

The Basin and The Towel

Michael Card's song is a wonderful basis for exploring our call to service. There are several telling phrases in the song. It begins with recognising that our call is 'to community'. This community is threatened by arguments among the members as to who is most important. It is impossible to have unity when these divisions occur, and at such times the space between ourselves and others seems greater than the distance between the stars. How can Jesus show them that this destroys community?

Rather than describe to them the type of service required to create true community, he showed them. Jesus challenged the disciples' perception of themselves and of what it meant to become citizens of the Kingdom. In an act of amazing humility, using a basin and the towel, Jesus let go of any position of power or influence and creates a fragile bridge between himself and Simon Peter, who initially will not accept this offer. But 'one will kneel and one will yield'. Peter does not understand Jesus' action, but he desires fellowship with him. Jesus explains that his friends must 'day after day take up the basin and the towel'. They must be prepared to serve not seek to be served. The song captures these elements powerfully.

John's gospel says that Jesus "knew he had come from God and was going to God." In his last teaching before returning to God, he abandoned power and took up a basin and towel. His last commission to the disciples is to not seek to be powerful over others, but to serve them. It was as if Jesus was saying to do what God requires "Act with justice, love with kindness, walk humbly with God", and do this with a towel around your waist!

In Jesus' time, the job of washing the feet of guests was a dirty and distasteful job, and even the disciples of a teacher were never expected to perform it. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he 'preached' a radical kind of equality. He said to his disciples afterwards, "I do not call you servants anymore, I call you my friends."

Jesus made footwashing sacred work. Our service of others is a call to humbly lay down our desire for status, power, and position. We may feel naturally like we are distant and separated from other individuals. We may feel unlike some people and in our distaste want to withdraw to our own comfort. By the act of servanthood we actually discover that 'everyday' action is the fragile bridge between what we are doing, and what the God is doing. Then we become prepared to open ourselves and we discover that in fact our feet are washed and we are truly 'in community'

A group of Chinese healers was once asked what it was about Jesus that most impressed them. One elder remarked that being a revered teacher who stepped over the lines of class and position and took such a demeaning role as washing his disciples' feet, was the most impressive miracle of all.

Service is not a special skill or talent. In fact, it can seem rather mundane and ordinary, menial, or even demeaning. Service is an act of mutuality. It is what

makes human relationships holy. Peter had to be humble and accept Jesus' service. Jesus asked his disciples, "do you understand what I have done"? When we serve one another 'day after day', helping one another in our real needs, we are understanding what Jesus did.

We are "washing feet" when we take a meal to someone who is sick, help a family move their belongings, help with weekly shopping, provide transport for someone else, give our support in times of crisis or death. We wash feet when we encourage the depressed, support the divorced, are patient with the angry, spend time with the lonely. There are a thousand ways to "wash the feet of the others." As followers of Jesus, there is no task that is beneath us if it means that we can serve one another. Our Passionist Family Group provides us with many opportunities for service. The God who seeks community is hidden in the distressing disguise of the poor, of strangers, of the sick and helpless, the young and old and in every one of our relationships.

When people make demands on us it is tempting to throw in the towel! But if we picture the image of Jesus putting a towel around his waist and kneeling before others, we can be inspired again to continue loving. Jesus commandment to love is meant to influence every fact of our lives, every decision we make, every relationship we form. The Family Group can be our school for learning true service and discovering that 'the call is to community'. Day after day, we must take up the basin and towel.