

ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS



Number Eight:

THE WASHING OF FEET

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The annual Passover meal celebrates and remembers the delivery of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This particular meal was Jesus' last with his friends.

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It was wonderful. It was terrible. The terror came first...

We were in Jerusalem for the feast again. Jesus liked to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem and this was the third time we'd shared it with him. Passover with Jesus was such a hoot! Such fun, such games, such laughter! But serious, too. Getting to the very heart of our liberation journey somehow. With Jesus everything seemed intensified: the bitter herbs were more bitter; the bread was sweeter; the lamb more succulent; the wine more full-bodied. It was as if your senses were multiplied. Every taste, every sound, every gesture, seemed more real, more full of meaning. Yet at the same time it was just chaotic fun.

Jesus was the host of course and his words, particularly his improvisations over the bread and wine always gave us food for thought. So, you see, we were really well fed—body, mind and spirit!

But this time was different. It was the same room and pretty much the same crowd: the twelve of us, of course, and the women, and some of the others—but not everyone because the room, large as it was, couldn't accommodate us all. That caused some disappointments, you can be sure.

When we arrived the room was already set out, nicely decorated with some Spring flowers and the table was brimming with food: bread, cheese, wine, a huge pot of lamb and much more. So we sat down and gently jostled for position—everyone liked to be close to Jesus. But there was no malice in it any more.

Over the years we'd got used to accepting things the way they were. There was no way Jesus would value any one of us more than the others though he was closer to some than others but that's only natural. I think, at first, that some of them were a bit envious of me. He kind of took to me from the beginning—I think he was sorry for me, really.

What is it they say? 'Open mouth, insert foot'? That's me. I blurt things out before I think them through. Stupid, insensitive, gauche: that's what lots of people call me. But Jesus is different. He always finds the good and builds it up. "You're honest and open-hearted, Simon," he said to me, "and I like that in a man." No-one had ever spoken to me

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like that before and it felt good. I know I'm not the brightest, not clever like John, but 'open-hearted and honest'—that's not bad is it?

So we are all laughing and joking as usual but this time there is an undercurrent. We all know that this is different. Indeed, I think that, deep down, we all know that this is the last time. Everything is heightened. The laughter is just a bit more raucous, the solemnity just a little bit more serious.

Then Jesus sits and lifts up the bread. He gives thanks and breaks it and passes it round to us. As we break a piece off and pass it on he speaks with a seriousness and depth we have never heard before. "This bread," he says, "is my body." The silence in the room grows so thick that no-one could have moved even if they'd wanted to. "I am the bread of life. Whoever eats this bread, the bread of my flesh, will live forever. My body is broken for you. Eat this in memory of me."

The room is stunned as we scrabble in our minds to comprehend what has just been said. Then Jesus puts his piece of bread in his mouth and we all have to follow suit. I cannot describe to you how it feels to chew on that morsel. I want to spit it out. I want to swallow it whole. I want to chew it, savour it, for ever. Never has bread tasted so sweet and so sour. I do not understand what Jesus' words mean for us; yet deep down I seem to understand them perfectly. We just stay there in silence for an age. Even I have nothing to say.

Then Jesus rises from the table and takes off his coat. 'Too hot?' I ask myself in surprise—and am then surprised that I can feel surprise after what has just happened. For the evening chill is creeping in and although it isn't yet cold it certainly isn't hot. Every eye is on Jesus and I'd say that a deep expectant hush fell on the room except that the room is already so deep with silence that there doesn't seem space for any more.

We watch with wondering eye as he takes up a large towel and wraps it around his waist, the ends dangling down. A growing awareness is dawning on us. We know what this means, though of course it can not be so. Then, from a corner of the room, where I'd not noticed them before, he takes up a bowl and a jug of water. As he pours the water, slightly steaming in the evening chill, from jug to bowl, all doubt is dispelled.

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Then kneeling—kneeling, I say!—before Joanna, he gently takes off her sandals, lifts each foot tenderly into the bowl and slowly washes them clean with his bare hands. He lifts each one again and dries them with a caress of the towel as he smiles up at her; a smile of pure grace.

I am outraged! Furious and disgusted. This is wrong on so many levels. It is as if he'd just made love to her in front of our eyes—and she a married woman! It's not just my mouth which is speechless with shock, my brain is paralysed too, with the same thoughts racing round and round: 'How dare he?' 'This is so wrong.' 'This cannot be happening.'

