

Daniel's reflection for Holy Week - POWER ON ITS KNEES

When the news spread across the world in 2001 that Archbishop Bergoglio had washed and kissed the feet of 12 Aids victim in a Buenos Aires hospice, a new hope was born in many hearts. Uncontrived and spontaneous, this was a truly radical thing to do. Each Maundy Thursday he washed the feet of the poor. He will do it again next week. No empty gesture this – it is the mini-sacrament of where his passion lies. And so it was with Jesus. During the Last Supper he reached for the apron and asked to wash the feet of his surprised guests. In this one rather shocking action he revealed the whole heart of the Gospels, a summary of his ministry. Here was the very incarnation of the profoundest meaning of the Servant- God.

The new Pope has chosen Francis as his name. St Francis too kissed and washed the wretched of his time – the lepers. He fiercely believed in a God who became flesh – in all its glory and misery, in all its grace and sin. In these striking actions of Jesus, of St Francis and of Pope Francis I, we sense a newness, a shift in resolve and expectation, a birth after much suffering, a clarity of vision after much purification. Such earthy rituals, with their evocation of poverty, powerlessness and service, signal a real transformation of the status quo.

In his washing of the disciples' feet Jesus was offering an unmistakable paradigm shift away from the pomp, finery and clerical show that was alive then, as it is now. His action warns of a kind of boundary-crossing in the Church's self-perception, when values are reversed and the last will be first - *anawim* become elite. It is a moment when the whole notion of authority is turned on its head.

There was an utter simplicity in the lifestyle of Jesus who lived among the poor, of St Francis who left his huge inheritance to embrace a world of poverty, and of Pope Francis I who spent so much of his time in the slums of a divided city. Jesus wore and eat what everyone else was wearing and eating, Francis was a barefoot, ragged, travelling preacher and our new Pope is impressing millions with the scant time he has for vestments, limousines and papal apartments, choosing only the bare necessities of an authentic human being. This is already seen as a definitive indictment of what he called 'the vanity of clerical power in the Church'.

In 2005 Cardinal Bergoglio said the Mass of Holy Thursday in a Maternity Home. He washed and kissed the feet of 12 expectant and young mothers and their babies. Why did he do that? It was a silent sacrament about the mystery of mothers, the holiness of babies, the sacredness of human life. It was about recognising the real presence of God. '(This teaching) is engraved' he said, 'across our hearts'. It is so easy, however, to forget that revelation!

I remember a Maundy Thursday foot-washing at St Wilfrid's Church in Ripon where I was a pastor about 10 years ago. Before the Mass began I lost my temper with Joseph, an irregular visitor from the ranks of the marginalised. I even called him names and saw him off the premises. After the ceremony I came back to the presbytery kitchen with Fr Jim and realised what I had done.

Shocked and ashamed I searched the places he used to frequent until I found him. We walked back to the house. I asked permission to wash his feet. He agreed. The task was not easy. Little was said. It was a strange and emotional kind of reconciliation that will always stay with me. I had forgotten that Joseph, too, was an *alter Christus*.

Given our propensity for greed and power, the sacramentality of foot-washing will always be relevant, and even urgent. Jesus, for instance, would have had his fractious and competing disciples very much in mind during that powerful conversation with Peter. St Francis, when he washed the feet of his brethren, was only too aware of the unholy state a corrupt Church had fallen into during his life time. And Pope Francis most assuredly will be carrying the weight of a scandal-hit, splintered institution when he washes feet in Rome next week, a ritual he obviously holds to be uniquely healing and prophetic.

These three 'moments' are lessons in humility for those who are obsessed with the question 'Which of us will be the greatest?' They find it hard to believe the Gospel insistence that the poor are the greatest, the primary place of God's presence. Professor Gilbert Rowe of Duke Divinity School, USA, wrote in *The Times* last week that the name Francis 'emphasises that the Roman Catholic Church not only serves the poor; the Roman Catholic Church is the church of the poor'. And indeed, we might add that the spirit of poverty constitutes the very essence of the Church.

James Hanvey SJ reminds us, in a recent *Tablet* article, about Vatican II's vision of a mystical Church community that expresses itself 'not in retreat from the suffering, violence and injustice that mark the world, but in a profound loving solidarity with it, especially with the poor, weak, forgotten and abandoned'.

In the first detailed account of the washing of the feet, it seems as though St John's Gospel, written several decades after the Synoptics, wanted to give a practical theology of the Eucharist that revealed the meaning behind the breaking of bread. '(John) made it', according to Franciscan Richard Rohr, 'into an active ritual of servant-hood and solidarity, instead of the priest-centred cult that it has largely become . . . (it is) amazing that the foot-washing ritual was never made into a sacrament. It is explicit and clear and mandated by Jesus himself'.

In many of the parishes I served, we often sat around the water and washed each other's feet. And we always spared a moment for a brief reflection from each one. Parishioners spoke of awakening memories of a lost intimacy, of longing for a compassionate and more peaceful world, of a sense of God in their deepest soul. Incarnation in one tender touch.

(Horizons of Hope p 42)