

We are now in the second half of the period between Easter and Pentecost.

In a calendar year, God has given us three times of “preparation”: 30 days of Advent (before Christmas); 40 days of Lent (before Easter); and 50 days between Easter and Pentecost, three opportunities to reflect on the birth of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the work of Christ through the Church, respectively.

This week past, I was reminded of the importance of the Church in the world.

You may recall the interview on Irish television in February 2015, during which Stephen Fry referred to God as, “stupid” (I cannot bring myself to repeat his comment in full). A viewer lodged a police complaint, that Stephen Fry’s comments may have broken Ireland’s Defamation Act (2009). The police started an investigation and this week concluded, “This man was simply a witness and not an injured party. We are **unable to find a substantial number of outraged people**. For this reason the investigation has been concluded.”<sup>1</sup>

Imagine! A country which is 78.3% Roman Catholic, there was not to be found, **a substantial number of outraged people**, willing to defend God’s honour and His character!

Our lament should not be the oft quoted phrase we use in social settings, *What has this world come to!* We must lament, *What has become of the Church, that there are not enough people to defend the honour and character of its head, Jesus Himself?!*

We the Church are the body of Christ, to whom Jesus has entrusted the Word of God, that we may learn it and live it, and through our experience of living the Word of God, we are able to proclaim it; and we are convinced of it, defend it.

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<sup>1</sup> [“Irish police drop Stephen Fry blasphemy investigation”](http://www.premier.org.uk). Tuesday 09 May 2017. By Alex Williams on [www.premier.org.uk](http://www.premier.org.uk)

As Jesus prepared to return to Heaven, He desired the twelve disciples be equipped and resourced to proclaim and defend the work He started, to carry this creation to its rightful end, in God's eternal Kingdom. He wanted the twelve disciples to experience living the Word of God, and only then to proclaim it.

Jesus left Heaven for earth to accomplish three things: to heal all diseases, to teach the word of God, and set right people's knowledge about the Kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>

Second, Jesus came to take on and defeat the power of death, that barrier which separated us from God, which we have just celebrated.

Third, as we said earlier, Jesus was tasked with bringing together 12 people of God's choosing, teaching and resourcing them to continue the work He started, to heal, teach and preach.

Separation is painful at the best of times, and Jesus is very aware of this. The gospel writer Luke ends his gospel account thus, *While He blessed them, Jesus parted from them and was carried up into Heaven, and the disciples worshipped Him and returned to Jerusalem **with great joy**, and were continually in the Temple, praising God.*

At this time, the disciples did not show any signs of separation anxiety. They had given up career, family and security, to follow someone whom many people neither liked nor understood. Yet, after He left for Heaven, they returned to Jerusalem **with great joy**, daily worshipping God in the Temple. How can this be?

We would be forgiven to think, the first time Jesus spoke to the Apostles about their separation, when He would return to Heaven, was during the 40 days after His resurrection. Not so.

The serious conversation about their impending separation took place during His final Passover meal with the twelve disciples. John says, *the*

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4:23

*time had come for Jesus to leave this world and return to the Father... knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands<sup>3</sup>.*

John then reports an incident which *seems* out of place, out of character and out of context. The washing of feet was usually done by non-Jewish slaves when people arrived in a home. John tells us Jesus got up and washed the disciples feet, **during** the meal, and he offers us a clue to decipher the timing of Jesus' action: *During the meal, ... when the devil had already put in the heart of Judas Iscariot ... to betray Him, Jesus got up, removed his outer garment... poured water into a basin and started to wash the Disciples' feet<sup>4</sup>.*

This was not only a demonstrable act of immense love, it was also symbolic of the washing away of sins through Jesus' impending death. In this one act, Jesus set an example of humility and servanthood. Perhaps of greater significance, this act was a striking demonstration of Jesus' teaching to, "love your enemies and anyone who hates you"<sup>5</sup>. Jesus washes the feet of **ALL** twelve disciples, including Judas Iscariot's feet, the one who was about to betray Him.

But this incident is neither out-of-place, nor out-of-context. Having been rejected by the religious leaders, Jesus starts to prepare the small community of twelve believers, His chosen disciples, for His separation from them, first by an act of literal and symbolic cleansing by foot washing, and then figuratively through the removal of Judas, the betrayer (*go quickly and do what you have to do*).

This powerful lesson was not only a demonstration of humility and servanthood, and an encouragement for the disciples to do the same<sup>6</sup>, it was also an equally powerful lesson in forgiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> John 13:1,3.

<sup>4</sup> John 13:2-6

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27

<sup>6</sup> John 13: 15-17

We can easily read into the foot-washing narrative and misunderstand, that God's forgiveness can be had without repentance. After all, there does not **seem** to be any mention of confession.

