

Sermon John 13.16-20

'If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you don't like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself.'

Augustine

May my words be faithful to the written word, and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the Lord. Amen.

Some of you will no doubt be devoted followers of PG Woodhouses' Jeeves, the valet who helps his congenial but somewhat challenged 'master' Bertie Wooster out of many a scrape. Here's one small exchange:

"How does he look, Jeeves?"

"Sir?"

"What does Mr Bassington-Bassington look like?"

"It is hardly my place, sir, to criticize the facial peculiarities of your friends."

Or maybe your tastes lie more with Nelly Dean, the pragmatic voice of reason in *Wuthering Heights*. Or maybe Samwise in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. All servants of others.

Today Jesus says, 'I tell you the solemn truth, the servant is not greater than the master, nor is the one who is sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'

These words follow the washing of the disciples' feet. It begins the section of John's Gospel sometimes called the 'Book of Glory' (Chs 13-20). The words of Jesus are charging people to do as Jesus does; linking clearly to the act of foot washing. So we are told that as servants of Jesus we too are called to wash the feet of others.

For us it is clearly linked to our call to be a community of mercy and kindness. We follow the one who was himself mercy and kindness and we seek to build that as a living reality in our midst.

There are many ways to 'wash feet' – and we need to be especially creative in this time of spatial distancing. Maybe you could send someone a card to let them know you are thinking and praying for them. Maybe you could call someone as an act of 'washing feet' to be alongside someone in need. Maybe you can respond to the Vaccinaid challenge, or the Christian Aid Covid Appeal: all acts of washing feet to support the lives of others. The key to this is that we are called to care for others and to emulate Jesus in our lives.

As we metaphorically wash the feet of others we refuse to hold back in taking on the small and unnoticed tasks. We are committed to listening, connecting to others and to show them they are cherished and loved by the God of tenderness, to truly be attentive to others around us. To see ourselves as servants of tenderness, of mercy and kindness.

To do this demands that we break with models of stratification and purity. It stands out against the rat race of productivity and the frenzy of accumulation. In the face of the world's anxieties, we are called to imitate birds and lillies. Today we are challenged to think of ourselves, how do we exercise power in our lives? For how we respond speaks volumes of the new kingdom we are a part of. Only if we move with the rhythm of suffering and solidarity – the passion, death of Jesus and of all peoples – can we hope to come to the rhythm of mending and blessing- the resurrection and ascension God promises to all. Only if we follow the example of the divine footwasher, do we truly become followers of Christ.

So, as we reflect on the call for us to be like the one we follow, we can take heart. We don't follow a figure like Woosters, Frodo or the Earnshaws. Rather we follow the Servant King, the one who stoops to wash our feet. And we are, today, challenged, in this Eastertide to recall the actions in that upper room of the washing of feet. And we are called to do the same in our lives.

As the poet Lisa Degrenia puts it:

Jesus, you kneel before me
You remove my shoes and I am exposed
My feet are grimy
full of calluses and cracks
pungent with sweat and toe jam
I'm embarrassed by them
I pull back but you reassure
You're not offended
I feel welcome in your hands
vulnerable, yet safe

The cleansing begins
I see your reflection in the ripples
I see me, too
Your water brings truth and life
Who I am and who I can be

I am whole and home in the touch the towel
You look at my neighbor and hand it to me.

The Touch of the Towel © 2011 Lisa Ann Moss Degrenia

You might be tempted to forget this, and the call to do as our Master does,
but recall the words of S Augustine:

**'If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you don't like,
it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself.'**

Amen.