

### “Towel Day Is Every Day”

Every year on May 25 a group of quirky people, of which I am one, celebrate Towel Day. May 25 is the birthday of Douglas Adams who wrote a five book trilogy (that is what he called it) entitled *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. According to the guide a towel is the most useful item a galactic hitchhiker can have. It can be used to keep you warm, as a beach blanket, and as a sail on a miniraft. Wet it serves as a weapon, a head wrap to ward off noxious fumes, or to shield your eyes from scary aliens. Of course, it also can function to dry yourself off after bathing provided it is not too dirty.

Two thousand years before *The Hitchhikers Guide*, someone else took an ordinary towel tied it to his waist and turned it into something special. According to John’s Gospel, on the night of the Last Supper Jesus did something remarkably humbling. He took a basin of water and proceeded to wash the feet of the men he called his disciples, his students. He was their teacher and master and he knelt down and washed their dirty feet.

This was a task that was usually given to a household servant. When guests arrived for a meal the servant would wash and anoint their feet, much the same way we get our guests a refreshing beverage when they arrive for a dinner party. It was comforting and helped the guests feel clean and refreshed. After all, in those days most travel was by foot and sandals did not offer much protection from the elements. Yet here is Jesus with basin and towel humbling himself to wash his disciple’s feet.

Of course, Peter in his anxiety first refuses the foot washing and then wants his head washed too. Jesus turns the latter request aside. There is no record that anyone else made a comment. Even the one who would set up Jesus for arrest gets his feet washed. Jesus shows no partiality.

What Peter did not understand initially is that Jesus was setting an example for the disciples. As Jesus prepared to be arrested and crucified, he also needed to give final lessons to the disciples. The last one about humility may have been most important. Soon they would become apostles, that is the ones who were being sent out to spread the Gospel. There might be the temptation to feel rather grand about themselves. Many people may have doted on them because they knew Jesus intimately. Jesus wanted to remind them that their ministry was not about ego fulfillment. Their ministry was to serve others.

I expect that this foot washing and the idea of servant ministry may have been a mystery to them. I do not think they actually believed what Jesus had been telling them about how he was going to be killed, much less that after being killed he would rise from death on the third day. If they had understood that much they might not have fled when Jesus was arrested. They might have stayed close. They might have attended the crucifixion. But they feared that what was happening to Jesus would happen to them. According to John, only

the Beloved Disciple and the women showed up on that fateful day. The rest were in hiding.

As they hid away between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection we know they were praying. When they weren't praying I wonder what was running through their minds? Were they reliving the Last Supper and wondering what good it was for Jesus to wash feet? Perhaps they were thinking that Jesus could have provided more concrete advice about what to do in a dangerous world without him there to guide them. They may have felt that a towel was not much of a weapon against the power of the Roman Empire and its brutal henchmen like Pontius Pilate. Towels are massively practical, but as a reward for following Jesus or an inspiration for ministry they may seem a little mysterious.

However, I think that when we baptize people in addition to giving them a cross and a candle a towel might be most appropriate. Too often we Christians get full of ourselves and self-righteous. As the old saying goes, "we get above our raising". We forget whose we are and what he taught. Sadly, it is everywhere.

In addition to the symbolic towel Christ gave one final commandment. He said, "... love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." He knew this commandment would be hard so he kept it simple. He did not give us talking points, lists of rules, theological background, criteria for membership, special gifts, or any other accoutrements. He gave us one simple rule "love one another as I have loved you.

It is a easy thing to envision and incredibly hard to live out. His disciples did it by spreading his gospel. They handed it on to us to share as well. Let us all tie on our towel and get ready to make every day towel day. A day when our love for one another is a mirror for how Christ loves us, and by which we are known as his followers.