

The Foot Washing: Reading John 13 again.
The Porvoo Consultation on Diaconal Ministry
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Introduction

Welcome everybody to this reflection on John 13:1-17, which is intended to inform your own discussion of diaconal ministry. It might seem that John's Gospel is not the right place to look for inspiration regarding the diaconate. First of all, it seems that the Johannine church had no clergy—certainly nothing like we see in the Deutero-Pauline or even Pauline epistles. Secondly, the words *diakonos* and *diakoneó* are rare in this Gospel. In the third place, neither the noun nor the verb occurs in the passage selected. As you would expect, it has a kind of literal meaning at the wedding feast of Cana, where it names the servants. But even there, the phrase “the servants who had drawn the water knew” is really a reference to disciples, who know the “whence” of Jesus. The verb is used only in chapter 12, but, later in the same chapter both noun and verb are used to refer to discipleship:

If anyone wants to *serve* me, he must follow me, and where I am, my *servant* will be too. If anyone *serves* me, the Father will honour him. (John 12:26)

The rarity of the words servant and to serve belies a rich and deep teaching on service, found principally in the very passage chosen for reflection. The story of the foot washing has often been represented in art. My first picture is taken from the Monastery of Hosios Loukas in Greece, not too far from ancient Delphi. The gesture has not lost its appeal as we see from our next picture. It is not often that a regular feature of the Holy Week liturgy is flashed around the world. *Viral* may be too strong a word, but, somehow or other the gesture spoke even in our day. In the New Testament, the only account we have is in John 13. My reflection will follow this sequence:

- Setting in John
- Setting in the Gospels
- Prophetic Gestures
- John 13
- Interpretation
- Conclusion

It may serve to begin by reading the whole passage, take from the NET translation, which easily available on the web (www.bible.org).

John 13

John 13:1 Just before the Passover feast, Jesus knew that his time had come to depart from this world to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now loved them to the very end. 2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, that he should betray Jesus. 3 Because Jesus knew that the Father had handed all things over to him, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 he got up from the meal, removed his outer clothes, took a towel and tied it around himself. 5 He poured water into the washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel he had wrapped around himself. 6 Then he came to Simon Peter. Peter said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” 7 Jesus replied, “You do not understand what I am doing now, but you will understand after these things.” 8 Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet!” Jesus replied, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” 9 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head!” 10 Jesus replied, “The one who has bathed needs

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only to wash his feet, but is completely clean. And you disciples are clean, but not every one of you.” 11 (For Jesus knew the one who was going to betray him. For this reason he said, “Not every one of you is clean.”) 12 So when Jesus had washed their feet and put his outer clothing back on, he took his place at the table again and said to them, “Do you understand what I have done for you? 13 You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and do so correctly, for that is what I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have given you an example—you should do just as I have done for you. 16 I tell you the solemn truth, the slave is not greater than his master, nor is the one who is sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Setting in John

As we read this story in the Fourth Gospel, a number of features will be borne in mind.

Farewell Discourse

The farewell speech is well established as a literary genre in the OT and the apocryphal books of the intertestamental period. There are numerous examples, like the blessings of Jacob to his children in Gen 47:29-49:33, the farewell of Joshua to the nation of Israel in Josh 22-24, and David’s farewell speech in 1 Chr 28-29. The common situation in almost all of these instances is that of a prominent person who gathers his followers (children, disciples, or the entire nation of Israel) just before his death or departure to give them final instructions which will help them after he is gone. R. E. Brown (*AB 29A*, 598-601) has listed thirteen features of major OT and intertestamental farewell speeches, which are shared in common with the Last Discourse in the Gospel of John. We have in chapter 13-17 an extended reflection on how Christian disciples are to “manage” in the post resurrection time.

No Lord’s Supper at the Last Supper

The second element to bear in mind is the absence of the Lord’s Supper in John’s Gospel. At the very point at which the hearer expects words such as “Then he took bread, and after giving thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you” (Luke 22:19), we hear something completely different.

