

# Jesus Washing Peter's Feet

By Ford Madox Brown (1852-6)

## Focus: Colour

- A. **Starter:** which is the most respectable part of your body? Which is the least? **Feedback:** why did feet have a low status in ancient times? Why was washing other people's feet such a menial task? (lower than the other person)
- B. **Painting:** gather impressions.



Caused an outcry when it was first shown, as has an unusually low viewpoint and compressed space: crowded into the "world" of the servant, and originally Jesus only semi-clad. Madox only managed to sell it once he painted the robe on Jesus.

What part of the Jesus story does this scene take place?

## C. Reading: John 13:3-17 (New International Version - UK)

*3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, are you going to wash my feet? 7 Jesus replied, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." 9 "Then, Lord," Peter replied, "not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well!" 10 Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. 12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.*

*"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.*

**Pause the reading here, ask students in pairs to discuss how they would answer this question.**

*13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."*

## D. What (three) things is Jesus teaching his disciples by washing their feet? (humility, service, example)

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**Focus on Colour:** what do you notice about the colour scheme? (earthy, naturalistic, warm glowing). How does that emphasise or give meaning to what is happening? (the divine is humble) In fact, there is a tradition of using colour to imply meaning.

- E. **Activity/ Homework:** Using the colour key, identify the colours in the painting, and what they might mean in the context of the painting. Write up Madox Brown's painting as part of your project. Focus on 1) the story behind the scene 2) the composition 3) use of colour.

## **F. Final Reflection:**

Touching people's feet is a very odd thing to do: those bare, sweaty, cracked, long toe-nailed feet in our hands remind us that life is not very soft and lovely. Peter says, You shall never wash my feet. His feet, he knows, are not very nice, and perhaps he feels that he himself is really not very nice. He is very uncomfortable at receiving Jesus' touch, and humiliated. And yet Jesus wants Peter to be a part of him: part of the great sacrifice that He is about to make, and part of Jesus' own way of doing things.

And that is why I must let Jesus touch and wash me, and why I myself must touch and serve others. I am commanded to touch them, like Jesus did, where they are at their most uncomfortable : homeless, suffering, drunk, lonely, addicted and poor.

*Purify me, Lord, and I shall be clean,  
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (Psalm 50)*