Introduction


The Commentaries

There is little agreement as to whether John 13:1-20 forms a unit. Schnackenburg includes John 13:1-30 under the heading, “Jesus’ Last Meal with his Disciples,” and subdivides the unit into verses 1-5 (introduction and the washing of the feet), 6-11 (Jesus’ conversation with Simon Peter), 12-17 (Jesus’ washing of the feet as a model for the disciples), 18-20 (announcement of the betrayal and the strengthening of faith), 21-26 (the exposure of the traitor), 27-30 (Judas’s departure). Brown likewise titles John 13:1-30, “The Meal,” with subunits, verse 1 (serves as introduction to the Book of Glory), verses 2-11 (the footwashing + soteriological interpretation), 12-20 (another interpretation as moral example of humility and service), 21-30 (prediction of the betrayal). Moloney, on the contrary, titles John 13:1-38, “Making God Known: The Footwashing and the Morsel,” with subunits, verses 1-17 (the footwashing), 18-20 (to make God known), 21-38 (the gift of the morsel).

Schnackenburg (10) insists that “without literary criticism, it is not possible to understand the text of John 13:1-30 in its present form.” By “literary criticism” he meant the criticism of the literary genesis of the text that accompanies the criticism of style and comparison with other passages of the gospel as to language and theological content. Distinct from 1:11 where “his own” was not restricted to the disciples, here “his own” refers to those who belong to him and listen to his voice.
(cf. 10:3, 4, 12). The phrase, “that the Father had given all things into his hands,” may be meant to reject a gaining of power over Jesus on the part of the devil; Jesus is subject to God’s power and control alone and triumphs over all adversaries. One should not argue from “having risen from the table” (v. 4) that historically Jesus interrupted the meal, for it was usual to wash the feet at the beginning of a meal. That “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot . . . to betray him” (v. 2) appears to contradict 13:27 where Satan entered Judas after the morsel.

Two interpretations of the washing of feet are given and these seem to be in conflict with each other. The first interpretation (vv. 6-10) belongs to the evangelist’s fundamental stratum and is theologically more profound. It is detected in Jesus’ answer to Peter, which is a warning against excluding oneself from what Jesus gives to humans. The deeper meaning of “to have a share (or place) with someone” becomes clear when we consider what Jesus promised his disciples after his death—they would share in the life he would gain (14:19), be where he was (12:26; 17:24) and thus share in his glory (17:22, 24). The “washing” thus refers primarily to Jesus’ death on the cross: “the whole significance of the washing of the feet was to point forward to the death of Jesus and the whole community founded on him” (11). Again, “this humble service points to the death of Jesus himself, which is, as a share in salvation, a service full of inner authority” (18).

He who has bathed (v. 10) is the one who, by having his feet washed, has been taken into the event of the cross, symbolized by the washing of the feet. Although there is some evidence for the use of λουσθαι (to bathe) as a term for baptism, baptismal symbolism is not here in view, rather in view is the stream of blood and water from the pierced side of the crucified Christ (19:34); according to 1 John 1:7 “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” There is some difficulty in the fact that the disciples are declared clean now, and not after Jesus’ death, but it is in line with 15:3 where they are already clean by reason of the word of Jesus. They are clean by means of the community with Jesus that will be built up on a new and lasting foundation by his death (22).

The second interpretation (vv. 12b-17) is earlier than the first, though it belongs to insertions made by the editor. It is paradigmatic, focuses attention on the washing of the feet as such, and is centered on the humble service of Jesus (vv. 12-17). It reflects the synoptic tradition at Luke 22:27, where Jesus in the upper room is among the disciples “as one who serves.” However, direct dependence of John on Luke is to be rejected. The central concept of διακονεῖν (wait at table) is lacking in John, the service in John is one performed by a slave, not waiting at table (40-41). As messengers (ἀποστόλος here is functional and does not mean apostle in the specific sense) the disciples both depend on and are closely connected with the one who sent them and are committed to him (v. 16).

Because Jesus has told them beforehand, the disciples will come to see that their betrayal of him and the plan devised by Satan in fact served his exaltation, and that he was right to claim the divine “I AM” as the one sent by the Father.