John 6

It is not of course that the Johannine community does not celebrate the Eucharist—that much is very evident from John 6—but rather for his own pastoral and didactic purposes the author has taken the drastic editorial step of *replacing* the action with the bread and wine with action of foot washing. I hope to show that the deep purpose is identical in both gestures.

The Setting in the Gospels

Given that the story is unique to John, it may be useful to ask whether there is anything related in the Synoptic Gospels. In all three Synoptic Gospels, there is a discussion about greatness, leading to a key text on service. Mark gives the earliest version in which James and John, the sons of Zebedee, seek eschatological promotion and cause a row. The response of Jesus is penetrating, ending in the aphorism, “*for even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:45) The same story is told in Matthew, with the interesting difference that it is not the sons but the mother who makes the request. Thus the blushes of incipient hierarchy are spared! Luke’s version of this episode is interesting on two counts: its location and the wording. The third evangelist, with his usual editorial freedom, moves the conversation to the Last Supper and then changes the ending. It may be good to hear it all:

Luke 22:24 A dispute also started among them over which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 So Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ 26 Not so with you; instead the one who is greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is seated at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is seated at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

We can compare the final lines:

Mk 10:45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Lk 22:27 For who is greater, the one who is seated at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is seated at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

Masters and servants at table occur earlier, in Luke 12 and 17. In the later chapter, the ordinary relationship is evoked to prevent at any inflation or as St Paul puts it, being puffed up. But early chapter reverses the relationship and is unique to the Luke’s Gospel.

Luke 17:7 “Would any one of you say to your *slave* who comes in from the field after plowing or shepherding sheep, ‘Come at once and sit down for a meal’? 8 Won’t the master instead say to him, ‘Get my dinner ready, and make yourself ready to **serve** me while I eat and drink. Then you may eat and drink’?”

Luke 12:37 Blessed are those *slaves* whom their *master* finds alert when he returns! I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to *serve*, have them take their place at the table, and will come and *wait* on them!

In the very Gospel in which table fellowship is strongly underlined, such reversal will not be without its didactic and cultural effect.

In my opinion, much of the material special to John’s Gospel, while apparently quite different from the other Gospels has in fact a link with the Synoptic traditions (if not the Gospel texts as they have come down to us). For example, there are no parables in John’s Gospel. But we do find the discourse on the true vine and the good shepherd, both plausibly linked not only with Hebrew texts but also with Synoptic traditions such as the parable of the vineyard or the parable of the lost sheep. Sometimes the relationship is more complete, when a synoptic saying is upgraded to a symbolic narrative. The best example of that may be Mark 2 where we read,

Mark 2:18 Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. So they came to Jesus and said, “Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don’t fast?” 19 Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they do not fast. 20 But the days are coming when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and at that time they will fast. 21 No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the tear becomes worse. 22 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins will be destroyed. Instead new wine is poured into new wineskins.”

The wedding feast of Cana share not only themes of wedding, wine and bridegroom, but also the important topic of transition from the mother religion to the practices of Christianity.

Given the background from the Synoptic Gospels, perhaps especially from Luke, the foot washing is a symbolic tableau constructed by the author of the Fourth Gospel, based on particular sayings of Jesus, as they have come down to us in the third Gospel. Technically,

John has raised the Synoptic teaching into an *action chreia* or paradigm. At this stage, this understanding of the foot washing as a literary elevation is a hypothesis calling for further substantiation.

Prophetic Gestures

In the Hebrew Bible, there is a large number of prophetic gestures, actions undertaken by prophets usually to illustrate or draw attention to their teaching. Well-known examples are

- Hosea marries a prostitute - Hosea 1-3
- Ezekiel with the exile's baggage - Ez 12:1-16
- Ezekiel's "non-bereavement" - Ez 24:15-27

Think of it as an early form of PowerPoint! The practice continues into the New Testament. A striking example can be found in the Acts of the Apostles, perhaps the last prophetic gesture in the Scriptures.

