

# Living the Towel and the Cross: Humility, Resurrection, and Christian Witness

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 illustrates Jesus' humility and patience as he kneels to wash his disciples' feet. This scene is significant when considering the Incarnation, the Word made flesh (John 1:14). These events are intertwined. As we approach Holy Week and the resurrection, these expressions of love and humility transcend theology, calling to action for the Church across all eras, especially in our contemporary world.

The Incarnation is embodied in humility. Philippians 2:5-8 states, "Though he was God, he did not consider equality with God something to exploit. Rather, he emptied himself." Jesus' birth, life, and crucifixion were acts of humility and presence on earth. The Word became fully human, accepting our weaknesses and limitations.

In John 13:3-5, Jesus' humility shines through. Knowing the Father had entrusted him with everything, Jesus washed his disciples' feet with a towel and water. His complete understanding of his divine authority enhances the significance of this act. Like the Incarnation, foot-washing reflects not weakness but purposeful self-humbling motivated by love.

Foot washing represents divine patience and servant leadership. In the ancient Near East, foot-washing was traditionally assigned to servants or slaves, so Jesus's assumption of this role challenges conventional perspectives. It embodies extraordinary patience as he washes the feet of Peter, who would deny him, and Judas, who would betray him.

This act transcends mere foresight; it requires courage to extend love even when it's unreciprocated. It illustrates the importance of patience in loving individuals regardless of their response. In John 13:14-15, Jesus instructs his disciples, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example." This teaching is not merely a metaphor but a guiding principle for those who follow Christ.

For some, what we do is simply ritual or routine. There is a great amount of teaching in what we do, and why. When the prescriptions of liturgy insist that we do this way or

that, we miss the point. Again, bring to mind the position of Jesus kneeling at the feet of his chosen. Judas, Peter, Mark, John and the entire gang. To place yourself at the feet of someone is the most humble position. The humility required for the leader to wash the feet is not about the privilege of those receiving this gift. Peter goes on to say, "Wash all of me!" He misses the point.

Mary of Bethany placed herself again in the position of vulnerability, and her love of Jesus was outpoured through her tears. With no towel, she used her very self, her hair, to wipe his feet before anointing. Judas makes the comment that the nard should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. It is the same Jesus, in giving of himself, even to those who would abandon, betray and deny him that is the true humility.

I'm aware of Francis, in his first Easter as Bishop of Rome abandoning the traditions of washing the feet of the twelve cardinal bishops, and choosing to go to a prison. He washed more than twelve. He placed himself lower than his status and washed the feet of many of Rome's most unloved people. This is the true conversion. It is not I the priest who washes your feet, it is the Christ that I proclaim. Teresa of Avila continues to remind us that Christ has no hands, eyes and ears other than ours. We are the body of Christ. The Spirit of humility demands us to let go of the status and sense of self-worth and allow the author of life divine to intimately connect with us where we connect with the sacred earth.

In re-enacting these three sacred days, the work of the people, the liturgy remains empty unless we can accept not only the ministry of Christ, but also, be prepared to take up the towel and do likewise within the community we are called to love and serve, even if the people we encounter we struggle with. God's love is based on that humility that recognises the gift of life given is also to be nurtured, healed, grounded in unconditional love and acceptance.

The resurrection and our acceptance of it embody the full power of humble love. It doesn't mean Jesus gained more power, but it shows that divine power is most evident through selfless love. American theologian Fleming Rutledge says in her book, "The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ," that "the crucifixion is the most irreligious, godforsaken event in history—and precisely for that reason, it is the core of the Christian gospel." So, embodying the principles of the resurrection doesn't mean abandoning our traditions; it means incorporating them into our lives.

Cultural shifts in Australia have significantly influenced our Christian witness.

People in Australia are less likely to attend church, trust in institutions is declining, and the younger generation is disillusioned with traditional religion. Despite these challenges, there's a strong desire for authenticity, justice, and community.

We're also aware of "tall poppy syndrome," where people who stand out are often diminished. This reflects our collective yearning for equality. Remember when Jesus washed his disciples' feet? That's what it means. It's not about being domineering or charismatic; it's about serving others and humility.

Jesus' act of foot-washing teaches us how to care for others, take action, and advocate for what's right. Even though embodying Jesus in our lives can be challenging, it's crucial.

You, me, all of us, are called to be a servant leader, resisting the urge to dominate and simply rest on our status. We are called to act as servants, not because we are weak, but because with the gift of humility and love, we are perfected in Christ.

We are to be patient in a divided society, slow to anger, quick to listen, and always be kind.

Our church culture of humility is founded on the principle where everyone feels welcome and valued. And simply saying that we are friendly to those inside the building doesn't cut it. We have a community facing many issues. It is there where we need to wear the cross of the resurrection and take our towels.

The Australian Church must examine its shortcomings in living humbly, not just about abuses of power or outdated beliefs, but also about being part of the problem caused by colonialism and cultural differences. Demonstrate how Jesus lived to move forward, even if it meant going against the grain.

Public faith is marked by sacrificial love.

As a resurrection person, show what you believe not with pride but with love and compassion. As Holy Week ends, follow Jesus to the upper room, representing humility, love, and ultimate hope.

**The towel and the cross, symbols of the past, are tools for positive change.** We don't want the Australian Church to be known for power or prestige but for patience, humility, and radical service. We want the resurrection to not only shine through our lives but change them radically as being Christ to others. In doing this, we demonstrate the joy of love willing to wash our feet and then rise to make everything new.

I am only going to wash one person's feet tonight. I want you to place yourself in that servant position, and intimately connect with the person whom you are caring for. Even if they smell, have issues, you can't stand or they vote the 'wrong way', you are hear to serve them in love, acceptance and humility. And after you have washed their feet, stand, and simply offer them the towel. It is in taking our faith, the cross, and taking up the towel, that we truly begin the path towards resurrection.

We change, the community changes, God empowers.

The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Fleming Rutledge's *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, Rowan Williams' *Being Disciples*, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census 2021*, and ABC Religion & Ethics' articles on cultural secularism and faith in Australia provide insights into these themes.