

Sunday School Notes for 23 April 2023: John 13: The Last Supper

It was the time of year to celebrate Passover, one of the major festivals which God had told his people to celebrate in about April every year. Why? They were to celebrate the fact that God has freed them from slavery in Egypt. Each generation was to tell their children about that dramatic escape. The Jews hadn't known exactly what God was going to do, but everyone who feared him obeyed the exact instructions which Moses gave them. They ate the meat of a young lamb and flat bread (no yeast) and they were all packed up ready to leave at a moment's notice.

As many Jewish families as possible made the long journey to Jerusalem to join in the special celebrations there. Jesus and his disciples who had become a 'family' made their way there too. The roads in Palestine at that time were not tarred and were incredibly dusty. So when you had visitors, a slave with a basin of water would wash the feet of each guest as he arrived.

Jesus and his disciples had booked a room to celebrate Passover, but the disciples had to buy their own food. At this stage the disciples were beginning to think they would be important in Christ's kingdom and weren't prepared to volunteer to do the work of a slave.

Instead Jesus, the King of glory, stripped down and tied a towel to his waist and proceeded to wash and dry the feet of his very embarrassed disciples! Peter at first refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet. Jesus pointed out that Peter was out of line. It seems Peter was actually trying to boss Jesus around. He had to learn to accept Jesus' way. When Peter lost his first argument he told Jesus to wash his hands and head washed also – he was desperate to be part of Jesus' group. But once again, he was seeking to control Jesus. Jesus points out that this is unnecessary – only his feet were dirty. Jesus knew Peter's heart was in the right place, even when he wasn't thinking straight. Jesus therefore washed even Peter's feet.

When he returned to his place without the towel and with his cloak around him, Jesus instructed his followers to serve one another. No act of service should be seen as below one if it brings people into Christ's loving care.

Notice, by the way, that he had washed Judas' feet too because he "loved him to the end". But Judas had shut himself off from Jesus by now and I imagine him with a slightly curled lip as he watched this "Messiah" humble himself like this. He just didn't get it.

John doesn't describe the Passover meal that they celebrated. But he does indicate that Jesus served the bread to everyone there. Yet, all Judas could think of was to be on his way to the priests. Jesus knew what was going on – was troubled at what Judas was doing to himself (v21) But Judas had made up his mind.

So Judas went out into the night. “It was night” in Judas’ life as well. Once he had gone, Jesus used his last few precious moments with his disciples to remind them of the need to love one another as he would no longer be there. The disciples struggle with the suggestion that Jesus was going away and Peter vows to stay true to him. But Peter had to learn that his strength alone would not be enough – only then could he play his role in the kingdom.

Acts of service build up the church. What are we doing to build the church today in our self-centred world which no longer prizes servant-leadership? Jesus took precious time to spell out for us how we should live; shouldn’t we be careful to obey him?