While we were staying there for several days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. He came to us and took Paul's belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" (Acts 21:10–11)

A considerable number may be associated with Jesus himself: The Twelve, the healing miracles and exorcisms, open table-fellowship the Fig Tree, the Entry in Jerusalem, The Temple Action, the Last Supper action with the words over the bread and the wine.

In our case, the practice of open table fellowship is especially relevant. The meal practices of Jesus were challenging because he broke the dietary laws—the kashrut—as well as the purity laws. The kashrut and the purity laws were not incidentals of religious devotion but essentials of Jewish identity. Tinkering with either was equivalent to removing an essential building block of the edifice of faith and nationality. The reaching out in compassion and the inclusion of the excluded rightly caused offence and was partly responsible for the push against Jesus, leading to his death.

Our story is a kind of *literary* prophetic gesture, an action *chreia*, which builds on the meal practices of Jesus and on his teaching on service, reversing the usual social order.

John 13: Words used

A final piece of the jigsaw is the actual words used. Three of these are especially significant and others provide supporting evidence. The key three words are "he got up", "he took off" and "example." Behind these instances stands a conviction that the symbolic world of the Fourth Gospel invites cross interpretation of the symbolism found.

He got up

The Greek word ἐγείρω has a wide range of meanings in Greek, from waking up to rising from the dead. In the Fourth Gospel, the use reflects this wide range.

- *He got up* (ἐγείρω) 13 times
 - *To get up*: 5:8; 11:9; **13:4**; 14:31;
 - *To construct*: 2:19-20 (in ref. to the resurrection of Jesus)
 - *To appear*: 7:52
 - *To rise from the dead*: 2:22; 5:21; 12:1, 9, 17; 21:14

However, we notice that the ordinary sense of getting up is found only three possibly 4 times. To construct, in the sense of to raise a building is found twice, but symbolically in

reference to the resurrection of Jesus. Finally, in six cases, it clearly refers to rising from the dead. On its own, this might not mean much.

He took off

The frequent verb τίθημι has both a perfectly everyday use and a special use in the Fourth Gospel. The sense of “to lay down one’s life” is found only in the Johannine literature (John 10:11, 15, 17; 13:37–38; 15:13; 1 John 3:16) and not elsewhere in the New Testament. As well as that, several of the ordinary references are in connection with the burial of Jesus or Lazarus (underlined below)

- *He took off* (τίθημι) 18 times
 - *To put, place*: 2:10; **13:4**; 11:34; 15:16; 19:19; 19:41-42; 20:2, 13, 15
 - *To lay down*: 10:11, 15, 17; 13:37-38; 15:13

In other words, the verb is used of laying down one’s life or the burial of someone who will rise from the dead. In conjunction with ἐγείρω, this usage is highly evocative. Again, on its own, it might not mean much. The third example may clarify further.

Example

The Greek language is rich in words meaning example or model: type, icon and character would all be examples. The word ὑπόδειγμα is one of these and here are the occurrences in John’s Gospel

- *Example* (ὑπόδειγμα) hapax
 - *An example of behavior used for purposes of moral instruction, example, model, pattern*
 - *An indication of something that appears at a subsequent time, outline, sketch, symbol*

Both uses are in the New Testament:

- *Example*: **John 13:15**; Hebrews 4:11; James 5:10; 2 Peter 2:6
- *Sketch*: Hebrew 8:5; 9:23

What is interesting, however, is the use of this word in the Greek OT, the Septuagint.

2 Macc 6:27 Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age 28 and leave to the young a noble **example of how to die a good death** willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws. When he had said this, he went at once to the rack.

2 Macc 6:31 So in this way he died, **leaving in his death an example** of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation.

4 Macc 17:23 For the tyrant Antiochus, when he saw the courage of their virtue

and their endurance under the tortures, proclaimed them to his soldiers as an **example** for their own endurance, 24 and this made them brave and courageous for infantry battle and siege, and he ravaged and conquered all his enemies.

