

Looking at Dependence: Vulnerability and Power in the Gospel of the Foot Washing (Accepted Manuscript)

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Accepting help of other people does not always come natural to us. On the contrary, it is often felt as degrading and even indignant. Yet, dependence is an essential characteristic of human life. It has been inscribed in the opening pages of the Bible that humanity is dependent and at the same time fully in God's image. The biblical narrative frequently recalls that it is only in relationships of care and mutual help that we can encounter God. This dependence on other human beings, so complicated to live with, is also highlighted in a singularly empowering way by Jesus in the dusk of his life, when he washed the feet of his disciples. This contribution shows how several biblical passages illuminate dependence and vulnerability as places of empowerment and as part of God's plan for humanity.

Keywords: vulnerability; Bible; practical theology; dependence; autonomy

Introduction¹

When I ask people around me what fears they have about their old age, the answers generally point in the same direction: fear of being sick, of being a burden, fear of losing one's dignity, fear of becoming dependent on others - as if "dignity" excludes "dependence on the care of others". Our Western societies brandish autonomy as a weapon to guarantee dignity, and thus depending on others for the gestures of everyday life is often felt as an attack on dignity, as an occasion for shame, as a recognition of one's undesirable vulnerability. Yet, vulnerability and dependence are essential characteristics of life in general and of human life in particular. They have been inscribed since the dawn of time in what it means to be human. In the opening pages of

¹ This article was written while I was guest-lecturer at *Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara* (Medan, Indonesia).

the Bible, the creation narratives portray dependent and vulnerable humanity as fully in God's image. The Old Testament frequently recalls that it is only in relationships of care and mutual help that we can encounter God, as I will show in the first part of this contribution. This vulnerability and dependence, so complicated to live with, are also highlighted in a singularly empowering way by Jesus in the dusk of his life, when he washed the feet of his disciples.

In this contribution I look at how some biblical accounts illuminate dependence and vulnerability as places of empowerment and as part of God's plan for humanity. After a short excursion through the Old Testament, I will look in more detail at what the account of the foot washing in John 13:1-17 can teach on this issue.

Dependence, Vulnerability, and *Imago Dei*

The positive perception of dependence as a place of empowerment is not widespread (and this is an understatement). In a 2018 statement, the French CCNE² reported on the stigma of old age and called all strata of society to change their attitude towards dependent and vulnerable older people, because our view of these people influences their self-perception and can generate a sense of indignity (CCNE, 2018). This demand for change in the way we look at dependent persons goes far beyond the framework of medicine or organised care and should involve society as a whole, because politics, media, economy and even churches are profoundly influenced by the conception of autonomy and independence as the ultimate guarantors of people's dignity. Churches have a role to play in this forthcoming cultural transformation. It is heart-warming to see that more and more Christian communities around the world are

² Comité consultatif national d'éthique.

declaring themselves "Alzheimer friendly churches" or "welcoming people with disabilities". However, these initiatives are often inspired by what Bethany McKinney-Fox calls "a weak theology" (McKinney-Fox & Swinton, 2019) rooted in an implementation of Matthew 25 – urging people to invite strangers and visit the sick – which results in a charitable and compassionate approach to the dependent person. It seems to me that our churches need a strong theological approach that can support the pedagogical and pastoral work needed to re-educate the eyes of our fellow citizens. Churches need to encourage people not to focus on the diminishing capabilities of the dependent elderly, but instead to visualise their intact potentialities and still mobilizable capacities.

In the Church, this work includes a re-reading of certain biblical texts. Indeed, I believe Scripture can act as a powerful counter-narrative for our time, because it challenges our certainties and corrects our pessimist reading of the world, opening up ever new perspectives. More than ever, we need a narrative that roots us in true hope. A reading of the biblical story that takes into account dependence and vulnerability can help believers mobilize spiritual resources to nurture the hope of dependent people to remain valued as full members of the community. Supporting hope then becomes an act of resistance.

A Christian theological perspective, I am convinced, changes the conversation on dependency because in this perspective we consider every dependent person in terms of *imago Dei*, people made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). This roots them in the world in a way that would not be the case if they were seen merely in terms of medical, socio-economic or political problems. The Creation narrative is central to salvation history and we always need to return to it. It is because we are made in the image of God that every person - however vulnerable and dependent - has an inalienable dignity.

