

The way of discipleship



The foot-washing ceremony during the Holy Thursday service will look different in some churches next week. A theologian and liturgist hopes that this change will lead to a recovery of the true meaning of the ritual

A curious link between the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, Jean Vanier and Pope Francis is that each has attracted media attention – somewhat bewildered if not adverse – by their involvement in the washing of feet.

When Williams introduced the practice to Canterbury in 2003, many regarded it as rather strange behaviour. The Daily Telegraph noted that “cathedral archivists said they could find no record of previous archbishops washing feet at Canterbury Cathedral”. The reader was left with the impression that it was one more silly novelty, possibly imported from Williams’ previous position in Wales, into a settled (and, presumably, almost perfect) routine.

Earlier, in 1998, Jean Vanier had organised a foot-washing liturgy at a meeting of church leaders at the World Council of Churches. The individual reactions of participants are not recorded, but later Vanier, recalling the moment when he saw an Orthodox bishop kneel down and wash the feet of a female American Baptist minister, observed: “Gestures sometimes speak louder and more lastingly than words.”

Invited to address the prelates of the Anglican Communion during their tense meeting in January, Vanier invited them to wash each other’s feet. Afterwards, the bishops decided to “walk together”, in spite of their differences. Vanier has made foot washing a regular element in the life of L’Arche, the movement he founded that creates communities in which people with and without learning difficulties live together.

Then there is the action of Pope Francis, who, on 28 March 2013, just weeks after being elected pope, when visiting a young offenders' prison in Rome, washed the feet of some inmates, women and men, as part of his celebration of Holy Week. The event caught the popular imagination and there was a rush among some bishops to follow suit. But there was an even more vehement response from others and their liturgical advisers. They insisted that what the Pope had taken part in was "not a real liturgical foot washing".

Why this sudden concern to make a distinction between the Pope washing the feet of prisoners and a "real" liturgical foot washing? One wonders how some people define "liturgy". But perhaps we should not be surprised. Foot washing has always been controversial among Christians. Indeed in our foundation text for all the later ceremonies and liturgies, the Gospel of John, it is presented as a provocation, eliciting open opposition from Peter: "You [speaking to Jesus] will never wash my feet" (13:8).

The reasons for Peter's alarm (and why what is virtually a liturgical command in the Gospel has since been minimised to the point of invisibility) are not hard to find: washing one's feet is a private affair and the whole business of kneeling on the ground, handling dirty, smelly feet and so on, is not exactly elegant. Indeed, in the ancient world, where arranging for the washing of the feet of one's guests was the mark of a sophisticated host (Genesis 18:4 for example), the task would be delegated to the most menial female slave.

The fact that these actions by Williams, Vanier and Francis attracted such attention might be explained as simply the reporters' ignorance of liturgy or of the stories told about Jesus' final Passover Supper, or perhaps it is simply that the notion that every Christian leader should recall that "whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:44) has been almost lost. However, it also reveals simple incomprehension: the vast majority of Christians have never seen, much less experienced, a foot washing.

Foot washing was practised in the early churches (1 Timothy 5:10) but we do not know how widely – nor at what point – it became a Holy Thursday-only event (as it is, de facto, among the Orthodox churches). In the West, it was a regular monastic action both within communities and as a gesture of welcome to guests. In medieval times, it became an act of kings, showing (with due pomp) their "real" humility. At the Reformation, some churches forgot it completely, as another bit of unnecessary and complex (which it was) ceremonial, while the radical reformers (for example, the Baptists) adopted it as an "ordinance" – but then discovered it to be inconvenient.

Among Catholics, until new rites for Holy Week liturgies were introduced in 1956, it belonged to the ceremonial of bishops and was confined to cathedrals, and was a ritual carried out apart from the principal Holy Week gatherings. In rural cathedrals without a large body of resident clergy, it was simply skipped. Even when it was introduced to parish churches after 1956, little changed. It was presented as an option, but one requiring a choir capable of antiphonal singing, and in the introductory rubric the phrase used was "one could do it if there is a pastoral justification". As a result, the liturgy was seen in few ordinary parishes – and only then by that small proportion of people who went to the Holy Thursday evening Mass.

A major change in 1969 allowed antiphons to be replaced by similar hymns, making it easier for

parishes with ordinary choirs. But a curious interpretation of the ritual had crept into the minds of many who took part. Foot washing was seen as a sort of mime of the events of the Last Supper.

As a nativity scene was to Christmas, the ceremony of foot washing was to Holy Thursday – hence the need for the right *dramatis personae* and *mise en scène*: 12 men (although this number was not specified in the missal) and the priest removing his “outer garment” and wearing a towel. And so the inevitable kerfuffle in many parishes, with priests excluding women from the event, and the annoyance of so many that Pope Francis was “breaking with tradition”.

Now, as a result of a direct intervention by Pope Francis, the situation has been clarified. On 20 December 2014 he wrote to Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, and in January it was announced that the rubrics in the Roman Missal for the Holy Thursday service have been revised. The group chosen to participate in the ceremony will now represent the variety of individuals that make up the one People of God. It should include men and women, and, if possible, young and old, the healthy and the sick, lay people and clerics and those in the consecrated life.

Significantly, the decree does not simply permit women to be among those whose feet are to be washed, but states that this group should visibly reflect the gathering’s make-up. Moreover, by citing the Gospels three times, it gives a clear steer on how foot washing can be understood: an experience of how Christians ought to relate to one another.

Foot washing has come to be seen in recent centuries as either a piece of theatre, a showy demonstration of humility by those in power, or as an act of obedience to the command to love the poor (hence “Maundy Money” could replace a royal foot washing). But the text of John is quite explicit: the purpose of foot washing is to help everyone in the community discover how they are to relate to one another as disciples. Each must be prepared to wash the feet of the other. It enacts the mutual relationship of service that constitutes our distinctive community and is the practical face of the love we should have for one another.

Foot washing has to move from being a quaint ritual – that can be dodged when inconvenient – to being a fulfilment of the Lord’s will for our behaviour when we gather together. It models what it is to be Church.

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