

Jesus The Servant

The Public Jesus

There is a pattern to the way John writes his gospel account of the ministry of Jesus. In the first 12 chapters of John's gospel, Jesus is in the public arena. There are crowds watching him and following him. Hundreds, if not thousands of people are listening to his teaching. When he works miracles, turning water into wine, healing a paralysed man at the Bethesda pool, there are plenty of people who see what is going on. 5000 people are present when he feeds the crowd with a few loaves and fishes. It's in the public arena that he makes his claims to be the Messiah. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is a very public event.

That's the way John starts his gospel. And that's the way he finishes it. Jesus rides into Jerusalem in front of the crowds on a donkey. His trial is before the Roman and Jewish authorities. And his execution by crucifixion is right out there for everyone to see. It's all designed to force people to make up their minds about who he is. Is this Jesus the promised Messiah, or isn't he? Some who have seen the miracles and have heard him teach, believe he is. Others who have seen and heard exactly the same thing, don't believe. Just like today.

Last Saturday I had a man tell me that he came to faith in Christ when the doctors had given up hope on his young son. There was nothing medically they could do to keep him alive. At the time this man was a Buddhist, and wasn't the least bit interested in Jesus. Yet when his son was miraculously healed after prayer, he and his wife believed that it happened because Jesus was who he claimed to be. I've known of another miraculous healing of a young woman when the Elders of our church prayed for her. The doctors were absolutely baffled as to how she had fallopian tubes when a few days before the medical evidence clearly showed there were none. But even after that, she didn't come to faith in Jesus. For some, seeing is believing. For others, even miracles don't convince them about Jesus.

The Private Ministry.

When we get to John Chapter 13 it all changes. John doesn't record any interaction with the public. It's just Jesus and his followers. The ones who believe in Jesus and have chosen to follow him. From chapters 13 -17 Jesus is alone with his disciples. This is preparation time, teaching them of what is to come, and how they are to live once he is no longer with them. He is preparing them for the cross. He is preparing them for the coming of the Holy Spirit. He's preparing them for the time that is coming when they will be hated and persecuted because they follow him. He's teaching them how to stay connected to him.

If you have not yet decided to follow Jesus, then this morning you are going to get an inside look at what Jesus taught his followers. But before I do that, I want you to see something else in John's gospel.

The Glory of God Revealed

John writes his account of Jesus like the swing of a pendulum. It starts right up high on one side, with Jesus in glory. Jesus is in all his majesty, with God. **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."** (John 1:1-2) John describes Jesus as the creator, the life, the light of men. When the pendulum has swung right to the other side Jesus is on the Cross and then raised to new life. The cross is not a tragedy, but a triumph. Jesus has fulfilled all that the Father has sent him to do. "It is finished!" is not a cry of defeat, but a shout of victory. Jesus left all the glory of the Father's presence to reveal the glory of the Father on earth through his death on the Cross. The Son of Man is lifted up on the Cross, drawing all people to himself. With the Cross and the resurrection from the dead the glory of Jesus is seen in full measure.

So if one high point is Jesus in glory with the Father, and the other high point is Jesus crucified and then raised from the dead, where is the low point of the pendulum swing? Where is the point where the light is nearly overcome by the darkness? It's here in John Chapter 13.

The Low Point.

The low point happened when the creator of the universe got down on his knees, and did something that only the lowest of slaves would do. Let's read it.

"It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.' 'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!' Jesus answered, 'A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.'" (John 13:1-10 NIV)

Washing feet was a dirty job that even the slaves used to fight over. It was always the youngest, weakest slave that got the job. The feet to be washed were ones that had stepped in camel dung and raw human sewage. Those feet stunk. It was a disgusting job, and every one of the disciples knew it. By doing the task of the lowest slave, Jesus was demonstrating an example of servanthood that those of us who follow him are to copy. That's certainly one of the lessons from this scripture that I will expand on in a few minutes. But there is something even more significant here.

Peter makes a fuss about having his feet washed. He's obviously embarrassed that Jesus the Master is taking the place of a slave. But Jesus is not just setting an example for his followers. He's making a point that Peter and the others won't understand until after the Cross. This foot washing is a symbol of the spiritual cleansing that will take place when Jesus dies on the Cross to wash away our sin. Jesus tells his followers they are clean, except for one. Let's read on.

