

## Culturally Defined Themes Generated from John 13:1-10

### Summary excerpts from pp 60-75 and 80-87 and 91-96 of the MTh thesis

A total of eight themes in John 13:1-10 of relevance to the hearers were identified during the interviews during which Sindhi Muslim men discussed the passage as it related to their cultural context. A few samples of these themes together with examples of how Bible stories can be chosen and shaped to resonate with Sindhi values and beliefs are provided below.

#### Theme 1: Humility and Service Contrasted with Traditional Roles

Concepts of humility and service performed in a manner which upsets or transcends the traditional role of the teacher's place of honor and the student's role as servant were discussed. It was disputed among the participants as to whether this action was a value of humble service to be emulated or a destructive action that undermines stabilizing social structures. The Sufi value of humility and the love of paradox seen in the greater humbling herself / himself before the lesser clashed with traditional roles of the lesser honoring the greater.

This perspective points to a strong hierarchical understanding of authority and the roles that provide structure and stability to society. Even those who were impressed with the act of humility as something to be emulated were not suggesting that the structure should be altered; concepts of prophet, parent and teacher were consistently referred to with respect. The dispute centered not on the elevated place of those considered worthy of respect, but on what constitutes the appropriate action and attitude of the greater toward the lesser.

Jesus' action represented a challenge to a traditional understanding of how leaders fulfill their roles. The collective and hierarchical structures that provide security for the Sindhi way of life, expressed in cultural roles of the lesser serving the greater and showing respect to the greater, are held in significant contrast to Jesus' action of humbling himself in the passage, even to the extent that one participant suggested with approval that Jesus "did away with" such ideas as students rising when a teacher enters the room.

There is a desire to maintain the hierarchical structure as well as ensure appropriate honor for the lesser and the greater. However the many evidences of abuse within the hierarchy caused some participants to question the validity of common expressions of the honor given by the lesser to the greater. This tension parallels Jesus' own explanation of his action in that the intent was not to undermine the honor due the teacher, but was to demonstrate appropriate behavior *within* the system. He did not say "I am not your teacher anymore," that relationship remained. However, he did say, "You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:13, 14 NRSV).

### Crafting stories for Theme 1

In crafting the narrative to address the concerns of the participants, their expressed desire to maintain the hierarchical structure along with appropriate honor for both the lesser and the greater needs to be taken seriously. Jesus' definitive comment in John 13:13,14, in which he exegetes his action for his disciples, places the story within parameters that appropriately engage the Sindhi context. An approach to the story that would elicit approval from a Sindhi audience is to describe the important place of teacher that Jesus had in relation to his disciples. This affirmation of an important societal relationship provides the opportunity to present Jesus' unique perspective of maintaining the system - "You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am" - while readjusting the purpose of the power: service for others. Valuing the structure while redefining the use of the power thus serves to bring the teaching of Jesus into the context of the Sindhi people in such a way that it positively influences pre-existing tensions within authoritative structures.

The concern demonstrated within this theme that the powerful utilize their authority for the good of the weak and dependent finds much resonance within scripture. Stories about God's demand for justice from the powerful, such as David and Uriah (2 Sam 11) or Jeremiah's condemnation of Shallum son of Josiah (Jer 22), provide teaching for those in power to exercise their authority in the fear of God without attacking their position as leaders. Alternately Jesus' proclamation of his mission of freedom (Lu 4:16-30), would

provide hope for those oppressed that God cares for their situation and not only demands that leaders desire justice, but that they act to see it happen. Even as God did not assert his will over his people from the outside but Jesus was incarnated within the Jewish setting, so the good news, which includes the recovery of sight and the freedom for the Sindhi people through Jesus, can occur within Sindhi society in a way that will not destroy the value of interdependence inherent in a hierarchical structure.

## 5.2 Theme 2: Service to One Another

In contrast to the above dispute concerning the relationship between teacher and student within a hierarchical setting, the concept of service to others is praised as a great virtue. Even without reading Jesus' comments about being an example for how the disciples were to treat each other (John 13:13), one participant commented that "Jesus means that if I who am the teacher do such a great service to you, then you also must do that kind of service to humanity."

