

Martin Luther King is famous for leading the Civil rights movement in the USA and for his emphasis on non-violent protests. During the protests in Birmingham Alabama many of those involved in the peaceful demonstrations were subjected to beatings, hosings, and the unleashing of police dogs. This brought about a reaction from others not involved in the demonstrations. Dr Luther King then began what he called a 'poolroom pilgrimage' going into bars and pool rooms and talking to people to encourage them not to respond with violence when the peaceful protests came under attack. But it wasn't just his words but his actions when arrested himself that spoke to people and persuaded them of validity of his words.

Today as we look at Jesus teaching his disciples and what it means for us to be a true follower of Jesus we see a lesson as much from Jesus' actions as from his words.

In John 13:15 Jesus said to his disciples, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you".

We ask three questions, what is the example, what were they to do and what are we to do if we are followers of Jesus?

1. The setting v1-3

V1 gives us the setting of this event. It was at the time of the Passover. This was the annual remembrance of when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. Moses had tried to persuade Pharaoh to let the people of God leave Egypt but Pharaoh refused and so God acted through sending an angel to Passover the land bringing death to the first born male child in every house which was not protected by the blood of a sacrificed lamb. The Passover feast was a special meal evoking memories of how God rescued his people through the sacrifice of a lamb.

At this point it was just hours before Jesus was taken away and put to death. His mind must have been filled with that and yet the dominating theme as we see in v1 is his love for these disciples. He was to show that love in a very practical way both then and the next day. He would wash their feet today and die for them on a cross tomorrow.

So there they were. They had come together in this room to share the Passover meal and there they were lying round the table eating.

2. The action v4-11

The passage records how Jesus got up removed his outer clothing, wrapped a towel round him, like a servant, and washed the feet of all of his disciples. From that today I want to note two things:

a. the nature of the task and b. the nature of Jesus

a. the nature of the task

the task of washing feet was a necessary one because these guys had been walking dusty streets. It was something that was normally done by the most menial servant or slave. It wasn't even considered fitting for a Jewish slave to do. It was the most menial task imaginable and Jesus did it. It was this which shocked the disciples because they did not think it was fitting for him of all people to be doing it. It is this which begins to get us to the heart of what Jesus has to say to his disciples. What Jesus was wanting his disciples to learn was that to love involves service and sometimes the most menial of service. However, we humans do tend to put some people on pedestals and then see them as above doing certain tasks. So we might struggle to imagine the Queen doing the washing up or the Prime Minister cleaning his children's football boots.

This task, in the minds of the disciples, was beneath Jesus. That was why Peter in v8 said "No you shall never wash my feet." It wasn't right. It wasn't how Jesus should act as Peter saw it.

b. the nature of Jesus

If we look at the words here it says v3 "Jesus knew" and then v4 "so he got up". Jesus knew who he was and that he had v3 come from God, more, as John is leading us to see, he is God. He didn't wash their feet despite being God but because he was God. Because he was God and because he loved them, he stripped himself and served them by washing their feet, even as the next day he would be stripped of his clothes and serve the whole world through sacrificing his life on a cross.

Here in this room being God he did the most menial act of service. It was a display of love. It was a symbol of spiritual cleansing, which we don't have time today to consider. It was an astounding example of humility and service, which Jesus then used as an example to teach his disciples.

3. The explanation v12-17

When he has finished Jesus asked the disciples "Do you understand what I have done for you? V12. It was clear they didn't and so he explained to them a. who he is, b what he had done and c. what they should do.

a. who he is v13 – he referred to himself as "teacher and Lord". Teacher is the term Rabbi and the normal way to address a religious leader. Lord indicated someone of high reverence perhaps with overtones of divinity. Certainly for us looking at this through the cross, resurrection and ascension we see in that word Jesus as God. Jesus was pointing to his nature and dignity. However he was not doing it in the modern "Don't you know who I am" terminology where some film or pop star or footballer claims special treatment because of who they think they are. Jesus was simply making the point that he knew what they were thinking, that Jesus is someone special, someone godly and so he should not be doing something like this.

