**Readers’ Notes**

*Jesus washing Peter’s feet (1852-56) by Ford Madox Brown* (1821-1893).

*Oil on canvas. Tate Britain.*

This painting depicts *Jesus Washing Peter’s Feet* which comes from John’s Gospel, chapter 13. John is the only writer to record this event which would have been seen as scandalous behaviour by Jesus. It’s a scene that many churches re-enact every Maundy Thursday - the day before Good Friday in Holy Week - just before Jesus was crucified. This oil on canvas painting by the Victorian artist Ford Madox Brown captures it perfectly.

So let’s hear a bit of the Gospel text from John 13:6-11.

6He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “*Lord*, are you going to wash *my feet*?” 7

Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” 8

Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” 9

Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” 10

Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet,but is entirely clean.

And youare clean, though not all of you.” 11

For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

Notice how we have an unusually low viewpoint and compacted space in this painting to focus on what’s happening below the table. This creates intimacy and participation.

We are not simply observing. We are invited into the room with Jesus and the disciples.

It was shortly after Jesus and his friends had celebrated the Passover together, that Jesus rose from the table and began washing his friends' feet. So why was this so significant?

Jesus had done some bizarre things - speaking out against the Pharisees, challenging deep-rooted injustices, speaking freely with children, women, lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes, healing on the Sabbath – but the disciples really couldn’t understand what point Jesus was making here. Just look at their expressions around the table.

They’ve just watched Jesus calmly lay aside his outer garment to wash those he loved. And as he lays aside his clothes, so he ‘lays aside his divinity.’ Jesus would later have his clothes forcefully removed from him when he laid down his life on the cross. And he would lay his clothes, very neatly aside in the tomb, as he rose from the dead.

Jesus is not merely asking Peter to observe basic hygiene. He tells him that there is a spiritual significance to this simple task which Peter won’t understand until ‘later’ – ‘later’ here in the Greek implies after Jesus’ death. This spiritual ‘washing’ will make the disciples totally clean and they only need to be washed once in this way. Perhaps this is a nod towards baptism?

Jesus is insistent – the disciples have to let him wash their feet otherwise they can’t have any real fellowship with him. But when Peter says *‘You will never wash my feet***…’** his ‘never’ in the Greek is an emphatic ‘*No’**...* as in ‘never ever in my lifetime,’ rather than a polite ‘No thank you Jesus, not today if you don’t mind.’ Is Peter terrified? Does Peter really want to follow a God who makes him do this kind of stuff? Because then whose feet would he, Peter, now, have to clean?

Peter addresses Jesus three times – twice as ‘Lord’ and once as ‘You’. Does he sub-consciously know that he will doubt Jesus at the end, will deny him three times? Is this a warning of what he can’t fulfil? Or perhaps simply being even closer to Jesus, by letting him wash his feet, is just too much for Peter and he’d prefer to remain at a psychological distance. Maybe, Peter is genuinely sad for Jesus - that his Lord and master is debasing himself so much with this humiliating task? Is it a loving plea, straight from the heart to Jesus to ‘please retain some dignity here’?

Yet can Peter really expect to tell Jesus what he can and cannot do? In this painting, Jesus, in his grasshopper green robe, *calmly continues* washing Peter’s feet; look how focused he is on doing this job thoroughly, with a firm grasp of Peter’s foot; and all the while a storm is brewing in Peter’s head. See all those frown marks, his awkward, intense concentration, posture and clenched hands. So then, Peter thinks - well why not wash *all* of me then? He will understand later…

Jesus then explains the difference between a master and a servant. If the role of a servant and master are being reversed, we see how Jesus teaches a new lesson. Yet there is another interpretation in which Jesus is neither master nor servant – but an *equal* to the disciples. In this way they are all on the same level, the same footing, and this gives us a different lesson. If we become servants or slaves to each other there is still a hierarchy in that model, but, if we are equal there is no hierarchy at all.

The Pharisees and the Victorians were obsessed with hierarchies and protocol in public and in private, so this painting warns us that Jesus is changing these rules. This Gospel story is central to our Christian journey - it reverses the obsession with ‘I’ and forces us to bend low (quite literally) to anyone we meet. If Jesus, our Saviour, will wash feet what can stop us too? Notice that Jesus washes all of his disciples’ feet and not just some of them, including Judas. Jesus’ love is unconditional. It is not a selective love, but love as grace towards everyone, including those who betray him.

To show Christ as divine our artist painted the nimbus (the gold ring around his head) but not for the disciples’ benefit, rather for us - the beholder. We know this as he paints the nimbus side on like a coin rather than horizontally around Jesus’ head. And he used his friend F. G. Stephens to model for Christ’s head.

Judas Iscariot is represented on the far left lacing up his sandals, his feet have already been washed - his white money bag on the edge of the table, securing Jesus’ imminent death. So we have Judas on the far left and John on the far right.

The Victorian Art critics hated this picture – originally Jesus was half-naked with a bare torso. It caused an absolute outcry when it was first exhibited – the idea of an utterly human bare-chested Jesus in a domestic setting was a Victorian scandal that we cannot imagine today. So the earlier version in the video remained unsold for years until Ford Madox Brown reluctantly painted clothes back on Jesus.

Ford Madox Brown wanted to portray the disciples, with their shocked reactions, as wrong. They should, like Jesus, believe all people to be equal. He was also ridiculing the upper-classes for their snobbery towards ordinary workers - without whom the Industrial Revolution would never have happened. Across Europe, Marx and Engels had just published their Communist Manifesto on the rights of workers and the dangers of capitalist mass production. Ford Madox Brown painted Jesus as a strong, manual labourer, so that he was entirely associated with the working man – the class that the Victorian elite most despised and yet they most needed. A hypocrisy not unlike that of some of the Pharisees’ behaviours.

The real power here is foot washing, the power of radical, transformative love. So that when Jesus died on the cross, he was outstretched, outcast, outlived - but not *outdone*.