According to Hans Reinders, the love and special consideration of the Creator gives value to the human person and the simple fact of being human is enough to benefit from this extraordinary gift (Reinders, 2008, p.220).

We have to ask ourselves then what being in God's image means for a dependent person? A whole volume of this journal would not be enough to explore the answers to this question. I would just like to highlight here that the *imago Dei* positions the human being in the order of creation as a creature radically dependent on its Creator and as fundamentally interdependent with the whole of creation. Yet, as I wrote in the introduction: today dependence is considered frightening. It seems undignified and contrary to our aspirations for autonomy and self-sufficiency. We do not want to depend on the care of others.

However, according to John Swinton, care is at the very heart of God's vocation for human beings in the creation story and because care is fundamental to acting faithfully towards God's creation, this raises a crucial point: being a recipient of care is an essential aspect of this process. Caring and receiving care are inseparable from the vocation of human beings on earth. John Swinton writes:

to be in a position where one can only be the recipient of care is not degrading or indicative of a loss of dignity or a failure of discipleship - it is in fact a holy place. To receive care is a deep reflection of divine love for dependent human beings. (Swinton, 2016)

God made human beings in God's image and this makes each human, however vulnerable, infinitely precious. This has an unsuspected consequence: since human beings carry something divine within them, it becomes unthinkable that they would create an object to which they would worship (an idol). If they want to meet God, human beings need only turn to their brothers and sisters. It seems to me that this is at

the heart of the Golden Calf episode in the Book of Exodus. Let us take a short trip into the Old Testament to clarify what I mean.

The Old Testament is teeming with condemnations of people who make statues and worship them as deities. Indeed, in the animist oriental religions these statues gave people access to the deity by giving them a concrete, visible access point. The statue in itself was not the actual god or goddess, its visible presence merely allowed contact with the deity³. Judaism's prohibition on making idols - statues of God - is therefore at odds with these primitive religions.

Now, during the Hebrew people's journey through the desert, it is not a statue but the presence of Moses that enables the people to be in contact with God, and when Moses withdraws into the tent of meeting, the visible presence of the cloud at the entrance of the tent invites each one to stand and worship before God (Ex 33:7-11). It is not surprising then that the people feel lost when Moses delayed to come down from Mount Horeb. Deprived of Moses' presence, which enabled them to be in touch with God, the people ask Aaron for another way to establish the contact. Like the nations around them, they make a statue: the golden calf. This immediately ignites God's wrath (Ex 32:10). Contrary to widespread opinion, I do not believe that God is jealous of the statue. I suggest that God considers the statue an insult to mankind, God's creature. There is no need for a golden calf to allow one to connect with God; for being made in God's image, every human being, whatever her or his vulnerabilities, is a meeting point

³ The statues made present the deity as they made present the king. This is the main argument for the worship of icons in the Orthodox Church and the rationale for which the first Christians refused to sacrifice to the statue of the emperor. Thanks to my colleague Petre Maican for pointing this out to me.

with God. The Hebrew people did not need a statue, or even Moses, to allow an encounter with God. Every brother and sister, without exception, would have done the job. Jesus confirms this in Matthew 25 when he says that whenever one cares for the least of the brothers, it is to him that it is done. In relationships of care and mutual help, human beings meet God. Bonaventure understood this well when he said that every human being is made to lead us to God. I believe this intuition is also illustrated by the biblical account of the foot washing in John 13:1-17.

Dependence and the Foot Washing

What follows is an analogical and contextual hermeneutical research of John 13:1-17, which seeks to accompany believers in the experience they make of themselves in their own questioning (Jacquemin, 2012, p.199). I do not seek the ultimate meaning of the narrative, but what the narrative can reveal about God and about ourselves in a specific context - that of an existence where dependence is at the heart of life.

