

Holy Thursday Gospel

[Jn 13:1-15](#)

Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father.
He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.
The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over.
So, during supper,
fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God,
he rose from supper and took off his outer garments.
He took a towel and tied it around his waist.
Then he poured water into a basin
and began to wash the disciples' feet
and dry them with the towel around his waist.
He came to Simon Peter, who said to him,
"Master, are you going to wash my feet?"
Jesus answered and said to him,
"What I am doing, you do not understand now,
but you will understand later."
Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet."
Jesus answered him,
"Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me."
Simon Peter said to him,
"Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well."
Jesus said to him,
"Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed,
for he is clean all over;
so you are clean, but not all."
For he knew who would betray him;
for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean."

So when he had washed their feet
and put his garments back on and reclined at table again,
he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you?
You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am.
If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet,
you ought to wash one another's feet.
I have given you a model to follow,
so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Jerome Biblical Commentary

The Book of Exaltation: “Those Who Accept Him Become Sons of God” (13:1-20:31). With ch. 13 the second major part of the Gospel begins. If the Book of Signs developed the thought of 1:11, “he came to his own, and his own received him not,” this second Book develops the thought of 1:12, “to such as received him, who believe in his name, he gave the power of becoming children of God.” Obviously the themes overlap in the prologue, and so do they in these books of the Evangelist. As in the first part of the Gospel, John continues to find symbolism in Christ’s words and deeds, striving to relate these as practically as possible to the life of the Christian in the world. Because the Passion Narrative plays such a major role in this part of the Gospel, it contains many more parallels to the Syn tradition than does the Book of Signs. However, here too John goes his own way, as will be seen. The passion in Jn is part of a drama of triumph, in which can already be discerned the fruits of victory made secure forever through Jesus’ resurrection and glorification. It is this portrayal of Christ the victorious Savior that forms the unity of this book.

137 (A) Jesus Instructs His Disciples (13:1-17:26). This section in Jn corresponds in the Syn tradition to the interval between the public ministry and the Passion Narrative when Jesus is alone with his disciples (Mk 13:1-14:42 par.). As in the Syn, there is a Last Supper with the disciples. Here, however, the resemblance ends. Apart from the fact that in the Syn the meal is represented as a Passover celebration and is not so represented in Jn (see comment on 13:1 below), John omits virtually every event chronicled in the Syn account and devotes his main attention to a lengthy discourse in which the faith of the disciples contrasts with the incredulity of the Jews in the Book of Signs, and in which, correspondingly, many former themes now reappear in a positive expression. A striking omission, in view of John’s sacramental interests, is the Syn’s account of the institution of the Eucharist. However, what needed to be said on this score had already been said in ch. 6, and in point of fact the discourse to the disciples is wholly concerned with the divine life that is the explanation of all the sacraments.

138 (a) THE SIGN OF THE FOOT WASHING (13:1-20). Preceding his discourse, Jesus performs a parable in action by which he epitomizes the significance of his entire life of dedication. Though not a miracle, this action is certainly one of Jesus’ “signs” in the Johannine sense of the word (see comment on 2:11).

1. *before the Passover feast:* John clearly means that this meal, as well as Christ’s apprehension, trial, and crucifixion that follow on the same day took place on the day

