

**Reading:** John 13:1-17

**Theme:** Shocking the disciples!

We would be surprised, but very pleased to receive an invitation to go to Buckingham Palace, but be even more surprised if we found out that the invite was to a family occasion and be even more surprised if the Queen greeted us personally as we arrived, showed us to our seat and served us a meal she had cooked herself - because she found out it was our favourite! Imagine telling our family all that went on there, but they laughed at us as they didn't believe us - too incredible, too marvellous and too unbelievable!

It in the passage we have been looking at in John 13:1-17, we see something even more incredible, unbelievable and marvellous. We have already seen staggering things in this passage - the marvellous love of the Lord Jesus (v1) and have begun to look at the marvellous action in v2-11. Last time we saw the introduction John gave concerning this in v2-3. We have glimpsed something of the amazing self-knowledge the Lord Jesus had about Himself (v3). It would appear that because Jesus knew all this, He nevertheless still proceeded with this marvellous action of washing the feet of His disciples.

Please keep in mind all we have seen over past weeks - of Jesus' love and His amazing self-knowledge. Let's try to again set the scene that evening. Earlier in the day some disciples had gone ahead to prepare the Passover meal - prepare the room and lay it out, set the table, prepare the lamb and the bitter herbs, the dips and unleavened bread, also the wine. They set out the bowl, the jug of water and the long towel near the door in its usual place. We do not know if these ones returned to Jesus and then all came in together. Probably Jesus with the other disciples travelled in from Bethany which was only a couple of miles away. They would have walked and done so with open sandals on their feet. It wasn't

on nice tarmacked roads, so dirt, dust, sand and even grit could well have been on their probably sweaty feet.

It was customary, polite and welcomed for the host to have the feet of their guests washed. The master of the house would not do it as it was a menial task. The lowest servant would do it - the apprentice servant, the one on work experience, the youngest slave. It was a job that showed you are a nobody! When John the Baptist, at the height of his popularity and fame, wanted to show how great the Christ would be, he said that he, John was not worthy to undo his sandals and remove them – even to get ready to wash His feet!

A problem in the upper room was there was no servant as Jesus and His 12 disciples were there in the room. The disciples had an attitude problem - they wanted to be “*big men*” - they had high and big thoughts about themselves and their own reputations. They had argued over who would be the greatest, perhaps even eyeing the table to see where they could sit and organising some sort of order of merit and that may have sparked the argument over who would be the greatest. I can imagine them seeing the water jug, basin, towel and thinking it would be so nice to have freshly washed feet, but hesitating to do anything about it, just in case they lost face and had to wash someone else’s feet! There they all sat, or rather reclined for the Passover meal. There in the corner stood the jug of water, the basin the towel - which frowned at them and silently screamed at them all “*You are proud and arrogant!*”

Yet no one moved, perhaps all even avoided looking at them. They all sat, reclined in dirty feet discomfort. Yet One was not too proud or high-minded, the One who knew “*that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God*” (v3). Jesus got up and did this marvellous

action. See 3 things concerning this, which we will do well to note and learn from:

### **1. The Active Rebuke.**

John does not use words for the sake of it, yet he does not just say that Jesus washed their feet! John, guided by God the Spirit, describes in minute detail, almost with astonished delight at his recollection of what went on at that time. In the Greek 7 distinct things are mentioned in v4-5 - which are brought out in KJV, but obscured by NIV - Jesus **rose** from supper, **laid aside** His garments (*outer clothing*) leaving His loincloth on, **takes** the towel (*obscured by NIV*), **wraps** it around Him, **pours** the water into the basin and in turn **washes** and **dries** each disciples' feet with the towel wrapped around Him.

They would not stir, none of them would move, but now by this marvellous action Jesus actively rebukes their proud stubborn hearts. Culturally we can understand their reluctance. One reference I came across said that the Jews felt that foot washing was beneath Jewish slaves, it should be reserved for Gentiles slaves or for women or children! Yet Jesus in His active rebuke, smashes conventions, smashes customs to bits and His act of humility is as unnecessary as it is stunning and marvellous.

This is very shocking for the disciples. All of them were around the low table, on the little mats or couches, reclining, laying back as Jesus got up. Perhaps they thought He was going to give some words of wisdom or give thanks and yet they watch Him strip off to His loincloth - He is dressed as a menial slave. Then He takes the long towel and wraps it around His waist, pours the water. I wonder at what point they realised with horror and shock Jesus was going to do the job they as individuals had been too proud to do? Then He washes the dirty, smelly(?) feet of these proud

sinner, of the traitor, of those who would abandon Him only a few hours later.

The One they called Lord and Master, who they had been excited over when He owned Peter's statement that He was the Christ the Son of the living God, this One they had marvelled at as He calmed the wind and waves, raised people from the dead, dealt with demons and diseases. Here He was, as a slave, washing **their** feet and it must have smashed their pride and arrogance, their high thoughts to pieces - for that moment at least! I suspect Paul had this incident in view when he wrote in Philippians 2 that Jesus was in very nature God, yet He humbled Himself to become a man and exchanged that nature for the form of a menial, foot washing servant. Yet the Lord Jesus humbled Himself even more as He would go to the cross and be made sin.

The disciples needed to learn, as do we all, that to be great in God's eyes and reckoning, is to be servant all. We all want to be thought well of, to have a reputation as a man or woman of God - in preaching, teaching, praying, giving and even serving! Yet true greatness comes from **being truly willing** to do anything in the service of another believer. There is something romantic and grand in helping and serving those in need, hardship or poverty - it is right to do so. The disciples would have had no trouble with that. Their problem came in humbling themselves to serve their equals, their friends, colleagues and fellow believers. Not to lose face then was harder than to condescend to serve a poor helpless inferior! Jesus' marvellous action is pure from any wrong motive, yet He, the Lord of glory in a human body, actively rebukes the disciples' and our proud stubborn hearts - as we will see again.

