

## **Holy Thursday 2006**

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply influenced by the life and message of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount and the washing of the feet. Even when he had great power as a leader of his country, he took the humblest place in the ashram where he lived. His role each day was to clean toilets: a sign that he wanted to serve others.

There are several layers of meaning for us in the washing of the feet:

### **1. Attentiveness to the least:**

All groups, all societies, are built on the model of a pyramid: at the top are the powerful, the rich, the intelligent. They are called to govern and guide. At the bottom are the immigrants, the slaves, the servants, people who are out of work, or who have a mental illness or different forms of disabilities. They are excluded, marginalized.

If we start with the model of the pyramid, we see Jesus taking the place of the person at the bottom, the last place, the place of a slave.

For Peter this is impossible. Little does he realize that Jesus came to transform the model of society from a pyramid to a body, where each person has a place, whatever their abilities or disabilities, where each is dependant upon the other. Each is called to fulfill a mission in the body of humanity and the Church. There is no "last place."

Jesus, revealing himself as the least one in society, the one who does the dirty jobs, the one who is in the last place, calls his followers to be attentive to the least in society.

### **2. We are important:**

I can imagine with what tenderness Jesus touches the feet of his disciples, looks into their eyes, calls each one by name and says a special word to each one.

When he speaks at the meal, he speaks to them all; he does not have a personal contact with each one individually. But as he kneels humbly before each one and washes their feet, he has personal contact with each one. He reveals to each one his love, which is both comforting and challenging. He sees in each one a presence of his Father, whom he loves and serves.

The love of Jesus reveals that we are important, that we are a presence of God and are called to stand up and do the work of God: to love others as God loves them, to serve others and to wash their feet.

### **3. Model of Forgiveness:**

It is never easy to exercise authority. Those who routinely do exercise it - parents, teachers, business people, priests - can either be too controlling or too frightened of intervening, frightened of conflict and other people's freedom.

Leaders can easily make mistakes. When one is in a leadership position it is not easy to be wise, compassionate and yet firm.

The Holy Spirit teaches us to be servant leaders in truth. Some people always seem to be in opposition to authority; not everyone can be happy with all decisions. That is why leaders are frequently criticized and attacked verbally. They are called to be model of forgiveness.

But how difficult it is to accept those who criticize or reject us! We easily build walls to protect ourselves from those who oppose us. We feel insecure and frightened by conflict. We do not always want to wash their feet as Jesus washed the feet of Judas.

### **4. New way of exercising authority:**

By washing his disciples feet, Jesus does not diminish his authority. He affirms that he has authority, that he is "Lord and Master". But he wants to reveal a new way of exercising authority through humility, service and love, through a communion of hearts, in a manner that implies closeness, friendliness, openness and humility, a desire to bridge the gap that so often exists between those "in" leadership and those "under" their Leadership

Some leaders feel insecure, and that can make them pompous, self-satisfied, aloof. They tend to lord it over others and control them. They hide their insecurity, their weakness and their difficulties with relationships behind symbols: big desks, big cars, magnificent clothes, all of which keep people at a distance.

St. Francis of Assisi remains a wonderful model for all of us as he managed to bring back to life the gospel message within the Church: a message of humility and service, a message of peace and unity, a message of washing each other's feet, a message of non-violence, poverty and commitment to the poor, a message of prayer and Providence. In his Admonitions, Francis writes about the heads of his fraternities, whom he calls servers:

And blessed is that servant who does not place himself in a high position of his own will and always desires to be under the feet of others.

Followers of Jesus will continually be caught up in the paradox. Shepherds, teachers and leaders are necessary. They have power, but how should they exercise that power in the spirit of the gospels?

How should they give a clear message about the truth of Jesus' message? How should they speak out against the powers of wealth? How should they be servant leaders who humbly give their lives?

Through the washing of the feet, Jesus reveals a new way of exercising authority, not from above but from below. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus exercises his authority standing upright: he calls each by their name and leads them in the right direction, correcting them when necessary.

Here, Jesus kneels at their feet, wanting to help them to rise up. He is their servant.

Later he will exercise authority by lying down, on the cross, offering his life for those he loves, giving life through the offering of his very being.

After telling the disciples that they are called to wash each other's feet, Jesus says:

"If you know this, blessed are you if you do it."