

Through Death to New Life



Above is pictured the basin and towel used in our parish church for the washing of the feet of those who attended Maundy Thursday evening Eucharist. It symbolizes cleanliness and service in 1st century Jewish culture, but when connected to Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus' feet in John 12, and Jesus washing the disciples' feet in John 13, it also has connections to our lives today.

Although Lent and Holy Week for 2025 have passed, and we are now in the season of Easter, it can still be helpful to reflect on some of the Biblical events with which we engaged during April. This is especially so when we realise that within this time there was also Anzac Day and the death and funeral of Pope Francis. In all of these, I see not only examples of serving others, but, in some sense, people giving their lives for others and thereby enabling new resurrection life to emerge.

I wish to begin with the story in John 11:38-44 of Lazarus whose death and raising to life foreshadowed that of Jesus and of us. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, were friends of Jesus. When Jesus was told that Lazarus was sick, he waited 2 more days before travelling to Bethany, during which time Lazarus died. Such a delay that caused grief to Martha and Mary is a puzzle. However, for Jesus to go was dangerous as Bethany was near to Jerusalem, where people had recently wanted to stone him. As a life-giver, a grieving Jesus risked his life by going to the tomb of Lazarus and calling him out of death and into new life.

Later, Mary wanted to show her love for Jesus and thank him with her whole

self for raising her brother to life. She bought a large container of perfumed ointment, with which to anoint Jesus' feet should he return to Bethany. Jesus came to dinner shortly before Passover. During the meal Mary left the table, undid her hair, collected her jar of nard, and returned to anoint Jesus' feet and wipe them with her hair. "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." (John 12:3). Her act was noticed by all present. Immediately Judas complained about the waste of money, but Jesus came to Mary's defence saying, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." (John 12:7). Mary offered herself, her love and her thanksgiving to Jesus in the action of a servant. Jesus identified what she did as also anointing him for his burial.

A few days after Mary anointed Jesus' feet, a second act involving feet took place at the Last Supper. During the meal, Jesus "got up from the table, took off his outer robe and tied a towel around himself." (John 13:4). He put water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples, including Judas who was shortly to betray him.

When Jesus finished, he put on his robe and returned to the table. He explained that he had acted as a servant, even though he was their Lord and teacher, and that they were to follow his example by washing one another's feet. By also washing the feet of Judas, Jesus showed in his loving service that he was ready even to forgive and accept his betrayer. This act of Jesus, directs us today to serve others out of love from a position beside them or lower than them, and even to be ready to forgive them and give our lives for them. Further, as Christ is present in all God's loved creation, I suggest that in our service of others, we are both serving them and God's presence in them.

The action of serving others by giving our lives for them can be seen clearly in the life and death of Jesus, in stories retold on Anzac Day, in the life of Pope Francis and in Mary of Bethany's washing of Jesus' feet with such expensive ointment, but it is not always so clearly and publicly displayed in our lives today.

Jesus died on a cross, and we all have crosses to bear during our lives. It may be that our bodies are in pain from old age, an accident or sickness, or that our minds are stressed, depressed or suffering from dementia. In these cases we often turn to others for help and receive service and care from Christ through, people, trees, rocks or animals. Jesus also, when exhausted and stressed, often went out alone to a desert or mountain to be supported by nature and pray to

God.

Sometimes we can be so concerned with *our* 'cross' that we forget our calling to serve others. When we remember our work of service, we may discover that we are better able to understand and assist those who are suffering like us, and can share their distress or pain in some way. We may also need to serve and show love to others by forgiving those who have hurt us, listening to a stranger who needs to talk, healing damaged earth, praying, and so on.

Although God is love, and loves us and is with us in our suffering, Lazarus died when Jesus delayed going to Bethany, God did not protect Jesus from being crucified and nor does God always protect us from pain or dying. Strangely, it seems that by assisting us to move through our anguish, (serving us in love by washing our dirty sore feet?), Jesus Christ, enables us to die to one way of living and to live by allowing the joy of resurrection life in Christ to grow within us and others.

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