The Love and Service of Christ
John 13:1-20

We're looking at John's gospel and today we've got to the last supper that Jesus shares with his disciples. But look how John introduces it. Verse 1 'Now before the Feast of the Passover…' And it's been argued that John has ordered his gospel around three consecutive Passover feasts. Because at each one Jesus does something dramatic, or at least something that tells us more of who he is and what he's come to do.

Think of the first one, back in chapter 2. And watch him as he enters the temple courtyards and drives out all the sellers of sacrificial animals. Why? Because he's the ultimate sacrifice - the one who makes all these other sacrifice obsolete.

But then there's the second, in chapter 6. And he's on a hillside, surrounded by this crowd of thousands - who he feeds from virtually nothing. Why? Because he's the bread of life and the true Moses who feeds the people in the wilderness and leads them to true freedom.

But now we're at the third and final Passover. And it's almost as if John is building our expectation because he makes it clear, Jesus knew this was his last, v1 again, 'Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.' So what great deed will he do this time? What miracle, what courageous action will he perform at *this* feast to show us something of his greatness and glory?

Well, what he *does* do *does* tell us a whole load about him, but also about ourselves and what we think greatness and glory look like. So we're going to look at three things. Our dreams, our problem, and our example.

Our Dreams
Now when your mind wanders, where does it go? If you're imagining scenarios at work, or in your leisure time, like you in action in your favourite sport, what do you imagine? Or, changing it slightly, what's your dream job? If you could do anything, what would it be?

And in our imaginations, our day dreaming, we're almost always the centre of attention *and* the centre of the action, aren't we? We dream of giving that stellar presentation to our colleagues, or of everyone congratulating us on our work. Or we relive a conversation, but this time we say something funny that everyone laughs at, or something cutting that finally brings that colleague down to size. In our down time, we imagine scoring that goal, or ripping that pow and leaving the perfect trace, or simply of not having to sort everyone else's problems but finally having some time for me.

And when it comes to your dream job, none of us dream of cleaning the toilets do we? We dream of doing something substantial. Something with impact, something that makes a difference.

So examine our dreams and almost always they feature us at the centre, with us as the hero, or us coming out on top. And life, and circumstances, and other people, are doing our bidding.

And if you use religious language, you might even say that's what the 'blessed' life looks like: you winning at life, or you achieving your dreams, or all your circumstances coming good, or people giving you the recognition you deserve or falling in line and coming round to see your wishes come true. Life and circumstances and people serving you. Hashtag blessed!

So look at v3, and how John describes Jesus: ‘Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God…’ So Jesus doesn’t just *dream* of being at the centre of his little universe, he is *the* centre of *the* universe. *All* things are in his hands. As he will say later, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’ So he doesn’t just dream of status, he has the ultimate status - every power and every person are his. The winds and the waves, demons, death and disease leap to obey him. Position and power and praise are his.

So if anyone has made it, if anyone is blessed, if anyone could sit back and expect circumstances and people to serve him, it was him. But what does he do? Verse 4, he ‘rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.’

What’s he doing? The greatest of all is dressing himself like a servant. But as he does he’s telling us, your need, your desire to be served is not wrong. You do need to be served, just not in the way you think.

Our Problem

Now, I’ve never been to Finland, but they are clearly doing something right, because, I don’t know if you saw, but last week they’ve been voted the happiest country on earth for the 8th year in a row. And I have to confess I’m always surprised by that because Finns don’t exactly have a reputation for being the most socially outgoing, do they? I know this is rich coming from an introverted Englishman, but I was once told that if you’re ever having a conversation with a Finn, and trying to make eye contact, you know they like you when they look at your feet and not just at theirs.

But if a Finn was able to travel back in time and look at the feet of Jesus’ disciples, what would he have seen? Just imagine those feet for a moment. No showers and no shoes, just open toed sandals on dirt roads covered with animal dung.

Now here in Switzerland, you go to someone’s house and you take off your shoes, and put on some slippers. But here, in Jesus’ day, you get invited to a feast, and what are you supposed to do with your feet? Who’s going to wash them? I mean, this was considered so gross that you could never ask someone else to do it for you. At least, you couldn’t ask your peer, your equal to do it. And if you were the host, you couldn’t even ask a Jewish servant of yours to do it. The only person it was considered socially acceptable to give this task to was a gentile slave.

