

PRBC Sermon for Zoom service at 10.30 am on 31st January 2021

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John 13 – Power to Serve

This morning we start a series based on the second part of John's Gospel, chapters 13 to 21. We anticipate it will probably take us up to the Sunday after Easter, 11th April, when Jonathan will conclude with a sermon on chapter 21, entitled *Breakfast by the Sea*. At PRBC, members of small groups will be studying The Good Book Guide to John 13 to 21, entitled *The Place of the Greatest Glory*. If you're not in a small group and would like to follow the series, please let us know and we'll get a copy for you.

The study begins with the questions: Have you ever seen someone in a position of power do something unexpected? What was it and what made it so surprising? Perhaps you'd like to ponder that...?

Beginning at v.3: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands (NIV 'under his power') and that he had come from God..." got down on his knees and washed his disciples' feet. In First Century Palestine, this was normally a task that a servant would carry out, so why did Jesus do this for his disciples? (Pause)

When he reached Simon Peter, we read in v.6 that Peter was incredulous that Jesus was going to wash his feet... In his mind, the Messiah just wouldn't behave like that! In v.8 he tells Jesus: "...you will never wash my feet." However, when Jesus tells him that if he doesn't let him wash his feet, he will have "no share (part) with me" Peter, with typical enthusiasm, demands Jesus wash his hands and head as well!

What is all this about? (Pause)

When he gets dressed and returns to his place, Jesus explains.

In v.15 he says: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you" – 'should' is a very strong word. It has unpleasant connotations these days, especially if you're the kind of person who doesn't like being told how to think or what to do! If we allow our ego to get in the way, we miss the point of what Jesus was teaching... foot washing is the metaphor he uses for service. True service or discipleship is about being willing to lay down our power, all our needs, wants, desires... and, in sincere humility, do whatever needs to be done... This is very challenging teaching.

Jesus goes on to illustrate his reluctant willingness to allow events to take their course in the rest of this chapter. He knew one of his disciples was planning to betray him and he knew another would deny knowing him. In v.21 we read that he was “troubled in spirit” at the thought that one of the twelve was about to betray him. One of the men with whom he’d spent three years travelling, teaching, sharing his thoughts, feelings and life itself... was getting ready to hand him over to the soldiers, officials of the chief priests and Pharisees. (John 18 v.3) And Jesus had just washed their feet. No wonder he felt “troubled in spirit”. Can you imagine what was going through his mind or how he was feeling? (Pause)

The atmosphere in the room must have been pretty tense: no-one knew what to say. Even Peter probably spoke very quietly to John, as he asked him to ask Jesus who was going to betray him. (v.23-4) Obviously, Jesus knew that Judas Iscariot was going to be the betrayer but he chose to speak ambiguously to Judas: “What you are about to do, do quickly.” (v.27) Only Jesus, and possibly John, knew what Judas was about to do and Jesus let him go.

Things might have been very different if he’d tried to stop him but even then Jesus knew he had to be willing to lay down his power. Although John doesn’t mention “the cup” Jesus refers to in the other gospels, the process of his arrest and inevitable ‘trial’ was set in motion by his willingness to let Judas do what he had to do. Although we can’t imagine he was looking forward to it, Jesus knew what he had to do. Remember John 8:29: “The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.”

Let’s return to John 13 to see what Jesus did after Judas left the room...

In v.31-32 he tells his disciples that he (“the Son of Man”) is about to be “glorified” and God is “glorified” in him. In his commentary on John’s Gospel, William Barclay suggests: “The greatest glory in life is the glory which comes from sacrifice.” Probably this is an oblique reference to the ghastly, sacrificial death Jesus knew he would suffer and I think his tender, gentle tone in the next three verses helps us understand his motivation... LOVE. (There’s more here to tease out in small groups.)

In the NRSV v.33 Jesus addresses the remaining eleven disciples as, “Little children...” This is a warm, intimate, almost parental way of speaking to a group of adult men! He goes on: “I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.” Perhaps it helps if we

remember the disciples were probably in a state of shock and Jesus was trying to make sure they understood...

Then Jesus gives an instruction or “new command” – “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” It’s that simple and yet how difficult it is! Some people / fellow disciples are easy to love; some others, especially those who are very different from us, are harder to love. Remember, these disciples are the men who squabbled, even at the last supper, about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. (Luke 22)

In v.34 Jesus deliberately uses some very strong language: “command” and “must” or “should” - there are echoes of v.15 in his imperative tone. He’s not saying, as Sergeant Wilson in ‘Dad’s Army’ might, ‘If you are able to... I would like you, please, to love one another.’ He’s issuing an instruction. If we feel we struggle to love one another, perhaps it’s helpful to remind ourselves that Jesus washed the feet of every one of his disciples, even those who were about to betray or deny knowing him. He was willing to lay down his power, humble himself, go down on his knees, behave like a servant... to show his disciples how to love. Perhaps I’m preaching to myself here... the next time I feel disregarded, ignored, patronized... by someone, I need to be willing to swallow my pride, metaphorically go down on my knees and serve my sister or brother.

V.35 is the extra little push that some of us need: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (NRSV) It’s as if Jesus is saying, ‘The thing that’s distinctive about Christians... the thing that will influence people more than anything else... is if they can see that we love one another.’

Chapter 13 finishes with the sad start of Peter’s denial. He cannot understand why he can’t go with Jesus and because he loves Jesus so much, tells him, “I will lay down my life for you.” It’s difficult to ‘hear’ his tone as Jesus retorts, “Will you really lay down your life for me?” There may be heaviness or sadness in his voice as Jesus goes on, “I tell you the truth, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.”

Let’s finish with prayer: Lord God, we ask you to help us be disciples who are willing to serve and love one another. Please help us to be willing to lay down our power, as Jesus chose to lay down his power. We know that we need the help of your Holy Spirit, working within us to be able to serve and love as you do. Please help us. Amen