

I remember one of my last Confirmation groups in Ahoghill was a group of adults. The Confirmation Service was held on Maunday Thursday in the context of a Holy Week series lead by the Bishop of Connor at the time, Alan Harper, later to become Archbishop of Armagh. In planning the service Bishop Alan and myself thought it would be lovely to incorporate the washing of feet into the service, in which Bishop Alan would wash the feet of the candidates.

One young lady objected: “I can see why you are suggesting this, it is in the Gospel, it is a lovely idea – but I just could not face the idea of someone washing my feet!” – so we didn’t go ahead.

There is something about feet isn’t there? My nearest and dearest tell me that my feet are probably best left covered. There is something distasteful, just not quite right, almost demeaning about washing feet – so Christians by and large have side stepped our Lord’s command to wash one another’s feet. We obey his command to share the bread and the wine – but feet – no, we’ll let that one go. Or else we sanitise it – like the tradition in the United Kingdom of the sovereign distributing Maunday money to a number of people on this day. In the early days the sovereign used to wash feet until one decided it was a bit beneath him.

Jesus washing his disciples’ feet goes right to the heart of the depth of servanthood he is modelling, as he stoops to perform this menial task.

Kneels at the feet of his friends,  
silently washes their feet;  
master who acts a a slave to them.

or as we read in those lovely words of Paul to the Philippians

<sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave, (*Phil 2:5-7*)

Turning to the beginning of our Gospel reading, the account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. In the NIV we read:

Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

As I read that, my mind went back to a time I was putting my older son to bed when he was small. He put his hands about six inches apart and said, 'Daddy, do you love me this much?' Then the hands went progressively wider and wider, at each stage asking 'Daddy, do you love me this much?'

Love at full stretch.

That is what we remember – love at full stretch, hands stretched out on a cross, nothing held back. Paul continues in those lovely words to the Philippians

And being found in human form,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death--  
even death on a cross. (*Phil 2:7,8*)

That is Servant Love. He goes on to tell his disciples:

<sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (*John 13:34*)

But if we are to show that love, we have to have some experience of it ourselves. So Peter, the bold impetuous Peter, appalled at the thought of his Lord washing his feet, has to learn that he must first allow Jesus to minister to him. He has to first learn how to receive. This is probably one of the hardest

lessons to learn in the Christian life, how to graciously receive service. As we are reminded in the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John, our Christian life begins not with anything we do or we can offer.

<sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. *(1 John 4:9,10, 19)*

It is out of that experience of Servant Love, love at full stretch, nothing held back that we are empowered to show something of that love in the world of today. To live, as David was talking about last night, the prayer that Jesus taught us.

Your Kingdom come  
Your will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.

in lives that lift up the lowly, that turn the other cheek, that go the second mile.

It is as we learn to receive that love that we are empowered to proclaim that love – in word, in deed, in life – that God's Kingdom may be advanced and his name glorified.

O Jesus, Master Carpenter of Nazareth,  
who on the Cross with wood and nails hast wrought man's full salvation,  
wield well thy tools in this thy workshop,  
that we, who come to thee rough-hewn,  
may by thy hand be fashioned to a truer beauty  
and a greater usefulness;  
for the honour of thy holy name.