In a previous study (Cooreman-Guittin, 2020) I have analysed how the figure of the tomb in the account of Lazarus' return to life (Jn 11:1-44) could function as a metaphor for the narrative framework around people with dementia: just as the tomb encloses Lazarus, the ambient discourse full of negative prejudices about this disease locks sick people in and condemns them to a slow "social death", their opinion no longer being taken into account, their company no longer being appreciated. Christ's action in urging the crowd to open the tomb is then a poignant call to free the sick from the negative straitjacket of prejudice. Indeed, the "social resurrection" of Lazarus cannot take place without the commitment of the whole community to him. But the patient is not a passive receiver in this story. Christ is there and he moves towards the patient. However, it is up to the sick person to trust Christ and to dare to believe that Jesus draws near in this experience and calls him or her out of the tomb. I believe it is

important to realize that the person who comes out of the tomb is not autonomous and independent. The face wrapped in the cloth reminds us that Lazarus remains sick and unable to get by on his own. He will be forever dependent on the care of those around him. This dependence, so difficult to accept, is illustrated by the story of the foot washing.

Let us turn to John's Gospel story. Several motifs run through the narrative unit 13:1-17: the motif of love in the introduction to this narrative (v.1) gives the framework and forcefully affirms that all the action that follows only makes sense in the light of Christ's immeasurable love for human beings. Above all, foot washing is a gesture that reveals God's love for God's creature. Then we find the motive of authority and the master-servant relationship (v.6.13-16), the motive of purification (v.10-11), and that of servitude (v.14-15). In this article I will limit myself to verses 5 to 9, which according to some exegetes are part of a Johannine rereading (vv. 6 to 11) of the apophthegmus 13, 4-5.12-17 (Zumstein, 2000, p.353).

This story can reveal valuable aspects of God's relation to human beings when read through the prism of vulnerability and dependence:

⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

This gesture of Jesus is often read as an unprecedented example of the reversal of social roles. According to J. C. Thomas, there is no description in antiquity of a person of higher status washing the feet of his subordinates (Thomas, 2014, p.55-59). However, in the Jewish tradition, Abraham – by washing the feet of his guests under the oak tree of Mamre – is considered the model of hospitality par excellence (Fitzgerald,

2000, p.522-525). It is not impossible that it was Abraham's example in the Targumic tradition that inspired his gesture to Jesus⁴.

What is absolutely astonishing here is to see that Jesus, God in person, kneels before the human being – it is *kenosis* taken to the edge, God emptied of Godself rising to the level of God's creature, kneeling down before the human being made in God's own image. This crucial understanding is also that of Maurice Zundel who sees in the gesture of Jesus' kneeling before Peter a final attempt by Jesus to make the apostles grasp that the divinity is in them. Zundel writes that Jesus' kneeling before the disciples is

[his] ultimate attempt to lead them to discover inside themselves this pearl of the Kingdom, to make them understand that *the divinity is in them*, that it is there that it awaits them, that it is there that worship in spirit and in truth must be celebrated, in this openness of themselves, in this transparency that is indispensable for the radiance of light....⁵

Through this extraordinary gesture, Jesus shows that in the act of being taken care of by our fellow humans we have the opportunity to meet God. Jesus points this out plainly in Mt 25, 40 and it has been repeated throughout Tradition: Gregory of

⁴ In Gn 18:4 we read: "Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree."; but in the *Targum Neofiti* this verse is rendered in a very different way: Abraham says: "I will fetch water to wash your feet. " In this version Abraham, as a host, washes the feet of the travellers.

⁵ 4th conference of Maurice ZUNDEL at Sainte Marie de la Paix in March 1961, available on line: <https://kerusso.ch/sites/mzc2/le-lavement-des-pieds-derniere-tentative-de-jesus-pour-faire-saisir-aux-apotres-que-la-divinite-est-en-eux/> (consulted on 08/07/2020 – my translation, emphasis added).

Nazianzus insisted that all beings, and therefore also all humans – those who think and those who cannot think – bear witness to the glory of God. Likewise, Bonaventure wrote that every human being is made to lead us to God. But Zundel goes beyond this and explicitly links the new commandment to the foot washing: it will always be the human being who must be loved if one wants to love God. The reciprocal also seems to me to be true: we will always have to let ourselves be loved by the other, because it is only through the love of the other that God can manifest his love for us.