Sir 44:16 Enoch pleased the Lord and was taken up, an **example of repentance** to all generations.

Ezek 42:15 When he had finished measuring the interior of the temple area, he led me out by the gate that faces east, and measured the **temple area** all around.

Again, the two senses are found, but the connection with exemplary and noble death is very prominent in 2 Macc and in 4 Macc.

In summary, the words to get up / to rise, to lay down (one's life) and give an example of noble death—all of these suggest that symbolism of foot washing has as its deeper meaning the loving service of humanity which is the paschal mystery.

There is strong supportive evidence from the other vocabulary of the passage:

- **Wrapped:** 13:4-5; 21:7 (Easter) This is a rare word and the only other occurrence is Peter wrapping himself to meet the risen Lord at the Sea of Tiberias.
- **Water** 21 times, but the contexts are also illuminating; NB Jn 7, 12 and 19. Chapter 7 has the verse about the water of life gushing up—a *later* gift in view of the resurrection. the washing in chapter 12 is all is preparation for the burial of Jesus. Finally, the water in chapter 19 signals the new life which comes to believers as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection.
- **Washing** 13 times. Jn 9, 13. The only other use is in the story of the man born blind who recovers sight by washing.
- **Wipe** 3 times. Jn 11, 12 and 13. To wipe is confined to the dinner party in Bethany and this Last Supper in Jerusalem.
- **Feet** 14 times. Jn 11, 12, 13 and 20. I.e. always in relation to the body of Jesus, in death and resurrection.
- **“Never”** lit. “not into eternity” 12 times: thirst, hunger, die, place, live, Holy Spirit.

Perhaps on their own, none of these would be convincing. But placed together was have a strong invitation to read this this story at another level. Before going on to see that in detail, here is a summary.

- The foot washing replaces the words and actions with the bread and the wine in the Synoptic tradition
- The bread and wine constituted an action *chreia* interpreting the death of Jesus
- Roots in the Synoptic Tradition (Luke) of a parabolic nature
- 3 words are important: to get up / rise, to lay down (one's life) and example
- 6 other words are supportive
- The context of the Last Supper and the Farewell Discourse invites interpretation in the light of Jesus's death and resurrection (our next step)

Interpretation

Finally, it is time to place these insights at the service of a reading of the text, looking at it in three segments:

- John 13:1-3
- John 13:4-11
- John 13:12-17

John 12:1-3

V. 1 As is well known, the interpretation of “to the end” involves a Johannine play on words, conveying the idea of bringing to a conclusion and perfecting. Because the word anticipates the last words of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, the meaning of perfecting is present. The associated verb *τελειόω* in this Gospel is used only to refer to completion of Jesus' mission.

V. 3 The word “because” governs all that follows, which tell us that Jesus' action has to do with his death and resurrection, the lifting up of the messiah in the paschal mystery.

John 13:4-11

The key here is the brief exchange with Peter. It may help to lay it out concentrically.

A 6 Then he came to **Simon Peter**. **Peter** said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

B 7 Jesus replied, “You do not understand what I am doing now, but you will understand after these things.”

C 8 Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet!”

B* Jesus replied, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”

A* 9 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head!”

There are three questions: why did Peter object? What is the meaning of verse 7? and what is the meaning of 8b?

Of course we are not told why Peter objected. If we take it very literally, perhaps his feet were not in need of washing! The more usually interpretation is that he cannot bear the reversal of social roles. But the two comments on the lips of Jesus invite us to another level.

In v.7, not understanding until later is a feature of this Gospel. Not understanding or being able bear something *now*, something which will be illuminated retrospectively by the resurrection is mark of this Gospel: John 2:22; 12:16; 13:7, 36; 14:26; 16:12; What new understanding of the foot washing is bestowed by the light of Easter? In 8b, the little word **μέρος**, a share, turns up at the crucifixion and the appearance by the lake and we are taken to both the cross and the resurrection for our understanding.