Ah, but there is! When it comes to Peter's turn to have his feet washed, he looked Jesus in the eye and asks, *Surely Lord, you are not going to wash my feet?* Jesus returns his gaze, and Peter repeats his protest, *You shall never wash my feet!*, to which Jesus replies, *If I do not wash you, you have no share with me; Unless I purify you, you cannot wholly **belong** to me.*

Jesus' words cut through to Peter, as they always have. Peter recognises he cannot pick-and-mix his relationship with Jesus. He recognises the problem lies in his attitude, *I will let you do some things, but I will not let you do what I think you should not do.* There is a serious problem with the attitude, *I will follow you, I will do what you want, but **only when** it fits in with what I think is right, but don't challenge the values I hold dear!*

Peter realises his error and his confession follows immediately, *Lord! Not only my feet, but also my hands and my head!* Lord, wash and cleanse me from head-to-toe, that I may be obedient, where you lead me (*feet*), what you ask me to do (*hands*) and shape my attitude, how I think (*head/mind*). The first thing Jesus expects of those who follow Him, is total surrender. Living the Christian life is not like going into the old Woolworths on the high street, and filling a bag with a selection of pick 'n mix sweeties, to suit our taste buds.

*Lord! Not only my feet, but also my hands and my head!* Without a total, irreversible commitment to the person of Christ, it is impossible to be a part of His work.

The second thing we learn from the disciples as they prepared for the time when Christ was no longer to be with them, is to focus on what God calls **US** to do, to focus on the task **WE** are called to do. We will have questions, but all the answers to our questions can be found in God's

Word. He speaks and He answers clearly, but we neither hear, nor do we see.

After washing their feet and Judas' departure, Jesus was troubled in His spirit. He speaks quietly to Himself, *One of you will soon betray me to the authorities.* Peter hears this and instigates John to asks Jesus, *Lord! Who is it? Who among us, will do such a heinous thing?*

We are an inquisitive people, aren't we?! We want to know **everything**. God tells us, *I will share information with you on a "need to know" basis, to which we respond, "Lord! I do need to know, now!"*

The sad thing is, even when God gives us detailed answers, we are none the wiser!

In response to John's question, *Who is it who will betray you?*, Jesus replies, *It is he to whom I will give this bread when I have dipped it,* and he gives it to Judas, telling him to do quickly what he was going to do. Even with this direct response, the disciples were none the wiser who was going to betray Jesus! Instead, they **speculate**: was Jesus sending him to buy something or give something to the poor, and stranger still, they seem satisfied with their own speculative answers!

This pattern repeats itself through they evening:

- Jesus said, *Where I am going you cannot come, but you will follow **afterward**,* to which Peter says, *Why can't I follow you **now**? I will lay down my life for you!* Jesus had to put Peter in his place, *Will you really lay down your life for me? Before the rooster next crows three times, you will have denied me three times!*
- Jesus said, *I go to prepare a place for you, and I will return and take you, **that you may be where I am**,* to which Thomas says, *We don't know where you are going; how will we know the way?*
- Jesus said, *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,* to which Philip says, *Lord! Show us the Father and it*

*is enough. Jesus looks at Philip, We have been together for so long and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father!*

- Judas (not Iscariot the one who betrayed Jesus) asks, *Lord! Why will you reveal yourself to us, but not to the world?*, to which Jesus replies, *Because I will only reveal myself to those who love me and obey me. The Father will love them too, and we will come to them and live with them.*

During this conversation, these questions reveal the disciples' separation anxiety, manifest in a spirit of self-centredness. *What about me?, Why won't you accept what I am prepared to do?, I don't know the way, ... Unless you show me ...* Our preoccupation with ourselves, blinds us to the Truth, even when Truth stares us in the face, or use a phrase our daughter Nureen uses, *its so close it will jump up and bite you!* Even then, we find it difficult to accept Truth.

Jesus recognises the disciples' problem in accepting His teaching, so He makes a pact with them: *I will not leave you orphaned; I will ask the Father to send you a Helper, the spirit of Truth who will guide you in all Truth.*

Your side of the deal said Jesus is, *Love one another, **as I have loved you!** There is no greater love than this - that a man should sacrifice his life for his friends. You are my friends, not my servants, if you do what I ask you to do. A servant does not share his master's confidence, but as my friends, I have told you everything I have heard from the Father.*

If anything gave the disciples a measure of confidence, it was this pact: I will send a Helper who will be with you forever, guiding you in all Truth, but you must promise me, you will love each other, **as I loved you!**

It is not an impossible request. The Holy Spirit is present to remind us Jesus' teaching and God's Word, and the Holy Spirit helps us love one another, as God loved His Son Jesus, and as Jesus loves us.

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<sup>7</sup> John 15:12

The disciples returned to Jerusalem, rejoicing all the way; there is no reason why we should not rejoice and be glad, for God has given us the Holy Spirit.

The world will then discover, **a substantial number of outraged people**, willing to defend God's honour and His Name.

**AMEN.**