

Easter Message from Right Reverend Declan Lang, Bishop of Clifton

Imagine that tomorrow you are going to face the biggest confrontation of your life – which will probably end in your death.

What would you do the night before?

I am sure that our answers would be different, but somehow would conceal the fear within us and the courage we hope to have.

Faced with such a situation, Jesus does something strange and original. It was even shocking for those who were with him. He washed their feet. He even washed the feet of the one he knew would betray him and the one who would deny him three times. In the end nearly all of those whose feet he washed deserted him.

Having washed their feet, Jesus asked his followers whether they understood the meaning of what he had done? If they did, then they too must behave accordingly. And that is still the message today. So how do you feel about washing people's feet or having your feet washed by others? Probably a little uncomfortable.

For the first followers of Jesus, the washing of feet was regarded as totally demeaning. Only slaves washed other people's feet. It was humiliating. But the word 'humble' comes from a word which means 'earth'. The washing of feet, as a symbol of service, earths us into one another's lives and destroys barriers of distinction. It enables us to recognise that we are all equally brothers and sisters.

In a busy world that is often frightened by such things as war, violence, economic collapse, family breakdown, we can brush aside one another in our indifference or hostility. We do not see the feet of people because we often do not see people, especially those who are weak and vulnerable. We do not see the dirty feet of those hurt by life and acted against unjustly.

In our lack of trust towards each other and in the structures of our society, we protect ourselves with barriers that not only defend us but keep other people out. We do not allow other people to wash our feet because we do not trust them. Consequently we often remain hurt, lonely and angry.

Jesus confronted the hostility he found between people and refused to accept the barriers which people erected to protect themselves. He experienced hostility from those who opposed him. He risked his life to the point of death to show there is another way to live. He risked the consequences of love. He washed feet and told his disciples that he was giving them a new commandment, a new way to live: "You must love one another, just as I have loved you. It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognise you as my disciples" (John 13: 34-35). He died for this. But death was not the end. Love overcame death and created a new way of life.

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