



by The Revd John Lee

Meekly kneeling upon their knees

St John chapter 13: verses 1 to 17

It's evening in a town in Eastern Uganda and time for supper; a young woman comes into the room where our mission team are sitting along with some local diocesan dignitaries. She is carrying a plastic bowl and a jug; a towel is draped over her arm. She lowers herself to her knees and makes her way round the room. Kneeling before each of us she pours the warm water over our hands and into the bowl. After we have finished washing we dry our hands on the towel as it hangs over her arm. All the time she is on her knees in front of us.

Who are the unnoticed servants in our communities? What can only happen because of their service? If we have stopped noticing them, have we stopped seeing something that God wants to show us?

For a western man, the father of three daughters and the husband of a determined and intelligent woman, this is a disorienting moment. To be served in this way troubled my view of how things should be and crashed headlong into the values I try to keep to in my relationships with women. However, that evening, as the sun went down and the smell of the meal wafted in, there really was no choice. We would each receive the service offered. There was a strange truth about this humble act. Nothing could happen until this young house-girl had done her work; she was the gatekeeper for the meal. Only when she had poured warm water over each of our hands could the meal begin; she led the way

into our sustenance and refreshment. When I read *John 13* I think of her.

Servant leadership has become much discussed in contemporary thinking. It is, for example, a strong characteristic of the most effective leaders discerned by Jim Collins' research. What distinguishes these people in particular and makes them great, rather than merely good, leaders? Collins concludes that it is 'genuine humility'.

I should be less surprised by the potency of servanthood, after all Jesus described himself as coming to serve (*Matthew 20.28*) and *John 13* is his acted parable of that call. It is set, of course, in a moment of great crisis but it is also a moment of profound confidence. John says that Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God. It turns out that, in the case of Jesus at least, servant leadership is not the sign of a weak leader who lacks confidence – it is the opposite. It is a symptom of one who trusts himself completely to God.

How does your identity as a child of God and your trust in Him influence your readiness to take on servant leadership?

For Peter it is difficult. 'No . . . you shall never wash my feet'. Is he projecting onto Jesus his idea of what a real leader should be and finding that the gears are crunching in his mind? It's an old issue for Peter.

'That's not who you are meant to be Jesus. You're not meant to be rejected and killed; you're not meant to get nailed to a cross and you're not meant to be kneeling here in front of me.' Surely this is not what effective leadership consists of.

Peter has not yet got to the heart of what discipleship means. The leadership images that Peter is working with clearly do not fit with the powerful pictures and parables that Jesus uses. If a disciple is supposed to learn a way of life from his master this is beginning to look tough. Jesus confronts Peter with a basic fact. He must accept this act of service with all that it declares about Peter's own needs and what he must become as he takes on the leadership of the Church.

Are there models of leadership that we are more comfortable with than the servant leader? Do more assertive models of leadership look more attractive, especially if we are leaders ourselves?

I am a student of leadership; in particular I have been studying the life of Admiral Nelson for the last decade or so. (Great on innovative, relational leadership; not so good on marriage!) Great leaders in the world's affairs and conflicts can provide stimulating insights and fruitful ideas but each of these leaders is critiqued by Jesus – on his knees, with a bowl and a towel – and so am I. 

*You who are over us,
You who are one of us,
You who are also within us,
May all see you in me also.
May I prepare the way for you,
May I thank you for all
that shall fall to my lot,
May I also not forget the needs of others.
Give me a pure heart – that I may see you.
A humble heart – that I may hear you,
A heart of love – that I may serve you,
A heart of faith – that I may abide in you. Amen*
Dag Hammarskjöld

about the writer

The Revd John Lee began his ordained ministry in Kingston-on-Thames, served as Associate Minister at Holy Trinity Leicester and has been Rector of St Paul's, Holgate in York since 2002. He is married to Nicola and has three daughters.