Syn Synoptic Gospels or Synoptic writers

par. Parallel pasage(s) in the Synoptic Gospels

before the Passover (cf. 18:28; 19:14, 31, 42). In Jewish calculation the day is reckoned from sunset to sunset. It is no less clear that the Syn account of the Last Supper describes Jesus and his disciples eating the Passover together (cf. Mk 14:12ff. par.). To harmonize these two views it has often been maintained that Jesus and his Galilean disciples observed the Passover on a day different from the one officially established for Jerusalem. This supposition is not unlikely, but it cannot be proved. In recent times it has been verified from QL that the ancient solar calendar, presupposed by the apocryphal books of *Enoch* and *Jub*, was still in use among some Palestinian Jews in Jesus' time as an alternative to the official lunar calendar of Judaism (cf. E. Vogt, *Bib* 36 [1955] 403-8; *Bib* 39 [1958] 72-77). If we assume, however, that Jesus observed the Passover according to this solar calendar, further chronological problems arise because the solar calendar was "perpetual" and the Passover (on 15 Nisan) fell on the same day of the week each year, Wednesday. This would mean that the Last Supper took place on a Tuesday evening, though it is otherwise clear that the crucifixion occurred on a Friday (cf. 19:31; Mk 15:43; Lk 23:54). The attempt has been made to establish on this basis a new chronology of Holy Week, notably by A. Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper* (Staten Island, N.Y., 1965), but the balance of critical opinion seems to be that the attempt has failed (see the extensive surveys of the French original of this book in *NTA* 1 [1957] § 184; 2 [1957-58] § 15, 26, 261, 514; 3 [1958] § 50; and esp. 4 [1960] § 856r-62r; but cf. E. Ruckstuhl, *Chronology of the Last Days of Jesus* [N.Y., 1965]). Lacking other evidence, it seems that we must dispense with the hypothesis of two Passovers. Although most authors tend to settle questions of "historicity" in favor of the Syn against Jn, in the present instance it seems preferable to recognize the eyewitness record of Jn as to the actual dating of the Last Supper and to conclude that the Syn tradition has given the name "Passover" to a meal which resembled it and served as the inauguration of the Christian Eucharist, but which had not been an actual celebration of the Jewish Passover (for the arguments opposed to this view, see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel*, 39-41). *the hour had come*: As in 12:23, see comment on 2:4. *to depart from this world* [see 1:10] *to the Father*: Cf. 14:12, 28; 16:10, 28. The actions and words that follow during this Last Supper are all conditioned by this moment. *having loved his own who were in this world*: The theme of love that pervades the entire scene and discourse to follow is set by the Evangelist. *he exhibited his love for them to the end* [or, *to the utmost*]: Jn states that what is to come is Jesus' final display of his love, or, perhaps more likely, that it was a supreme exemplification of that love.

QL Qumran Literature (See *Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Texts*)

Enoch First Enoch (in Ethiopic) (→ 68:9-15)

Jub Book of Jubilees (→ 68:16-24)

Bib *Biblica*

NTA *New Testament Abstracts*

139 **2.** *during a banquet:* Some mss. read “after a meal,” but this is obviously a mistake (cf. v. 26). Though John does not recount the institution of the Eucharist, the Christian reader will, of course, be aware of the significance that this meal has in relation to Jesus’ life. Hence John emphasizes this action as part of that significance. *when the devil...to hand him over:* See 6:70; cf. also Lk 22:3. **3.** See 3:35; 7:33; 16:28. **4-5.** John’s emphasis on Jesus’ awareness of his relation to the Father at this time (vv. 1 and 3) shows that Jesus intended this act to be a concrete symbol of the humiliation of his incarnational state (cf. also Phil 2:5-7; Mk 10:45 par.); the action could have occurred quite naturally in conjunction with the episode related in Lk 22:23ff. It was the task of a slave, though also performed by wives and children (cf. Str-B 2, 557). **6.** Peter’s reaction is to point up the incongruity of what is apparently happening: the reversal of the roles of master and servant (cf. v. 14). **7.** *afterward you will understand:* The significance of the foot washing is pointed out by Jesus in v. 12ff. However, the full meaning of this sign will be made known to the Church only through the later enlightenment of the Spirit (cf. 2:22; 12:16). **8.** Peter immediately shows that he does not, indeed, understand what is being done, when he continues to insist that Jesus must not so demean himself. *unless I wash you, you will have no share with me:* The action typifies Christ’s lifework, which Peter must accept as God’s will even as Christ has done; Peter has been objecting ignorantly as in Mk 8:32f. par. In all likelihood, John expects the Christian reader also to relate Jesus’ words to his own life and to be reminded of the function of baptism. This interpretation was commonly put on this passage by the Fathers. **9.** Peter still speaks naïvely. If Jesus insists on washing his feet as the condition of continued fellowship, so be it! Only, let him be washed entirely, that his share with the Lord be complete. **10.** *the man who has bathed has no need to wash* [most mss. add “except his feet” or other words]; *he is clean all over:* What Peter asks is quite unnecessary. The foot washing, after all, is only a symbol; it is not that the disciples need to have this or that part of their bodies washed. Having their share in Christ, they have all that is needful. By his choice of Gk words, John probably again suggests baptism to the Christian reader (“bathe,” *louō*, was a word used for religious washings, and in 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:26; Ti 3:5; Heb 10:22 various forms of it are used to signify baptism). If the long form of the verse is the original, the ritual of the foot washing is said to be needed over and above the complete bathing (baptism). In this case, the foot washing would appear to signify the necessity of the Christian to purify himself of his postbaptismal sins. That there would thereby be an allusion to the sacrament of the Eucharist is, however, quite doubtful. **11.** Jesus has just pronounced that the disciples as a group are clean, even as the symbol of washing signified. Yet one was not clean, despite the fact that he, too, had been washed. Not even the sacraments can purify when the inmost dispositions are impure.

mss. Manuscripts

Str-B H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (6 vols.; Munich, 1922-61)