It's not always easy to let yourself be loved by another person. Peter's reaction demonstrates this: ⁶ *[Jesus] came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"*

Peter is clearly uncomfortable with this gesture of Jesus, which upsets the social norms of the ancient hierarchy. But read from the present context of care-relationships, Peter's refusal opens another reading. Caregivers of people with dementia often report that some patients refuse to be washed (Lefebvre des Noettes, 2019, p. 183). Actually, it seems difficult at any age to accept help with everyday tasks. Recently a young father stated this to me, loud and clear: "If I can no longer wash my feet, I'll shoot myself in the head. No way anyone's going to do that for me." Is it not it curious that a lot of people do not mind taking care of others, but do not want to be taken care of themselves? It is difficult to accept that one is vulnerable and dependent on others for ordinary everyday actions. It seems interesting to me to transpose this observation to the story of the foot washing. Obviously, Peter was not ill, his vulnerability was not physical; but was he not sick with self-esteem, thinking that he could control everything, that he did not need anyone? Also, I suggest that we understand Peter's attitude as a refusal to be vulnerable, a refusal to acknowledge his dependence on the

Lord. Jesus is aware of Peter's disarray. Therefore, he does not impose his gesture on Peter, but prefers to enter into a dialogue.

⁷Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

It is only later, in the light of the resurrection, that Jesus' gesture can be understood. There are events in life that only make sense later in time, seen in retrospect. It seems useless to have one's feet washed when one is in full health. In today's mentality, it is generally considered that to be washed, to accept help, are postures reserved for "old age" and for times of illness. We do not teach our children to seek help. Is not the purpose of education to make the little ones independent and self-reliant? We do not talk to them about their vulnerability as the cradle of love. Because indeed, it is only by being open to one another – and therefore by being vulnerable – that it is possible to love and be loved (Cooreman-Guittin, 2019). Jesus' gesture breaks through our search for autonomy and self-sufficiency and is addressed to each person from now on, regardless of his or her state of health. Health professionals have told me repeatedly: changing our view on old age and dependency should begin in kindergarten. Even if we do not understand, when we are in good health, why it is important to agree to have our feet washed, the day will come when we will understand what it means.

I was fortunate enough to teach religious history classes to non-Christian 10-year-old children at state schools in France. Before the Easter holidays, I always told them about the events of Holy Week, the Last Supper, and therefore about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. I will never forget the scandalized reaction of Sara, a little Muslim girl: “What?! Your God washes the feet of his friends? But that's a slave's job!” I think that Sara's indignation is equalled only by Peter's reaction: *“you shall never wash my feet!”*

Jesus' gesture contradicts Peter's and Sarah's idea of Jesus' power and authority. The latter shows that authority can only be exercised on one's knees, in a relationship of service and care. And it is precisely this care that Peter categorically refuses because it amounts to a recognition of his vulnerability. Jesus does not pass in force. Sitting in front of Peter, he explains: *"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."* (v.8) As if he sensed what is really behind Peter's discomfort, Jesus replies that unless he accepts this service, Peter will have no part with him, who is resurrection and life. I believe Jesus is saying to Peter : "If you do not accept that I go to the end of my love for you (even to the cross) and continue to believe that you are self-sufficient, you will have no part with me." The foot washing is thus an expression of the life-giving love that will be ultimately made present in Jesus' self-gift.⁶ Peter's acceptance of his neediness conditions his access to salvation – without this acquiescence, Jesus can do nothing for him. Any lasting relationship with Jesus hangs on the acceptance of this gesture of foot washing and ultimately on the acceptance of the cross. This is the act upon which not only Peter's but anyone's future relationship with Christ depends. There is total interdependence between Jesus' action and Peter's – and our – reaction. When Peter understands that the washing of his feet is a gesture revealing God's love, something in him changes, he wants more: ⁹*"Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"*

As often in the Gospels, Peter does not understand, but he is ready to do anything (he thinks) to follow Jesus. He finally acknowledges his dependence and

⁶ Special thanks to my colleague Pedro Valinho Gomes, *"Unless I Wash You" Exegesis and Theology of the Footwashing (John 13,1-17) as Life-Giving Love, Essay*, Nairobi, Tangaza College Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2005.

accepts Jesus' proposal, which breaks the pyramidal model of the social hierarchy and replaces it with the model of the body as organising structure. St. Paul has understood this very well: society is a body in which everyone has an honourable, esteemed place, of equal value, regardless of their qualities, limitations, strengths or deficiencies (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-31; Eph 4:4-13) (Brock, 2011). It is a model where interdependence reigns, where we need each other in order to fulfil our vocation. Every person is responsible for a mission that no one else can accomplish, but that no one can accomplish alone. The story of the washing of feet also means this: building the Kingdom together implies the obligation to consent to interdependence, to recognize the necessary reciprocity of service and care. It is in accepting this, Jesus says, that you will be blessed if you at least put it into practice (v.17).