So why does Peter object? I think he voices a resistance to the claims of Jesus found more widely in the Gospel. The clearest sequence of objections is found in John 5. But there are objections scattered elsewhere, for example against his place and family of origin and against his equality with God and so forth. There is an objection in chapter Jesus, which may help:

John 6:52 Then the Jews who were hostile to Jesus began to argue with one another, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

This is not chiefly to do with a literal understanding of the Eucharist as if it were a form of cannibalism. Rather the objection is to Jesus’ person and in particular to the belief that his death and resurrection are sources of life for believers. Jewish objectors at the time of writing balk at the cross, the one place where he does “give his flesh for the life of the world” in John’s Gospel. They cannot believe that the cross is the climax of salvation history. Or, to put in Johannine terms, they cannot believe that God would *serve* humanity by the laying down of the life of the Son of Man.

Peter’s refusal to be washed is analogous to that. Given that the deep meaning of the foot washing points us to the cross and resurrection, he voices the core objection not just to John’s teaching, but to Christian teaching as a whole: it cannot be that God’s love would bring him to the lowliest service of humanity through Jesus’ being lifted up like the bronze serpent. *That* is why letting yourself be washed is a condition of being one with Jesus, of having a share with him.

John 13:12-17

Three comments may suffice here.

1. The short passage is in a concentric pattern, which serves to highlight the centre, from which the other parts derive their meaning. There is also an echo of Jesus’ teaching from the Synoptics:

Matt 10:24 “A disciple is not greater than his teacher, nor a slave greater than his master.”

2. At the centre stands v.15. We have already seen the force of the word *example*. The little phrase “just as” (καθώς in Greek) has special force in this Gospel. Sometimes it has the ordinary Greek meaning of “just as is written” or according to. But of the thirty-one occurrences, fully twenty of them refer to the relation between the Father and the Son, between the Son and those who believe in him. It always means more than simply comparison. Three examples may suffice:

John 6:57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who consumes me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the bread your ancestors ate, but then later died. The one who eats this bread will live forever.”

John 13:34 “I give you a new commandment—to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

John 20:21 So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you.”

It is not simply that our actions are modelled on the actions of Jesus (a point of comparison), but rather the action of God in Jesus is continued through our actions (a point of synergy).

3. The slightly gnomic final comment has a parallel in James 1:22-25. It is a Beatitude. There is only one other Beatitude in Fourth Gospel:

John 13:17 “If you know these things, you are **blessed** if you do them.”

John 20:29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? **Blessed** are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Is it only a coincidence that a beatitude opens and closes the Book of Glory?

Conclusion

Let me gather the various considerations together. From a historical-critical point of view, the foot washing is an enacted parable created by the Fourth Evangelist. As usual, he innovates conservatively, using material from the Synoptic tradition, in this case Luke. He does this to face head on a double crisis threatening his community:

- Belief in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, or rather its lack.
- The practice of mutual service, or rather its lack.

This Gospel teaches that there is more to service than moral behavior. Why is this? Because salvation itself was a lowly act of loving service by God, through the humble lifting of his Son in death and resurrection. Christian service is not merely modeled on the service of Jesus; it is, rather, a continuation of that service, so that the Father continues to act through the Son through us today. Putting it different, Christian diakonia participates in and is a continuation of God’s service of humanity in Christ. To be part of that continuation, we must allow ourselves also to be thus served by God in Christ. Only then have we a “share” in him and only then can we be Christ to others.

We hear the same teaching from a completely different and earlier part of the New Testament, St Paul in Gal 2, where we read:

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

All of this means that the simple verse we started with—John 12:26—means a very great deal more than might be apparent at first glance.

If anyone wants to **serve** me, he must follow me, and where I am, my **servant** will be too. If anyone **serves** me, the Father will honour him. (John 12:26)