"For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them'" (John 13:11-17 NIV)

What follows is a detailed description of how Jesus was betrayed by Judas, straight after Jesus had washed Judas' feet. Jesus also goes on to predict that Simon Peter will betray him by denying him. How do you wash the feet of someone that has lived with you for three years, who you know is going to betray you? It's a staggering example of the degree to which Jesus loved Judas. Yet washing the feet of Judas didn't change Judas' heart. This is the low point. Jesus is on his knees, looking up into the eyes of Judas, washing his feet with all the tenderness and love that only he can display, knowing that Judas is about to go from

that place with clean feet, to sell Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, which was the going rate for a slave. Jesus who is taking the place of a slave, is sold for the price of a slave, by one of his closest followers.

At his lowest point, Jesus gives his greatest teaching to those who will remain as his followers. He has just demonstrated how to love someone in the most difficult of circumstances. The rest of the disciples don't understand the magnitude of what he has done, but they will. Here is what he says to them;

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35 NIV)

This command for us to love one another isn't given in a vacuum. It's given in the context of one of the greatest acts of betrayal the world has ever known. Jesus calls us to wrap ourselves in the clothes of a slave, and love one another. Not to be actors, pretending to be servants, but to be lovers of other people through acts of service. You see, loving one another through acts of service is a whole lot different than doing servant stuff without love. If the servant things you do are not coming out of a genuine love for others, then it isn't worth much. Here are three characteristics of service that is done out of love.

Service that is done out of love

1. It's done without publicity.

Jesus didn't call in the TV cameras when he washed the disciples feet. Servants in the Kingdom of God don't make a big deal out of what they do. Last Sunday Lyn and I were in Christchurch at Avonhead Baptist, where I was the first full time Pastor. We celebrated 50 years since the church was started. One of the people we honoured was Russell Ward. Russel helped build the church building, and he's been maintaining it for 50 years. Nobody asked him to do it. He just does it because he loves the Lord and loves people and wants to serve. He said to me last Friday "I've had seven stents put in my arteries and I have to stop several times now when I mow the church lawns, but I can still do it." Service that comes from a loving heart doesn't need to be noticed.

2. It can't be done standing up.

You can't wash smelly feet standing up. As that old song goes "Loving puts us on our knees, serving as though we were slaves". Mother Theresa died on September 5, 1997. At the time of her death she was the most famous nun on earth with 4000 sisters and 100,000 lay people working for her cause. But she didn't set out to become famous. She just started on her knees, praying with the dying on the streets of Calcutta. She used to say "It's not how much we do, it's how much love we put in the doing". Mother Theresa and Diana, Princess of Wales died within one week of each other. Both of them impacted the world, but Mother Theresa left behind an army of people who she inspired to carry on loving people through acts of service. Somebody once asked the conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein which was the hardest instrument to play in the orchestra. Straight away he replied "Second fiddle".

3. It needs the right water temperature.

Sometimes when we know the Lord wants us to wash smelly feet, we get the coldest water we can find, put ice cubes into it, then go to someone and say "here, let me serve you!" Or alternatively, we can come with boiling water and jam peoples feet in it, and call them ungrateful if they complain! The goal is to remove the dirt lovingly, with soap, warm water and gentleness. Taking the skin off with a wire brush is not servanthood. Servanthood is one of the primary ways we express our love for Jesus and our love for one another.

In July 1980, Professor Bruce Riggins of McCormack Theological Seminary spoke to 3800 people at a missions conference in the USA. He told of meeting an unusually dedicated Christian woman who was working in some of the seedy areas of London, serving underprivileged people. He asked her what made her serve these needy people, and she told him a remarkable story.

As a Jew during World War Two, she was on the run from the Gestapo, who were rounding up Jews and sending them off to concentration camps where they were being killed in their millions. There was a French woman who had lost her husband who took this Jewish woman in and hid her in her house. This woman was a Christian. Eventually the Gestapo came and arrested the woman with the Jewish identity papers. But the woman they arrested and sent to the concentration camp was not Jewish. She was the Christian woman who insisted that they change identities. She said to the Jewish woman "I'll pretend to be you. It's the least I can do, because Jesus has done so much for me". Within 6 months she was dead. The Jewish woman survived the war, and was so overcome by the servant attitude of this Christian woman that she chose to follow Jesus. She spent the rest of her life serving others.

Jesus said

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35 NIV)