

13¹ Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' ⁷Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' ⁸Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' ⁹Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' ¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

[NRSV]

Washing has become very topical in these last few weeks. The advice is that spending at least 20 seconds washing your hands thoroughly with soap removes contamination. So, wash your hands before and after going out or any contact with others or the outside world. It's taken on the nature of good or virtuous behaviour; some soap and water could save a life – either yours or someone else's.

This is not entirely new, of course. Hospital wards have had signs up about hand washing or using sanitiser for years to control infection, and those of us involved in pastoral visiting will be very familiar with that. Going further back, many of us will remember when we were children being reminded by our parents to wash our hands after every trip to the loo, stroke of a pet or play in the garden.

In the story of Holy Week – the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus, there are two stories of washing; one of feet, and one of hands. They have a very different significance and meaning, yet they both help to explain something of what is unfolding.

The Last Supper is the setting for the washing of feet. It was a task usually assigned to slaves, and always done by someone understood to be of lower status than the recipient of the washing. But here, Jesus takes the responsibility for himself. This episode occurs before Judas leaves the meal (v.30) and so we might assume that even he was included in this.

It's a remarkable act, turning social conventions upside down – as Jesus often did. He behaves in a way that is entirely in keeping with a man who eats and drinks with 'sinners', speaks with lepers, touches the sick, champions Samaritans, tells us to prioritise children because they understand, and heals people on the Sabbath.

However, if that isn't enough, we need to remember that when we're reading John's gospel, nothing is just face value. When Jesus washes the disciples' feet, he is looking ahead to the purpose of his mission, and the meaning of the death he is about to face. Somehow in the mystery of all that the crucifixion means, there is a true washing and cleansing. The power of the selfishness, guilt and shame that plagues humanity and mars our relationships with God and each other is about to be broken. Receiving that is going to feel a bit like having Jesus – the most important person in the room – washing your feet. Finding forgiveness and healing can be a process that involves awkward moments, embarrassment and unease. Yet it is ultimately the true liberation we all need.

Little wonder, then, that Peter protests. He also protested when Jesus was much more explicit about what was going to happen – that he would be arrested, tried, executed and then rise again (Mark 8:31-33). Subconsciously, perhaps Peter has made that connection. However, when Jesus says it's important, Peter characteristically overreacts and asks Jesus to wash more of him. It's a comical moment in what is otherwise a very serious episode. It's not about how much of the water in this bowl you get, Peter, it's about the much bigger themes that it points to.

This washing symbolises Jesus taking responsibility for doing what is necessary for reconciliation and forgiveness to be achieved, and he accepts that will be at a great cost. The contrast with Pontius Pilate's bowl couldn't be starker. "Washing your hands" of a situation has entered our language as shorthand for someone refusing to take the responsibility, the consequences and the cost of a difficult decision or action. Pilate's public action is his attempt to disown the decision of the mob to crucify Jesus, but we know he can't. Only the Romans can execute and he is the governor, so the responsibility remains his, whatever he does with a bowl of water.

One bowl is a vain attempt to disown a decision, as a result of fear of the crowd and losing face with the emperor. It's a face-saving and expedient manoeuvre to try and maintain a façade of peace. The other bowl is a costly act of service, symbolising a genuine cleansing of sin and its consequences, fully embracing the pain of the way of service, and taking on the full responsibility of what the fulfilment of that action will require. This is Jesus rejecting the way of power, preferment and status that Pilate is so locked into.

In the next half an hour, most of us will wash our hands – and for good reasons. Try making it a moment for prayer and reflection as you take responsibility for the safety of yourself and others. Use it as a moment to think about Jesus washing his disciples' feet, his commitment and love for all of them – even his betrayer. Take a moment to give thanks for the cleansing and reconciliation he chose to bring – and at what cost. Pray for all those in positions of authority, influence and power – who like Pilate might be tempted to do what is easy and expedient, rather than what is difficult and right. And pray for those you seek to protect by washing your own hands – those who are vulnerable, those who work in our health services and need us to keep the demands down, and also and particularly for all who are suffering, and those who grieve as a result of this pandemic