Gk Greek

140 12-14. As a point of practical application, the meaning of this action is now explained. Not only do the disciples and all Christians share in the fruits of Jesus' lifework, they must also imitate its spirit. *you too have the obligation to wash one another's feet*: It is their duty to practice the humility signified by this act. The literal act has been incorporated to some extent in the liturgy of Holy Week

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Haydock's Catholic Commentary

Ver. 1. *Before the festival day, or feast of the Pasch.* See the note on this word Pasch, Matthew xxvi. ver. 2. Here when St. John says, *before the festival day*, he means in the evening, or latter evening after sunset, on the 14th day of the month of Nisan, when the great feast of *Azyms* or *unleavened bread* was begun, (for the Jews began their feasts from sunset on the foregoing day) so that the hours from sunset, at least, on the 14th day of the month of Nisan (at which time the paschal lamb was to be eaten with unleavened bread belonged to the *first, and great day of Azyms*, which lasted till sunset on the 15th day of the month [of] Nisan. St. John therefore says, *the day before*, meaning after sunset on the 14th day of the month; but yet it was part of the same great feast, which was kept on the 15th day. See also the note Matthew xxvi. ver. 17. (Witham)

Ver. 2. *And when supper was done.* By this we must not understand, that the supper was over; for we afterwards find that Jesus again sat down, and gave bread to the traitor. But these words only mean, that all had partook of refreshment, and might be therefore said to have supped. (St. Augustine, tract. 55. in Joan.) --- He knew that he went out from God, and would return to God; but at the same time, he did not leave God, when he went out from him, nor us, when he returns to him. (St. Augustine, as above.) --- And though he went out from God, and returns to him, yet here he condescends to perform the office, not of the Lord God of the universe, but of a man and a slave; (St. Augustine) and this, says St. Chrysostom, (hom. lxxix. in Joan.) that he might tread all pride under foot: doing every thing himself on this occasion, to teach us with what eagerness we ought to perform the duties of humility.

Ver. 4. *He riseth from supper;* that is, after *supper was done*, or ended, as it is here said, (ver. 2. and 1 Corinthians xi. 25.) *girded himself* like a servant, to wash and wipe the feet of his apostles. (Witham) --- If we compare the text of the four evangelists, it will appear that the washing of the feet preceded the institution of the blessed Eucharist, of which St. John is silent. (Bible de Vence)

¹Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. 1968]; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (electronic ed.). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ

Ver. 5. St. Ambrose and St. Bernard shew that this washing was mysterious, and significative of the very great purity expected of those that receive the blessed Eucharist.

Ver. 6. *Lord, dost thou wash my feet?* My master, my Lord, the true Son of the living God, wilt thou wash the feet of me, thy servant, thy disciple, a poor vile sinner? this must not be. (Witham)

Ver. 8. *If I wash thee not, thou shalt have no part with me.* At this, Peter, as one thunderstruck, replied: *Lord, not my feet only, but my head;* whatever my Lord pleaseth. (Witham)

Ver. 10. *He that is washed, &c.* The feet are always apt to contract some dust or dirt; and in the mystical sense, he that is washed by the sacraments of baptism, or penance, from greater sins, must still endeavour to cleanse, and purify his affections from lesser failings of human frailty. And you, my apostles, are clean from greater offences, *but not all of you*, meaning the traitor Judas. (Witham) --- It is impossible that the extremities of the soul (if we may be allowed the expression) should not, as long as we tread upon this earth, receive some stain or other; although in the opinion of men, the soul appear just. Many indeed after baptism, are covered with the dust of sin, even to the head, but those who are disciples indeed, need only to wash their feet. (Origen, tract. 32. in Joan.) --- The foulness of the feet, when the rest is clean, signifies the earthly affections, and remains of former sins remitted, which are to be cleansed by devout acts of charity and humility. (St. Ambrose, lib. iii. de Sacram. chap. 1; St. Bernard, de cæn. Dom. ser. 1.) --- Though his disciples were clean, still he washed their feet, conformably to that of the Apocalypse, chap. xxii. "He that is clean, let him be cleansed still." (Origen, tract. 32. in Joan.)

Ver. 14. *You also ought to wash one another's feet.* Not that he made this a standing precept according to the letter; but designed it as a lesson of humility. We find this custom literally observed in several churches, as it is now done every year by diverse prelates, and by Christian kings and princes. (Witham) --- He gives us an example of a more elevated act of virtue, that we may at least learn to practice the lower degrees of it. For he indeed was their Lord, but when we perform this office, we can but do it to our fellow-servants. (St. Chrysostom, hom. lxx. in Joan.) --- This it is, blessed Peter, which you were ignorant of, but which he promises to explain afterwards. (St. Augustine, tract. 58. in Joan.)