Kneeling down in front of each other and taking into account mutual vulnerability is not without risk. We all know the rest of the story: while the evangelist John tells us nothing about the reaction of the other disciples, we know that at least two of them will betray Jesus only a few hours after leaving the cenacle (upper room) on their washed feet. Peter and Judas seemed to have accepted the service but did not hesitate to betray and deny Jesus in the course of events. Taking into account one another's vulnerability is a high-risk undertaking. Jesus is aware of this, but he knows that the only possible way to manifest his love for humans is through the loving service of foot washing – and ultimately through death on the cross.

As we can see, acknowledging one's own vulnerability is a long-term task and one is never immune to the temptation of autonomy and the mirage of omnipotence. Our vulnerability, which is a source of love because it allows us to open ourselves to others, is also a source of betrayal, conflict, and unhappiness. Peter will have the bitter experience of this in the courtyard of the palace of the High Priest, while he was

warming himself with the guards over an embers fire. The vulnerability to which he had consented in the upper room, in agreeing to dare to depend upon Jesus, inspired him only with fear once outside in the palace courtyard, causing him to deny him in whom he had placed all his trust. Peter's example confronts us again and again with our own inner obstacles. Consenting to advance on the path of vulnerability and finding the strength to love and be loved often requires working on ourselves day by day.

Do you understand what I have done for you? Jesus asks in v.12. This question is also addressed to today's reader - who has been answering for centuries: “Yes, Lord, you invite us to put ourselves at the service of others.” And this is true, but it is only half the answer: Jesus says that we should wash one another's feet - there is no doubt about adverbial reciprocity. There is service to be given and service to be accepted. Agreeing to having one's feet washed means accepting one's vulnerability and daring interdependence, right now.

Thus, the classical interpretation of this story as an injunction to put oneself at the service of others is refocussed. This interpretation remains valid, but the contemporary paradigm demands a contextual (r)evolution: Jesus also teaches us that accepting service is what makes it possible to be a true disciple of Jesus. The dependent person who accepts being helped is not suffering passively but instead is in a singularly empowering situation, because Salvation comes through her or him. Therefore, relationships of service and mutual aid are places of empowerment and become holy places because they reveal something of God's love for human beings, both for the person helping and for the person being helped. It is together that the helper and the helped reveal something of the mystery of God to each other. The interdependence is total. And since this point is crucial, allow me to quote Joyce Anne Mercer: “God's call

in older adulthood invites even those with frail bodies and minds to serve the neighbour, as caregiver and care-receiver are graced by one another's presence.”⁷

Again, it is important to emphasize that this story is not only for the elderly: during my research I discovered that it is not uncommon in (Christian!) wedding celebrations in the United States for the future spouses to have a "foot washing ceremony" signifying how their love is fulfilled in service to each other, but also how they dare to trust and depend on each other. By placing this symbolic act at the beginning of their marital life, the young spouses show that dependence is not reserved for old age. Moreover, in L'Arche communities throughout the world, where people with and without intellectual disabilities live together, there is a long tradition of washing each other's feet during the Maundy Thursday celebrations. The fear of being a burden and of becoming dependent on the other thus acquires a completely different meaning. In L'Arche no one becomes a burden when he or she is vulnerable and dependent on daily help, on the contrary, this dependent person becomes an opportunity for God's love, glory, and power to manifest itself.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown how throughout the Bible, there are stories that highlight God's astonishing plan for a vulnerable humanity called to (inter)dependence. Made in the image of God (Gen 1), all humans, regardless of their state of health, are paths that lead to God – no need for idols to meet God (Ex 32). In the washing of feet (Jn 13), God kneels before humanity and implores it to embrace its vulnerability in order to have part with God in Jesus.

⁷ Joyce Anne MERCER : <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/what-does-christian-vocation-look-elderly> (consulted on 06/06/2018).

Biblical texts remain relevant in the contemporary context and can be read in ways that help today's faithful to change their view of dependency and vulnerability. It is in interdependence and mutual care that the power of God's love for us can be expressed. It is only in vulnerability, our openness to one another, that the power of God's love is revealed. Only together are we in God's image.

Notes

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