But I keep watching because next to Joanna is Thomas and Jesus washes his feet in exactly the same sensual—erotic—way as he did Joanna's and that is even worse! Though funnily enough it also makes it better. He continues round the table treating each one the same—all of them accepting it without any protest.

As he continues my mind starts to unfreeze and I realise that my horror has a much deeper component. The real reason this is so wrong is because it's a kind of blasphemy! This is Jesus, the nearest thing to the face of God that I will see in my lifetime, and he is behaving like a common servant. It's not right; it's against the proper order of things and it should not be happening!

Yes, he's talked to us about coming to serve but we've come to know that his service to us is to lead us into God's kingdom; to invite us to share with him in bringing that kingdom to others. He's served us by his presence, by the bright light of his being, by his beauty and by his awesome scary power. But not this. This is demeaning; this is unworthy of him. He's gone too far this time and I will have no part of it.

I continue like this until I am aware of a silence in the room. I look up and see Jesus standing in front of me, the bowl in his hand. He looks down at me. "Peter?" he says. Sometimes I love it when he calls me the rock; his rock. But now it seems to mean something different: Peter the rock-headed, Peter the stone-hearted. I play for time: "LORD, you want to wash my feet?" Stupid question. I know it. He knows it. He's standing in front of me with a bowl and a towel. He's washed everyone else's feet, so of course he wants to wash me—honest, open-hearted me. But I don't feel that way at present. My gut is shrinking within my belly.

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My heart is pounding, my mouth is dry and my face is flushing redder and redder.

I dare not speak; even I dare not speak. If I do, things might be broken which could never be repaired. So I stare at him as if wishing for an answer to my question which needs no answering. But he does answer. Not *that* question but the one I didn't even know I was asking. "You don't understand now what I am doing." Too right there, Lord! I don't. "But later on you will understand."

Oh, we're playing the trust game again, are we? Well I've trusted him before—there was the walking on the water thing, for instance—so why is this so hard? He is my Lord. Of course it must be right or he wouldn't be doing it.

But that's the thing: he is my Lord. I should be washing his feet, not he mine. Suddenly, fleetingly, I am reminded of stories I've heard about John's reaction when Jesus came to him for baptism—but that was different. This just isn't right and I cannot permit it. Surely he will respect me for standing on my principles?

"Lord, you will never wash my feet." Blimey! That's said it now. Is that open-hearted and honest enough for you? Suddenly I realise that the whole room is watching and all the conversation is hushed. Oh bloody hell! The centre of attention again. Why is it always me? Why can't I just go along with the crowd and blend in?

Well, it's a bit late for that now.

Jesus is looking at me with one of his half smiles; the ones where you never know if they're going to dissolve into laughter or fade away into something deeply serious. This one fades away: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

Suddenly all sorts of things start to fall into place. For a start it's not Jesus who's got things upside down, it's me. What I thought was my humility was actually my pride. I was too proud to let him serve me. It's like a kick in the stomach. I am winded and bruised. How could I have been so vain?

But there's more. Because he is my Lord, any washing from Jesus will be more, much more, than a washing from anyone else. To have him oh so gently cleanse my limbs will also wash away the dirt from my soul. How could I ever have thought of refusing that? Suddenly I am

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aware of how dirty—filthy—my soul is and I desperately want to be clean.

The words of the psalm come to me: *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow* and I cry out, “Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head also!”

Jesus laughs. It’s one of his, ‘O Simon, Simon, what are we going to do with you?’ laughs and I know that everything’s going to be alright. “It is sufficient that I wash your feet.” And he kneels down before me. His hands are gentle and yet so firm. As he works them into my tired grimy feet I feel a lightness spreading through my whole body, a sense of being one with the divine, and I don’t think I have ever been happier.

He tenderly dries each foot and it is as if he is kissing them, as a mother kisses her children to sleep; and I am content...

And yes, later—a long time later—I did understand. But that is another story.

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NOTES

The narrator here is Simon Peter, one of Jesus' closest followers.

This Passover meal, which Jesus shared with some of his followers, is often known as 'The Last Supper'. All the gospels have an account of what happened, as well as Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth. None of them tell the full story but by taking them together we can get a sense of what may actually have happened.

The story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet is told by John (13:1-17). We don't know exactly who was present. The gospel writers speak of 'the disciples', which will have included the twelve apostles but also probably others. This may or may not have included some of the women, including Joanna, wife of Chuza (Luke 8:3).

Matthew tells us that when Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized, John said to him, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." (Matthew 3:14-15)

The psalm verse Peter quotes is psalm 51:7.