

Maundy Thursday - Rev'd John Goldsworthy - 1st April 2010

I want to start at an unexpected place – the opposition of some clergy and lay people to women bishops and priests on the basis that since scripture requires that wives should obey their husbands, it is inconceivable that a man should then come to church and sit under the authority of a woman.

Ephesians 5:22-24 is especially invoked to support this view.

“Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

Nearly 30 years ago, Bishop John Wilson challenged this interpretation, that *submit* means *obey*. He did so by going back just one verse, “Submit to **one another** out of reverence for Christ”. John Wilson points out that the Greek word translated “Submit” cannot here mean “obey”. If it did there would be chaos in the church and society. Imagine the Vicar having to obey the curate while the curate at the same time must obey the Vicar. Or the manager of the Rye Hotel having to take orders from a junior waitress and vice versa.

The Greek word literally means, “place oneself beneath another”. It does not mean a chaotic disruption of necessary chains of command. It does mean a voluntary humility in seeking to be of service to one another. Marriage is only one example of social relationships that thrive where there is mutual respect and a desire to serve one another out of reverence for Christ. Not only does Paul enjoin wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord, he also requires husbands to “love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.” This requirement, in the face of the social norms of Paul’s day, was revolutionary, not to say almost scandalous. And it made the command to submit equally applicable to men as to women.

If, as members of the body of Christ, we are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, we may ask, which scripture throws the most light on how to apply this? The answer, for me at least, is in the gospel reading we have just heard. Jesus, at some stage during the Last Supper, with studied intentionality, stripped down to his underwear, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin and proceeded to wash the disciples feet, drying them with the towel.

Washing the sweaty, dusty feet of one’s guests was a courtesy provided by a host as the guests arrived. The task was normally performed by the slave lowest in the pecking order. Jesus now assumes this role of the slave, but in the middle of the meal. John records no words being spoken. Maybe the disciples were too stunned and perplexed to speak, except for Peter. For him this was too much. “Lord, do YOU wash MY feet?” “Peter”, Jesus, in effect, replies, “you do not understand now what I am doing, but later it will become clear to you.” Here is Jesus voluntarily placing himself beneath his disciples.

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Peter, as only Peter could, resists. "You shall never wash my feet." In other words, Peter tries to set limits on what Jesus may do for him, which means that he tries to set limits on the authority of Jesus. Ever since, even among professed believers as well as unbelievers, people have set limits on Jesus. We have all done it. We will allow Jesus to call the shots so far and no more.

It doesn't work, of course. No-one can tell God what to do. So Peter hits a brick wall. Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." Detailed study of John's gospel reveals that John loved to use double meanings. So here: If Peter does not allow Jesus to wash his feet, does not allow Jesus to place himself beneath Peter in voluntary, humble service, then he and Peter have reached the parting of the ways.

But John applies double meaning to this act of washing. The foot washing is symbolic and takes place in the context of Jesus' final meal with his disciples. And in that meal Jesus takes bread and wine and makes them symbols of his body broken and his blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. The outward washing of feet pointed to the cross. In the washing Jesus assumed the place of the lowest slave. But on the cross, where he achieved the inner washing away of sin, Jesus assumed the much lower position of a despised criminal – an object of derision, hung stark naked on a cross. He could not have placed himself beneath us any lower than that.

It is this that Peter will come to understand in time. If he will not allow Jesus the "slave" to wash his feet, how will he allow Jesus the "criminal" to wash his soul? When Jesus humbled himself to wash the disciples' feet he was sternly rebuking them because they had not long previously been arguing as to which of them would be greatest in the Kingdom of God. The church to this day has never been free from the tensions caused by people with a lust for power.

But when Jesus washed the disciples' feet he did so in the context of the Last Supper where he broke bread and described it as his body given for them. Later in the supper he took a cup of wine and described it as his blood of the covenant poured out for many. Now the separation of body and blood speaks of a violent death. Someone who dies peacefully in their sleep does not normally bleed. So, in the Holy Communion, when we take of bread and wine separately, we remember that Jesus did not die peacefully in the sleep of old age, he died violently, unjustly, at the hands of human beings. We remain always a died-for, risen-for people.

When Jesus set us the example of humble, mutual service to one another he poured out water. And He made it plain that he was setting an example for us all to follow, "If I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." But when he moved from symbolism to reality He poured out his life blood. When he washed their feet he set us an example of humble serving to follow. He set us an achievable task. When he hung on the cross he achieved for us what

we could never achieve for ourselves. He offered the atoning sacrifice that only one who was both God and human could effectively offer. This was not the appeasing of a cruel and angry God, but rather the satisfaction of divine justice to the anguish of a loving but just God.

Whether you come forward now and actually get your feet wet or you just observe, you are faced with the question, "How best can I wash the feet of others; how best can I be of service to others?" "Whose feet can I wash and how?" Whether you come forward to partake of the bread and wine or you just observe, you are faced with the question, "Do I really appreciate how enormous was the suffering of Jesus; do I really appreciate how enormous was my sinfulness that it required such drastic and costly action on the part of God?" And further, can I hear Jesus say, "If I do not cleanse you by my shed blood, you have no part in me." On the other hand, if I humbly take the "cup of salvation", am I so filled with gratitude that I am compelled to wash the feet of others out of reverence for Christ?

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