In a long excursus (33-55), Schnackenburg wrestles with the question of the dating of the last supper in relation to the Passover, and especially with the lack of an account of the institution of the Eucharist. He rejects the theory of A. Jaubert that Jesus followed the Essene calendar according to which Passover was always on the night of Tuesday/Wednesday; he opines rather that John and the Synoptics followed distinct traditions. It would seem
that the evangelist did not speak about the sacraments—wherever sacraments are clearly in focus, the texts are editorial additions, for example, baptism in 3:5, the Eucharist in 6:51c-58 (44). Although we can never be sure about it, the evangelist may have wanted to interpret the eucharistic practice of his church. By positing the washing of the feet as pointing to Jesus’ death, he would be telling the community that Jesus loved them to the extreme limit, giving himself in death, in order to give them a share in his life.

Brown notes that John preserves the correct historical information by setting the Last Supper on the day before Passover. For unknown reasons, Jesus on this day ate a meal with his disciples that had Passover characteristics; the Synoptics assumed that the day was actually Passover. The phrase, εἰς τέλος, means both “utterly, completely” and “to the end of life,” that is, to the death. Voluntary death is presented as the supreme expression of love in 15:13 (Brown, 550). The verb, τίθησιν, used for laying down his clothes, is the same verb for laying down his life in 10:11, 15, just as the taking up again of clothes and life is expressed by λαμβάνειν here and at 10:17, 18. All this serves to relate the footwashing to the death of Jesus.

The prima facie meaning of the footwashing is an example of self-sacrificing humility to be imitated by the disciples (vv. 14-17); this is the second interpretation. However, vv. 6-10 (the first interpretation) suggest that the footwashing is essential if the disciples are to gain a heritage with Jesus and that this action also cleanses them from sin (v. 10). The first interpretation (vv. 6-11) is more original; the dialogue there has no other possible reference than the footwashing, while some of the sayings in vv. 12-20 are general and are appropriate to other moments of Jesus’ life (561). The first interpretation sees the footwashing as an act of service for others, symbolic of the service Jesus will render in laying down his life for others. Jesus tells Peter, not “if you do not allow yourself to be washed,” but “if I do not wash you”—a salvific action of Jesus is involved, not simply an example to be imitated (565). The expression, echein meros can mean simply “to share with, be a partner with,” but here meros means more than fellowship. The LXX uses it to translate Hebrew heleq, the God-given heritage of Israel. Jesus speaks of a heritage “with me,” hence alluding to the union of the disciples with him in heaven, as at 14:3, 17:24. Thus, the footwashing makes it possible for the disciples to have eternal life with Jesus. “Bathed,” in the phrase, “the man who has bathed has no need to wash,” refers to the footwashing. Jesus tells Peter that he missed the point in thinking that the extent of the washings will increase heritage with Jesus; only the footwashing is important, for only that symbolizes his death. Judas was not changed by the footwashing (vv. 10-11) for his heart was already filled with evil intent (v. 2).

There may be a secondary baptismal reference in the footwashing. The verb, louein (to bathe), and its cognates are standard NT vocabulary for baptism. It is true that in the Johannine tradition it is the blood of Jesus that cleanses (1 John 1:7; Rev 7:14), but cleansing by baptism and by Jesus’ blood are not mutually exclusive (cf. Heb 9:22 with Heb 10:22; Tit 2:14 with 3:5) (567). The secondary reference to baptism meets the criteria that Brown suggested for Johannine sacramentalism (559).

The second interpretation of the footwashing is as an example to imitate; however, it does not thereby lose its association with the death of Jesus. Just as Mark 10:32-45 combines elements of both interpretations of the footwashing, so John 15:12-13, with its command to love to the point of...
laying down one’s life for others, is an excellent commentary on what Jesus means in saying that “you are to do exactly as I have done for you” (569).