## 2. The Stubborn Extremes.

I suspect the disciples were all ashamed, maybe not Judas, but we are not told the reactions of any of them except Peter. Good old Peter! He put his foot in his mouth on countless times and often changed feet at other times and he does so here again when Jesus came to him. Then after a brief conversation, he goes to the other extreme - never wash to wash all over!

It appears that as Peter saw Jesus washing and drying the feet of the others, his mind must have been in a turmoil as he knew that he or the others should be doing that and not this way around. Peter blurts out as Jesus came to him “*Lord, are You my feet going to wash?*” There is a strong contrast and emphasis in the Greek with the words “you” and “my” being next to each other in word order. Here was the one Peter had owned as the Christ the Son of the living God, the One whose hands had healed the blind, lepers and the sick; had touched dead bodies and they rose up from the dead alive and well. Now with those same hands He would wash Peter’s feet!

This was too much for Peter. He questions Jesus and Jesus’ answer doesn’t satisfy him and so Peter stubbornly refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. The Greek is very strong “*No way!*”; “*Never ever*” will you do this. Peter is stubbornly humble! Jesus had said wait a while and he’d understand, but Peter says in effect “*Never ever, not even in eternity*”. He cannot accept this humbling act by Jesus and he is stubborn in the extreme through humbleness! Peter saw no further than what was socially acceptable and fitting, as if only the act of foot washing was at stake. If that was the case, Jesus’ words would be almost like the words of an angry boss “*I’ll do it or else you’re fired!*” Yet the action by Jesus pointed to something far higher - “*Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.*” The action included spiritual symbolism as we will note a bit later. Peter, on realising there was more than social etiquette at stake,

then went to the other extreme in the same stubborn way. Now no longer “*never wash*”, but “*wash all over*” - unbounded and unthinking enthusiasm!

Peter had plenty of faith and love, but had little clear knowledge. I wonder how many of us would have written Peter off long before as he seems so ignorant, dull and blundering? We could be guilty of doing that with other believers if we are not patient and kind. Very often a person’s heart can be right though their head be wrong in their thinking. We need to make allowances for that and to realise that not only was the will of man affected by the fall, but also the mind.

We need to be aware of pride and false humility. We can so easily write off our or other people’s gifts, talents, abilities, potential and end up denying God’s goodness, and work in us and them throughout the years. Every believer will have some part to play in church life. This means they have some gift or talent to use in the local church. We may say something like “*Oh, I can only do this or that...*” **Well then do it!** Faithfully use what gifts you have - no matter how small or insignificant you feel they are, but then, as you prove faithful, be prepared for God to give you other gifts to develop and use in His service.

Peter refused to accept what Christ would do for Him and it was false humility. If Jesus chooses to bless and use us, we are not to dismiss it as wrong, nor deny such. God has blessed many of us in many ways and we are not to deny what God has done for us in His grace. To do so is not true humility, but inverted pride. In some Christian circles, it appears spiritual to say something like “*I’m nothing, have no abilities, talents, wealth or growth in grace, I am miserable useless sinner!*” A right and spiritual appreciation would be something like “*I am a sinner, with nothing to boast of,*

*but God in His grace and mercy is given me health, strength, talents, abilities, success in business, ministry, sport, study, isn't He wonderful and amazing!"*

We are to be careful we do not spurn or diminish the work of our Saviour's love and grace in our lives and to grow, develop a sense of "*Woe is me, I am useless, rotten and inadequate*" and miss the blessings, benefits and gifts our God has lavished upon us and we fail to use such for His glory and honour.

If we are honest, we go from stubborn extreme to stubborn extreme, passing briefly through a balanced position on the way in many areas of life - from "*I am useless*" to "*I am the greatest*" with the right appreciation somewhere briefly touched upon in the pendulum's swing! We need that balanced and right appreciation in so many areas of life. We certainly need it in church life as some could be thinking that we are the best church in the world - *which I assure you is an extreme error* and yet at the same time there could be others who feel we are damned and just waiting winding up as part of God's judgement on us - *which is the other extreme!* A more accurate and surer appraisal should be that we have much room for improvement in many areas, but so very much to give thanks for. This means both areas need to be covered in the prayer in the life of the church and we will express praise and thankfulness for all God has done, pray for God's mercy and goodness to be further extended to the church as He works among us and through us.

We are to beware of any stubbornness, especially stubborn extremes in our lives. We can miss out on real blessings. We can feel God **has to** bless us with this, that and the other and yet He in His love and wisdom knows He does not have to do so! We can become resentful and bitter toward God and other Christians,

especially if they know blessings and we do not - as it is easier to mourn with those who mourn, than to rejoice with those who rejoice. We can stubbornly refuse to accept God's providence for us and the Lord may be saying to us: "*You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand.*"

We need to avoid stubborn extremes in our lives, especially in our attitude to the things of God and with other believers. Our position of understanding may be in a pendulum swing opposite to that of others and we can become polarized from true brothers and sisters as the devil gets in and sows discord and resentment.

Our time has gone and the third heading will have to wait till next time, when we will look at "***The Kind Instruction***" and the lessons we can learn from it. Until then I pray that we may know the same humble, kind, loving Jesus teaching us all to become more and more like Him in our thoughts, words, attitudes and actions.