



Christian Humility

***"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,
you also ought to wash one another's feet."***

John 13:14

READ John 13:1-17

Everything is ready for the Passover meal. The disciples are all at the table. The meal is about to start. Then Jesus lays aside his garment, ties the long linen cloth around his middle, pours water into the basin and starts washing the feet of his disciples.

The disciples must have been perplexed and ashamed. Just imagine it: their Lord and teacher doing the work of a slave that they up until now refused to do. When they entered the Upper Room they saw the pitcher with water, the basin and towel. Yet no one was prepared to perform that duty of a servant. They considered themselves too good for that. But now Christ their Lord and Teacher is performing that very task. He is doing to them what they should have done to Him and to each other.

The Lord of glory dresses himself like a slave and washes the dirty and sweaty feet of his disciples. Yes, the Lord of glory. That is how John pictures him. He knows that his hour is come (verse 1). He is in complete command. In verse 3 we read:

"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments and girded himself with a towel."

What a contrast! The highest possible place is his by right, yet he takes upon himself the very lowest place, that of a slave.

The disciples are stunned and ashamed. They have nothing to say. They let Jesus wash their feet. Except for impetuous and impulsive Peter. He goes from one extreme to the other. First he refuses: Never will you wash my feet. Later he says: Not just my feet but my hands and my head as well.

From his dialogue with Peter it is clear that Jesus is not just giving a lesson in Christian humility. Christ's act of humility is a symbol of his total humiliation on the cross. It foreshadows the cross itself. Christ did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). Through that sacrifice on the cross Christ will cleanse his loved ones. The cleansing of his disciples' feet is therefore also a symbol of the cleansing away of their sins. That is why Christ says to Peter:

"If I do not wash you, you have no part in me."

Christ's humble service therefore entails far more than a lesson in humility. It is something totally unique. Yet in the latter part of that passage of Scripture Christ does wish to focus on that aspect of Christian humility. Christ has seen how pride and selfishness prevented his disciples from offering to wash each other's feet. He wants to free them from such an attitude. That is why he points to the humble service he has shown as an example to be followed. If I, your highly esteemed Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

Christ is in fact saying: If I the Lord of glory am prepared to take the form of a servant, actually washing and drying the feet of those who are so much lower in rank than I am, ought it not be easy for you, mere disciples, to render loving service to one another in the spirit of true humility. After all, a servant is not greater than his master.

Is Christ saying that we must literally wash each other's feet? Some people have thought so. The point is, however, that we too should be ready to perform the lowliest service. It is a spirit, an attitude to others that Christ is interested in. You can wash feet with cold hearts. Yet following Christ's examples with cold hearts is an impossibility. Calvin wrote about this practice of literal foot washing in the Roman Catholic Church:

"Each year they hold a theatrical feet-washing, and when they have discharged this empty and bare ceremony they think they have done their duty finely and are then free to despise their brethren. But more, when they have washed twelve men's feet they cruelly torture all Christ's members and thus spit in the face of Christ himself. This ceremonial comedy is nothing but a shameful mockery of Christ."

Christ is not interested in external deeds as such but in a spirit of true humility which expresses itself in deeds of love.

This lesson was necessary for the disciples. They kept squabbling among each other about who was the greatest. This lesson is no less necessary today. Are we any different to those disciples? Are we truly prepared to be the least? If Christ were to ask us to wash his feet we would gladly do it. We all want to serve, don't we? Yet if Christ were to insist on washing our feet, would we allow it? True humility does not begin with the giving of service. It begins with the readiness to receive it. And what if Christ then continues to insist that we wash our neighbour's feet? Are we then just as willing to do that in self-sacrificing love as we were to wash his feet?

Christ sets the standard for our conduct towards each other. When you follow his example you figuratively stoop down to wash each other's feet. You no longer fight for your own position and honour. You are prepared to be the least. You want to serve in love. You count the other better than yourself.

But now the practice. How do we treat each other within the communion of saints? It is very easy to put each other down. When people think and act differently to what we are used to we very easily disqualify everything they say. They are considered to be inexperienced or ignorant. We switch off instead of humbly listening to what they have to say and trying to learn from it. It can happen that we strongly disagree with certain people. Do we then refuse to talk to them or to greet them? "We have no time for them" you hear people say. Is that washing each other's feet? Just think of it: Christ even stooped down to wash the feet of Judas his betrayer, while he already knew that he was going to betray him. May it then occur that we have no time for brothers or sisters in the Lord? There is also the other side of the coin. It can happen that people don't dare anymore to speak to those who strongly disagree with them. On previous occasions they have had such an ear-bashing or unfriendly reception that they don't dare anymore. Here too the question arises: does such a reception reflect the example Christ gave of true humility? Further, how faithful are we in apologising to each other and forgiving each other? Are we too proud to apologise, whether it be to our children or to fellow Christians? Are we prepared to go to those who have hurt us to apologise for what we have done wrong or do we demand that they first come to us to apologise for what they did wrong? What does Christ's example teach us here? Didn't he even stoop down and wash the feet of his betrayer?

Such an approach will remain a big struggle. A big struggle, not against others, but against ourselves. How are you able to count others better than yourself? It is only possible when you keep Christ's example in mind. He, the Lord of glory, humbled himself even unto death on the cross in order to cleanse us from our sins. Only when you are aware of it that you are a sinner saved by grace do you know how to treat others in Christian humility and are you able to do it.

In overconfidence we may think ourselves better than others and cry out: "though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus then puts us back in place with the words: "*before the cock crows you will deny me three times.*"

Christ will not tolerate selfish ambition, pride, that striving to be greater or stronger in the church. All our human pretensions are made to look silly in the face of Christ's example. As superior Lord he stooped down to wash the feet of his servants. That is how we are now to deal with each other in the church.

Christ ends that passage of Scripture with the words: If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. It is one thing to know and another to do. Blessed are you if you also put this lesson into practice. You are then called happy. You possess the peace of God which passes all understanding. You enjoy peace with God and with his people.

C Kleyn

© 2015

www.christianstudylibrary.org