While Schnackenburg and Brown accept the theory of a double interpretation, Moloney writes that “a theory of a later moralizing interpretation of the footwashing added to the original vv. 1-11 is not needed. There is unity of place, characters, and theme across vv. 1-17” (Moloney, 375). Moloney gives the passage a unitary baptismal interpretation, but baptism considered as realizing the death of Jesus (cf. Rom 6:3). The devil had already made up his (the devil’s) mind that Judas would betray Jesus. Jesus indicates the depth of his love for his own by washing their feet. “You have no part with me” (v. 8) is a veiled reference to the Christian practice of baptism: “‘to have part with Jesus’ through washing means to be part of the self-giving love that will bring Jesus’ life to an end (cf. v. 1).” If Jesus does not wash Peter, he will have no part in Jesus; baptism removes a disciple from jeopardy, from the danger of sin and the devil (378). The total immersion involved for “the one who has bathed” is a further hint of both baptism and the association of the disciple with the death of Jesus. There is tension between Jesus and Peter, as Peter shows lack of openness to the revelation of God’s ways in the words and deeds of Jesus. The exhortation to repeat what Jesus has done is not to moral performance but to imitation of his self-gift. The command to lose oneself in loving self-gift unto death in imitation of the hypodeigma (example) of Jesus has been ritualized in baptism. The blessedness of those who know and do these things (v. 17) flows from the living out of all that is implied by entering into discipleship through baptism (379).

Jesus’ death will be a moment of self-gift in love that will reveal God (v. 19) and transform fragile disciples into sent ones of the Father (vv. 18, 20). Scripture will be fulfilled in the event of the unconditional gift of self unto death for those whom he chose and whom he will send forth, the very ones who will betray him. Then the disciples will come to believe that he is the unique revelation of God, and that his choice of them makes God known (380).

Further Possibilities of the Text

The brief state of research, as given by Schnackenburg (8–10) and Brown (558–60), uncovered shades of meaning that might have escaped the casual reader. The diversity of interpretations was already evident in the period of the Fathers of the church. Origen, Comm. In Joh. XXXII 4 (Schnackenburg, 399, n. 42) interpreted the bowl as scripture, which contains the cleansing word (water). Augustine emphasized connection with the death of Jesus and saw a reference to the sacrament of penance in v. 10, “he who has bathed has no need to wash, except for his feet.” Penance cleanses sins committed after baptismal washing. Boismard argues that two independent accounts have been combined, one “moralizing,” the other “sacramental.” Because the footwashing seems to replace the words of institution of the Eucharist, Goguel and others have interpreted it in terms of the Eucharist. H. Windisch asserts that, according to John, Jesus at the last supper instituted not the Eucharist, but the washing of the feet. Some scholars think that the washing of the feet was an important part of the baptismal rite from the fourth century onwards, though not in Rome or the Christian East (Schnackenburg, 402, n. 69). E. Lohmeyer, “Die Fusswaschung,” ZNW 38 (1939) 74–94 interpreted the footwashing as the apostolic ordination of the disciples.
The Homily

Owing to constraints of space, I shall not be able to give the full exegetical backing for my readings, but I hope that the threads of the argument are sufficiently clear. The central image in this piece is represented in the phrase, “have part with me.” This phrase does not refer to the lot the disciples will inherit in Jesus, but simply to community with him, being “his own in the world” in continuing fellowship of love with him. The community was created by the prevenient love of Jesus for “his own” and that love has no end, no limits. Now that it was time to go back to the Father, Jesus decided to act out this belonging and to point to its various implications. The figure of Judas cast a shadow, not only on himself, but also because the disciples will all soon fail Jesus. Jesus wished to assure them in advance that the bond with him was inviolable. To this extent, the washing of the feet retained something of the prevenient grace and forgiveness shown on the cross.

The action was posited “during supper”; the cleansing of the feet was not out of need, as would be the case at the very beginning of a meal. It is not about cleansing; the discussion about cleansing is secondary, and has been introduced to explain the case of Judas. Jesus’ action was symbolic: he was reconstituting the group as “his,” as bearers of his love and mission. As “his,” they would represent his legacy, the legacy of mutual service (vv. 12-17) and carry on his work; they would be sent out on mission, with authority from him that links them to the Father (v. 20). The Gospel of John has already given an interpretation of the Eucharist itself at 6:51c-58; here it reinterprets it in terms of community with Jesus for mission.

Final Reflections

The homily has not followed any of the commentaries—what is the sense of the advice to visit commentaries in preparing homilies? Commentaries are good for opening up the possibilities of the text and showing its links with traditions in the particular book or literature as well as elsewhere. They open doors, but it is for each to decide which door to enter. We come to the text with differing quests and from differing standpoints. Texts are open to a multiplicity of meanings and performances. Preaching is not exegesis and does not primarily address the mind, but the heart. The reading of commentaries is only the beginning of the preparation; the real preparation is the attuning of mind and heart to the Spirit speaking through text. The preparation for a homily begins at the desk, but ends on one’s knees.