

John 13:1-20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 13 verses 1 to 20 He came to Simon Peter who said to him, Jesus answered him, Peter said to him, You shall never wash my feet.

Jesus answered him, If I do not wash you, you have no share with me. Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus said to him, The one who is bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean, and you are clean, but not every one of you.

For he knew who was to betray him. That was why he said, Not all of you are clean. When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, Do you understand what I have done to you?

You call me teacher and lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

[1 : 5 6] If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you. I know whom I have chosen, but the scripture will be fulfilled. He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.

I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place, you may believe that I am he. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me.

John chapter 13 is a very important chapter, helping us to understand the meaning of Christ's death. We should begin by noticing the similarities between John 12 verses 1 to 8 and John chapter 13 verses 1 to 11.

There's a meal before the Passover, there's washing of feet, and there's a reference to Jesus' coming death. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus performs an action symbolizing his death in the Passover meal, instituting the Lord's Supper.

But here Jesus performs a different symbolic action with a similar purpose. We might ask why John omits any reference to the institution of the supper, and why his chronology seems to place the Last Supper before the celebration of the Passover as well.

[3 : 0 7] Perhaps because John wishes to present Jesus as the Passover lamb. We can see John exploring this connection in chapter 1 verse 29 and 36, and also in chapter 19 verse 36.

Luke is all about meals and eating, but John has focused upon water and washing, particularly within his Gospel. And it's not entirely surprising then that the symbol of Christ's death here is a washing action rather than a meal.

Verses 1 to 3 present us with a situation within which all of the key details have been aligned. The scene is fully set for what takes place next. Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God.

And from there, the story proceeds. Jesus knows that his hour has come. This is heralded in the previous chapter with the reference to the Greeks coming to him. This was a sign that his hour had come.

[4 : 21] He's going to depart out of this world to the Father. He's loved his own who were in the world. He's loved them to the end. And during the supper, at this moment where all these things have come into place, the devil has put into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him.

And he knows that the Father has given all the things of this world into his hand, that he has come from God and he is going to God. And then he takes those hands, takes the towel, and washes his disciples' feet and dries them with the towel.

The deliberate manner in which the action is entered into underlines its significance. The more that Jesus is exalted, the more that he stoops to serve his people, the very first thing that Jesus does when he knows that the Father has given all things into his hands is to take those hands and to wash his disciples' feet.

The parallel between this action and the action of the previous chapter, where Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet with the nard and dries them with her hair, should not be hard to see.

In chapter 12, verse 3, the costliness of the nard, the liquid that is used to wash Jesus' feet, is stressed. And Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet is achieved with a far more costly liquid, with his blood.

[5 : 37] The foot washing ultimately points to what Jesus is going to do with his death. It's a symbol of his love for his disciples. He loved them to the end, the end of his death, and of his provision for them.

He removes his garments, as they will be removed at his crucifixion. He wraps himself in a linen towel, as he will be wrapped in linen cloths at his burial. He lays down his life in order to take it up again, and here he lays aside his garments in order to take them up again.

The disciples are reclining to eat, and their feet would have been outside of the sphere of conversation and of fellowship, a realm that Jesus enters in order to minister to them. Once again, the disciples would only fully understand the meaning of Jesus' action at a later point, when they saw what he did in the cross and the resurrection.

And the washing is absolutely essential. Without Jesus' act of service, we would have no part in him. And Peter's objection at this point is in some ways parallel to Judas' objection in the previous chapter.

Judas objected to the costliness of the liquid that was poured upon the feet of Jesus by Mary of Bethany, and presented this argument in a way that seemed very pious, that it should be given to the poor.

[6 : 49] Peter's objection is an objection to the symbolic action displaying the necessary work of Christ in ministering to us in his death. Why should my master, the one who's so much greater than me, engage in this action for me?

It all sounds very pious. But Judas is headed for betrayal, and Peter is headed for denial. Both of their forms of resistance are resisting something that needs to be done.

What should we make of verse 10, where Jesus says that the one who is bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean? Maybe it could be seen as a reference to baptism, and all that that stands for.

The feet are the part of the body that comes into direct contact with the judgment-bearing dust, and the foot washing is more akin to perhaps the forgiveness of sins over the course of the Christian life, as we continually return to our first washing.

It isn't just a symbol of Christ's death, though. It's also a model to follow. This is the form that our life should take with relation to others. It's the way that we should follow the example of Christ in setting aside our primacy, putting others before ourselves.

[7 : 59] Jesus quotes Psalm 41, verse 9, speaking of it in relationship to Judas. And this psalm has an interesting series of resonances. Perhaps the opening statement of it, blessed is the one who considers the poor, reminds us of Judas and his false concern for the poor in the previous chapter.

The psalm then speaks of enemies saying of David that he is lying down, never to rise up, in the verse prior to the one that Jesus quotes here. David then praises God that he would raise him up in verse 10 of the psalm, the verse after the one that Jesus quotes.

When we see verses quoted in the New Testament, we should always pay attention to the surrounding context, because often the reference to a particular verse is designed to spark a connection between the two passages and to help us to recognise in the surrounding passage that has not been quoted, something that illuminates what's happening within the New Testament.

All of these themes would seem to be fulfilled in Christ's death and resurrection. And by referring to Psalm 41, not only Judas' treachery is foretold, but the way in which Christ would be raised from the dead.

A question to consider. Maundy Thursday is a time when Jesus presents us with two symbols of his coming sacrifice, the supper and the foot washing. The supper is intended to be a continual practice as an ongoing memorial of his death, and the foot washing to be a pattern for our continued service of each other within the life of the body of Christ.

[9 : 35] How can these rituals and patterns help us to understand Christ going to the cross more generally, not merely as a once-for-all sacrifice in his death, but as an enduring model for our life?

Looking at them more closely, what can we learn about the cross-shaped character of the life of the people of God?