To wash feet was a job reserved for the lowest of the low. A job no-one dreamed of having, a position in life no one day-dreamed of attaining.

So as you watch Jesus stripping off his clothes, and wrapping a towel around his waist, he’s not just dressing like a servant, is he? He’s deliberately adopting the dress of a slave. A gentile slave. And he’s taking a position at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. This is the stuff dreams are not made of.

Verse 5, ‘Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.’ And doing what he does would be staggering enough, if it weren’t for who two of those feet belong to. Verse 2, ‘The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him.’ And we know that Judas has already made contact with the religious authorities and agreed a price to betray Jesus. So, as Jesus comes to Judas’ feet,

these are the feet, and this is a man who has already walked the road of betrayal, and later that same evening will do it again.

And yet John tells us that the Father has given *all* things into Jesus' hands. All power and all authority, every life of every person. So surely this would be the moment for Jesus to expose Judas and defeat the evil plot and vanquish the enemy. But what does he do? He serves his enemy. He washes the feet of his enemy. And the ugliness of evil and the treachery of the deceiver is confronted with the beauty and loyalty of Christ.

But at least one, Peter, is struggling to see the beauty. Verse 6-8, 'He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall *never* wash my feet."'

Just ask yourself, what's Peter's problem? It's his view of status and position and authority and influence and leadership, isn't it. He sees those things in ways that make it totally unacceptable that Jesus should do this. This is beneath you Jesus. You're the Lord, and Lords do not do this sort of thing. Lords and leaders are served, they don't serve.

But his problem goes deeper, doesn't it? Because look again at what Jesus says, v7, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." And the implication is that it's only after Jesus' death and resurrection that Peter and the others will get what is going on around that dinner table. That at the moment Peter cannot see beyond the physical facts of what Jesus is doing, to the spiritual reality behind it all.

Verse 8 again, 'Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."' Which means, this washing of feet is about something far more significant than just feet. It's about Peter's greatest need, your and my greatest need, it's about being washed and united to Christ. That these dirt-encrusted feet, and that water in the bowl, and Jesus washing and wiping, is a sign-post pointing to something far greater.

Listen to how Paul puts it in Philippians 2: 'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant [literally, a bondservant, a slave], being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.' (Philippians 2:5–8)

And at this last supper, Jesus is physically acting that out. That as he strips off his clothes - he's the king of all glory, in whose hands are all things, and he has stripped off, he has laid his glory aside. That as he bends and serves as a slave, he has emptied himself and come as a man. That as he moves around that table, and as he washes their feet, he's pointing them to the ultimate washing to come.

Because look what Paul writes, '*even* death on a cross' - that's how low Jesus stooped. That's how far he bent down. Even the death reserved for slaves (if you were a Roman); even the death of the cursed and the damned (if you were Jewish). As John the Baptist said back in chapter 1: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Who at the cross takes Peter's and your and my sin upon himself, and washes us clean of it.

Because think what that sin entails. The sin that is always putting me at the centre of life, not God. The sin that expects others - including God himself - to serve me and my agenda. The sin that wants the glory and the praise of others for myself not him. The sin that multiplies as I think 'all things should be in *my* hands', and the anger and frustration that grows as I'm confronted with the fact that all things are *not* in my hands, but *I want them to be*.

And Jesus is saying, Peter, you can have no part in me unless I wash you clean of all that. Because it's not just your feet, it's your heart that's caked with dirt. And you think serving is beneath me, because you think it's beneath you. But Peter, your greatest need is that I serve you in this way.

But in doing that, Jesus doesn't just address our wrong desires. He gives us a purpose to live for and a motive to do it.

Our Example

And firstly, he gives us a purpose in life.

Look at v12-15: 'When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."'

Now, if you're a leader, in whatever area, there are a few temptations that, if not specific to leadership, are at least strongly linked to it. Things like pride and self-importance, or entitlement and lording it over people - of coming to think you deserve to be treated in a certain way, or that you should be able to get away with things that others can't. So it's not long before a leader comes to believe that *certain things* are beneath him.