b. what he had done v14 – this highly exalted person had done a very lowly act of service for them. It was a clear example and a radical act. Now we might think hang on OK it was a bit unusual but

surely let's not make too much of it. However we cannot separate this act from what was to come the next day. What Jesus was showing them here was a glimpse of what loving involves and he would as it says in v1 "show them the full extent of his love" or as the footnote says "love them to the last" on the following day. What is happening here is the teacher, the leader is showing what his leadership involves and showing it as an example for Peter and the rest to follow. This is what Jesus said in Mark 10:43-45, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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." That was the teaching and here in John 13 we see the teaching worked out in action in the upper room and more so on the cross. The true follower will serve out of love was the message and the example on that evening and the next day showed that Jesus himself walked the talk.

c. what did he expect them to do? V14b & 15 he expected them to follow him. He, as God, had been willing to wash their feet, in their day that was a necessary task. But the heart of the matter was much bigger. Jesus point here surely was that, as teacher and Lord, he knew no task of love and service for others was beneath him and the same should be true for these disciples. It may well have been that they had lain there round the table wondering who was going to do the task and thinking, it is not going to be me! Here Jesus showed humble love which was his way and was the way for these disciples as well. He had given them a clear example to follow.

We began with three questions, what is the example, what were they to do and what are we to do. The example was that of love shown in humble service, they were to learn from and copy that example in their lives and especially after Jesus' ascension when they would be changed from humble followers to the Apostles and church leaders.

That just leaves the question what are we to do?

d. what about us? V16&17

Well firstly note this is a command from Jesus and if, as we have seen in the first two sermons of the series, we wish to put Jesus first in our lives we should be hearing and obeying his word. So how does it apply to us today?

Well many of us will have seen the practice of Maundy Thursday footwashing, where a Bishop or church leader, often in full robes to signify who they are, will wash people's feet because Jesus did it. However that always strikes me as following the form of what Jesus said rather than the heart of what he meant. Jesus meaning is that no task of loving service should be beneath the follower of Christ.

I remember my first weekend at theological college (I can't remember last weekend though). On the Sunday we had enjoyed a nice roast lunch at the end of which the Principle stood up and gave out

some notices. The last thing he said was help was needed in the kitchen washing up because there were no kitchen staff. So thinking I would earn some brownie points I wandered into the kitchen to find the Principle there coat off sleeves rolled up and his arms in the sink. Now I remember that still today because, like Peter lying round that table at the last supper, I thought “no this is not right”. However, it has stuck with me down the years as being very right and a very good example of what Jesus was saying and doing here. The Principle wasn’t doing it to look good or because he thought it was right. This was how he was as a follower of Jesus. My response showed that I still had a lot to learn.

Jesus washed the disciples feet to show that no task of loving service should be beneath the follower of Christ. Then he told them he had given them an example to follow and as we read vs16-17 he clearly expected them to do it. He was the master and did it so surely they as his followers will also and not just those disciples but every disciple down the ages.

This means i. we are never to important to serve others and ii. nothing is too menial for us to do.

Those are the principles that come out of this passage to us but how does that apply in practice?

Jesus loved his disciples and he showed that love in sacrifice. It was shown in the great sacrifice which only he could offer of his life in place of each and every person. But it was also shown in this act of humble service which we can and should seek to follow.

Jesus’ example means humble service should be part of our Christian way whether it is at home, with our neighbours, at work and at church.

The danger in many of these situations is that we are tempted to say, “it is not my job to....” and I think here Jesus removes that from us.

So at home we should not shun the menial tasks, washing up, cleaning the toilets or whatever. We do it as followers and as service to the rest of the family.

As neighbours we serve those around us being willing to do small and perhaps insignificant tasks of shopping etc.

At work we serve washing up the mugs at the end of the day, clearing up when a child has been sick even if we are a teacher!

At church there are so many ways we can serve. If we came each Sunday with the attitude how can I serve my brothers and sisters how would it change what we do this morning?

In the life of this as any church there are many ways we can serve and often ways that go unnoticed, doing the flowers, visiting people in heir homes, helping in the crèche, tidying up at the end of services. Yes we may not be on the rota but in love we serve.

We are never too important to do these tasks of service nor should anything be too small or menial for us to do. Out of love Jesus sacrificed his very life for us and he looks to those who follow out of love for others to be willing to follow his path of sacrificial and humble service.

Jesus said to his disciples “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you”, v15. That example of love revealed through humble service is there for all of us to copy as we follow Jesus.