

## You laid aside your majesty

Last year at Wickhampton, historian Imogen Corrigan gave a talk on medieval table manners, with information derived not just from written sources, but depictions of feasts in illustrations of the time. One of the fascinating facts gleaned from the latter was that it was not only servants who waited at table: junior members of the nobility participated in serving the meal as part of their training. Before they were old enough to be guests, they learnt from being on the other side of the table. It reminds me of some of the things I had to do as a British Rail management trainee; or the shifts I spent with nursing staff on a ward at Addenbrooke's Hospital. But how do we know from the paintings that this was the case? By the way those serving are dressed: servants in their working garb; but the noble trainees in doublets, fine hose and pointed shoes.

Emphasis is given to dress in the Lord's instructions via Moses for the Passover: *This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly.* In Egypt, on the night itself, this was a practical consideration: the people needed to be ready to leave before Pharaoh changed his mind (as he always did). But the directions in Exodus are really there for the ritual keeping of the feast in Israel. Not knowing whether that dress code applied to the seder meal I Googled it, to find that today there's a whole market in *elegant and respectful* Passover attire and no shortage of advice: *Wearing modest and polished clothing signifies respect for the occasion. You want to strike the perfect balance between looking good and feeling comfortable, especially when you're seated at the table for hours. So no eating hurriedly (or reclining) there!* But whether or not Israelites dressed that way when celebrating their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the description in the text of girded loins and staff-in-hand helps the participants in the meal enter into the experience; signifying a state of mind: an alertness, looking to God in expectation of what he is about to do.

Interestingly, John pays attention to Jesus' dress during his last supper with his disciples: when he got up from the table, he *took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.* There is a practical reason for this, of course: his robe would be an encumbrance as he crouches, and he will wipe their feet with the towel; but do I also sense a symbolic significance? Particularly when John mentions the robe again, as Jesus puts it back on when he returns to the table with his disciples. The hymn in Philippians 2, used on Palm Sunday, comes to mind:

*Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus, who,*

*Though he was divine, did not cling to equality with God,  
but made himself nothing.*

*Taking the form of a slave, he was born in human likeness.*

*He humbled himself and was obedient to death,  
even the death of the cross.*

*Therefore God has raised him on high,  
and given him the name above every name:  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.*

Like youthful medieval nobility, Jesus performs a servant's task; but unlike them, he also takes on the dress and form of a servant. In wiping his disciples' feet with the towel round his waist, he binds them to himself as it is bound to him. But in putting that on he first removed his robe; as in Noel Richard's worship song lyric, *You laid aside your majesty*. In John's terms, the taking off and putting back on of the robe mirrors the movement of God the Son: becoming flesh in the incarnation and, now his hour has come, preparing to return to the Father, once he has accomplished his divine work on the cross. The robe is still his – he is still the eternal Word, with God from the beginning – but it would get in the way of demonstrating his divine love to soiled and footsore humanity.

Like the children of Israel sharing in the Passover meal, Jesus wants his disciples to enter into that experience. As Paul stresses to the Philippians, we are to have the same state of mind as was in Christ Jesus. We who are privileged to sit at table with our Lord, have much to learn from the other side of that table: when we get up and go out into the world to which Christ came: as Lord and Teacher, yes; but also as loving servant.