But here is the One who holds *all things* in his hands. But what does he do with those hands? He serves. And says, 'if I'm the Lord who does this, you do likewise.' Because, v16, "Truly, truly I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him." In other words, if the king of all glory serves, then his ambassadors are going to follow suit.

And if you're a Christian, you are his ambassador. But maybe you are already serving. In fact, maybe it feels like your life is passing you by in a never ending round of serving - particularly if you're a mum - of washing dishes and changing diapers and cleaning toilets and brushing floors. Or for all of us - a never ending of going to work and giving your time and energy and money. And you can look at those who *don't* do those things, who just come to consume, or put themselves at the centre, and feel just a twinge of envy. And you can begin to wonder if you've missed it.

But Jesus says to you, no, it's those who aren't serving who are missing it.

Because he's not just your Lord, he's your Creator, your Maker, who stripped off his glory like he stripped off his clothes, and served.

And you've been made in his image. You've been made to represent him to the world. So can you see how wanting everyone else to dance to your tune runs against the grain of what you've been made to be and do? Which is to serve God and others for the glory of God and the good of others.

But secondly, as we do that, Jesus gives you a motive for doing it.
Go back to v1, where John tells us *why* Jesus does what he does: 'Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them *to the end*.' Literally, to *the telos*, to the uttermost, to the fullest extent possible and to his last breath, he *loved* them.

Have you ever served out of duty? You really don't want to do this thing that needs doing, but you do it anyway, because it needs to be done and it's right that it's done. You just wish it wasn't you having to do it.

And duty can be a good, a very good thing. Duty is what can keep us going when the emotions are running on empty. But Jesus didn't serve simply out of duty, he served out of love. And here the King of Love strips off his garments, but at the cross he will be stripped naked. Here his hands take up a bowl but there they'll take on nails. Here they drip with water. But at the cross, they will drip with blood. The blood that washes us clean.

Why? Because you've served him? Because you've served him enough that you deserve him? No. Because he loves you, and loved you to the uttermost when you were undeserving.

See the length and breadth and height and depth of Christ's love for you; see how he has served you, and let it melt your heart. And rather than go through life thinking life owes you and others should serve you, love because Christ loved you. Forgive because Christ forgave you. And as Augustine said on this passage, 'do with your heart what you can't do with your hands.' And in love, cover the sins of others as he has covered yours.

And yet, you're not Jesus, are you. So might there just be days when you don't serve and fail to love like you should? What do you do then? Give up in despair? Look what Jesus says to Peter. Peter protests, 'you'll never wash my feet'. And Jesus says, 'if I don't wash you, you have no part in me', to which Peter - in his usual enthusiasm - says, v9, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head." In other words, 'Lord, if I need washing then do it. Wash all of me!'

Look how Jesus replies. Verse 10, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean." Now, he's just told them they need washing - a whole life washing - so why does he now imply the problem's with the feet?

Well, most likely, Jesus is looking forward to them being completely cleansed by his work on the cross. And their full body, whole heart bath is as good as done. But Peter's still going to sin in the future, isn't he? And so are you. Days when your feet get dirty. Days that aren't marked by love and service, but by selfishness and lust.

And Jesus is saying, and I will wash you clean of all that too. That at the cross he makes us holy - job done. But he's also making us holy. Washed and being washed. And as we *daily* come to him, praying, 'Our Father in heaven… forgive us our sins', so he *daily* washes us clean and gives us a fresh start.

So when you become all too aware of your selfishness, or your mixed motives, or lack of love, don't despair. As John writes in his 1st letter, 'the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin…

[and] if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

You see, we can be tempted to think that having life and everyone else serve us is the ultimate in *hashtag blessed*. Jesus knows differently. And you can know that in Christ you are washed clean of your sins, that you are loved, and in response you can go live a life of love and service. And Jesus says, v17, "If you know these things, *blessed are you* if you do them." That's the blessed life.

So, go into the week, knowing Christ has loved you and Christ has served you, and that there's blessing to be had in loving and serving others.