two women to each man, and a couple of children with each woman, in which case Jesus fed five thousand men, 10 thousand women, and up to 20 thousand children, possibly 35 thousand in all.

plantations, or in factories that provide “designer-label” clothing with minimal reward for middle class consumers everywhere. Undocumented migrants do the dirty work avoided by locals.

Thus we pigeon-hole communities, differentiating between thinkers and doers, intellectuals and workers, the elite at the top and ordinary folk at the bottom, those who govern and those who are ordered about. Attitudes behind this social system can easily become postures that are truly racist and sexist.

Power is very seductive, dreadfully tempting. To quote peace activist William Sloane Coffin, “One of the attributes of power is that it gives those who have it the ability to define reality and the power to make others believe their definition” (Coffin 2004, 83). Pastoral leaders may well be tempted to regulate, control, or dominate a pastoral situation, rather than wait until the right way of doing things has been discerned together. We should refuse to get caught up in any power game. Kneeling before a fellow disciple implies exercising authority in the spirit of service, as Jesus did.²²

AN INSPIRATIONAL SYMBOL

Many Asians have gained inspiration from the foot-washing event. While a leading figure in the Indian Independence Movement (1915–1947),²³ Mahatma Gandhi, often retired to Sabarmati Ashram, his simple abode in the Gujarat countryside, for his daily task he chose to clean the toilets—a job until then imposed on outcasts, the Dalits, the lowest of the low. A key leader of the Congress Party which spearheaded the drive for Indian independence, Gandhi is considered one of the greatest world leaders of the second millennium (see Gandhi, 2001).²⁴ For a dozen years he moved back and forth between national and international campaigns and his Sabarmati Ashram where he quietly cleaned the latrines, a job that united him in solidarity with people at the very bottom. Gandhi gained inspiration for this task from reading John Chapter 13.

Another example from Asia is discussed by Aloysius Pieris (1982; 1999). In Colombo, Sri Lanka, Aloysius Pieris, SJ, once encouraged a few Buddhist friends to read the four Gospels, and then tell him what they found unique about Jesus, what was most distinctive. That Jesus is the son of God is not exceptional in South Asia, as Hindus

22 This is surely what the classic Lumko series “Training for Community Ministries” was promoting and facilitating. See publications by Lobinger (1999; 2008; 2017); Lobinger, Miller and Prior 1993; Padilla and Prior (1997); Prior and Lobinger (1978; 1983). Many Lumko training kits were translated into Indonesian by the Larantuka Diocese (East Flores) for use in their five-year pastoral plans. Former Lumko director, Fritz Lobinger, who worked for many years with Anselm Prior, has continued to publish and campaign on servant leadership (see, Lobinger, *Like His Brothers and Sisters*, 1999). An earlier version was published in Asia as, *Every Community Its Own Ordained Leaders* (Lobinger 2008), and most recently, *The Empty Altar* (Lobinger 2017).

23 As a young lawyer Gandhi first developed and practised *ahimsa*, non-violent protest, from 1893–1914 when facing the apartheid regime of South Africa.

24 See also, the film *Gandhi* (1982), directed by Richard Attenborough, and winner of nine Oscar awards.

believe in many incarnate children of God. Amazingly, each of his Bhikkhu friends answered by pointing to the same event: the story of the washing of the disciples' feet; an event truly unique, a one-off with no comparison anywhere. No other religious founder ever behaved or acted in this way (Pieris 1982, 65–70; also 1999 *passim*). Hearing that, Pieris had a mural of the foot washing placed on a wall in his Tulana Ashram.

A further example is relevant, this time from the third century CE, from the post-Apostolic Church of Rome. Deacon Laurence was assigned to guard the possessions of the Church in Rome. In August 258, threatened by the military authorities, Laurence was ordered to hand to the proconsul the wealth of the Church of Rome, be it chalices, garments, or money. The next day Laurence came to the piazza in front of the Roman military headquarters, bringing with him the destitute and the lame whom he had gathered from the seedy alleys on the outskirts of the city. To the proconsul, Deacon Laurence proudly announced: "Here is the wealth of the Church!" In short, shrift Laurence was roasted alive.²⁵ His witness was impeccable, if overtly provocative: the poor, the destitute, the lame and the disabled are the true wealth of the church; they present the authentic face of Jesus. Their vulnerability and fragility, as defenceless as Jesus himself, is capable of piercing the heart, enkindling love and bonding friendship in solidarity.

TO CONCLUDE: PUTTING THE LAST FIRST²⁶

The Word of Chapter 13:1–20 has no expiration date. It challenges each disciple to take risks for the One who walked intimately with the little ones, the lonely, those stigmatised with the HIV virus, or those pushed to one side because of their political commitment to justice and fairness. To quote Dorothy Day: "To convert the poor you must be like them; to convert the rich you must be unlike them" (in Quigley and Garvey 1982, 54).

Each day we experience a new dawn, a fresh opportunity to live out the Gospel for another day. Each sunrise launches the first day of the rest of one's life. More poignantly, the words of Teresa of Avila come to mind: "The feeling remains that God is on the journey, too." And Teresa underlined an essential condition: "To have courage for whatever comes in life—everything lies in that." Undeniably, on not a few occasions the quiet resilience of others, not least that of my brother Anselm, has kept the fire kindled amidst the ashes: "Arise, let us go forward!" (Jn 14:31).

25 Laurence is Anselm's baptismal name. According to the legend, Deacon Laurence asked to be flipped over on the pyre, as his other side had not yet been properly baked.

26 See, Mk. 10:31, Mt. 19:30, 20:16, Lk. 13:20.

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