

Nathanael's speaks of the foot washing

I am Nathanael, the “lazy-one”. That has become more or less my nick name when Jesus said that he saw me sitting under the fig-tree, when I asked how he'd known me. I've never been able to get rid of this name, just because I like sitting under fig trees – they are good places to think! John did do me no favours when he included that story in his gospel for the whole world to read! Fortunately he did not forget that I went fishing with Simon Peter at the lake of Galilee, after Jesus' resurrection – restoring a bit of my reputation!

That was the first time I saw Jesus after he died! As usual even though we had to lug these hundreds of fish onto the shore, Jesus had already prepared breakfast for us – fish and bread. That was really welcome, after that frustrating night of fishing, and catching no fish. And then suddenly Jesus was there and said: Try the other side! John writes in his gospel that we caught 153, but I can't remember how many there were – it was a lot. But Jesus already had prepared breakfast and he served it to us!

That reminds me of the evening before Jesus was arrested. I have mixed feelings of that evening – so much happened. Of course it was the arrest of Jesus, leading into all the events of Good Friday and Easter, as we now call it. That was a roller-coaster of events, and I still cannot believe that I left the scene as fast as any of the other disciples, except of course for Simon Peter. But even he could not associate himself with Jesus at that time. Fortunately

all that changed after the resurrection – where would we all be without his leadership!

But I digress – the thing that stuck most in my mind of that evening is the way that Jesus treated us. We were not disciples or servants any more – He spoke to us about what was going to happen – even if we did not understand it at that time – and he called us his friends!

This despite that we behaved ourselves appallingly in the beginning of the evening. You probably know it is custom with us to have our feet washed before we start the meal – very necessary with all the dust on the road. So we normally take our sandals off and have our feet washed when we lay down for the meal.

But, we had been rushing around all day, to make last minute preparations for the meal – Jesus had only asked for it the evening before. He specifically said it should be us alone – no women, no servants. Which was fine, but it meant that we had to prepare everything – and we had become a bit tired. And then of course there was no-one to wash our feet.

Now, I like Simon Peter a lot, but to wash his feet – no, that is too much. Let alone the feet of the others – good friends, but, no, I don't want to go down on my knees to wash their feet! One never knows where those have been – and I will become dirty all over. I could see from the others that I was not the only one

thinking this. Of course, I would not mind washing Jesus' feet – but then I would have to do the others too – no way!

So, we were sitting around waiting for each other. And to our surprise Jesus got up, took off his overcoat, took a towel and started to wash our feet! I was first! I did not know where to look, or what to say. I was so surprised that I was dumb-founded. And so were the others, until Jesus got to Simon Peter – always the one to say something. He did not want to have his feet washed.

But then Jesus said that he could not have a relationship – “a share in him” was what Jesus exact words were, unless he let Jesus wash his feet. Hearing that Simon Peter went over the top: “Then also my hands and my head”. But Jesus said that only his feet would need to be washed – the rest of his body and all of our bodies were already clean. Except for one – he must have eluded to Judas – who was going to betray him. But, even knowing that it did not stop Jesus washing Judas' feet either.

You probably have read the account in John's gospel by now – he's always been gifted by a good memory and also very open to the Holy Spirit, but when I think back at that time two things stand out for me.

The first was that it was not the reason that our feet were dirty, that Jesus' washed them. Yes, of course they were dirty, but he washed our feet because he loved us. Until that time we truly did not understand how big Jesus' love was for us. As our master he

was pretty strict with us, and we were told off quite often if we did not understand what he said quickly or fully enough.

But he washed our feet because he loved us. He could have told anyone of us to do it. He could have done it out of annoyance with us and to teach us a lesson in morality – this is how you have to serve each other.

But we felt that that was not the case. And then when Simon Peter refused, Jesus made it clear that if Simon would refuse this act of love, he would refuse Jesus himself. Simon did not get that at first, but since I have spoken with him and he agrees: Jesus did not wash our feet because it was something that had to be done. No, he loved us so much that he actually loved to wash our feet! I still can't get over that he loves us so much.

Yes, I know that he died on the cross for us out of love and that we are therefore in a right relationship with him and his Father. But in a sense that is too big, too remote and too wonderful to understand. But that he washed our feet to express his love for us – no-one has ever done that to me, even though I have had my feet washed often enough before then and afterwards. But no-one has ever done it to me out of love, except for Jesus.

And the second thing I always remember from that night is that he said "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you". And again Jesus did not mean that we should wash each other's feet, but he meant that we are to love each

other – just as he loves us. That we do not do the things for each other out of duty, but out of love for each other.

And that our love should not only extend to the small group of disciples, but to all of humankind – we even have to love those who have not had the privilege to meet Jesus yet.

And I know that this is difficult – especially since we are here in prison – locked up because the local people did not like us preaching Jesus' gospel. And when I am sitting here in my corner of the cell, tired, smelly, dirty, I really do not want to love those around me. I even have difficulty loving Jesus – as he is the reason that I am locked up.

But then I think back at that evening before Jesus sacrificed it all for us, out of love, and imagine him washing my feet again – loving me in the way that only Jesus can love – and then I know that he still loves me and that I still have a share in him – and that therefore I still will and can love the people here around me, because he continues to love me, despite me being tired, smelly and dirty.

Bernard Fidder, 1 April 2010