An interesting point brought out by one participant, but was also an underlying assumption of others, was that such service and giving honor to another is reserved for the one "who is true" and not for those "who are enemies or deceivers." This defines a parameter to the concept of service based on a "collective" view of society. The one who functions appropriately within community (and this includes the stranger, see hospitality below) is worthy of service, whereas the enemy - the one who threatens the lives, values or systems of society - is not deserving of service.

### Crafting stories for Theme 2

In contrast to the theme 1 in affirming the hierarchical parameter within which the instruction to wash each other's feet is given, crafting the story following the theme of service would highlight the importance of disregarding one's own honor and comfort for the sake of another.

Furthermore, in contrast with the concept that giving service and honor to another should be only for the one "who is true" and not for those "who are enemies or deceivers,"

the story can be crafted to emphasize the point that Jesus washed all the disciples' feet, even Judas' who betrayed him and Peter who showed disrespect by refusing at first. This allows the concept of servanthood to be presented according to cultural values, yet allow Jesus' action of going beyond those "who are true," thus challenging the limits that the Sindhi culture has placed upon such actions.

The Good Samaritan (Lu 10:25-37) also expresses this theme. An emphasis on humanity (*insaniat*), expressed through one's actions toward another rather than one's status or heritage, would resonate with the participants' expression of the value of service. In addition, Jesus' deliberate use of a despised race attacks the characterization of viewing a collective group of people as "enemies or deceivers," thus challenging the assumption that enemies should not be served. The story of Jonah would also be a fitting narrative that can be shaped to bring out the tension inherent in this parameter of the Sindhi value of service. Jonah was called to serve an enemy nation for their good based on God's compassion for humanity. This action would both be praised by the Sindhi people as well as provoke empathy with the personal struggle of Jonah in fulfilling this desire of God.

### 5.3 Theme 3: Humility and Equality

In contrast to the tension between the honor due the teacher and the acts of service that may undermine that honor in theme #1, humility and equality are praised without reservation. Sindhi society is strongly hierarchical and the structures and relationships within Sindhi society - e.g. teacher / student, parent / child, religious leader / adherent - reflect this in that equality in social status is nonexistent and expressions of humility are one way. For example, a follower of a religious group will greet the leader by bending low and touching his feet or knees. Nonetheless, humility coupled with equality is highly valued among Sindhis.

Humility is not defined as lowering oneself beneath another, but rather negatively as not raising oneself proudly above another, thus the connection with equality. Jesus' action is therefore interpreted as not placing himself *beneath* his disciples in a place of lesser honor,

rather his action is one of ascribing them honor by providing service and not demanding service to himself. This virtue of humility is based on two assumptions: (1) God's favor is towards the humble and he has contempt for the proud and (2) "we are all created equal before God". According to Sindhi belief the greater context of living in submission to God as the supreme creator is the larger systematization within which the value of humility and equality "make sense".

The importance of humility is also related to the collective nature of the Sindhi culture and its stress on "being" over "doing". Success is not attributed to a person's ability or persistence in a task, but in their right orientation to others - an orientation of humility - that results in God's blessing.

### Crafting stories for Theme 3

Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet is a supreme example of the Sindhi values of humility and becoming "one" with others. Coupled with the *kenosis* of Christ as described in Philippians 2, this story can be crafted to demonstrate Jesus as God's example to us in treating each other with humility and respect. Rather than reacting with pride of status as the holy one of God, Jesus acts consistently with his claim that he came to serve rather than to be served (Mk 10:45) and calls his disciples to emulate his actions. Like the mango tree bent over in fruit (a Sindhi metaphor for service in humility), we fulfill God's design for us in community with each other when we follow Christ and serve each other.

The Sindhi value of humility is predicated upon belief in the supremacy of God as creator and our relationship to him as created beings. Moreover, "we are all created equal before God." This double emphasis of humility before God and equality with each other has much in common with scriptural teaching. The story of the tower of Babylon (Gen 11:1-9) can be presented to encourage the attitude of humility before God and God's opposition to the proud. Jesus' example of coming to a wedding and not taking the highest place (Lu 14:7-11) is culturally appropriate for the Sindhi culture which provides couches and elegant chairs for the special guests. The story of the Pharisee and publican at prayer (Lu 18:9-14) can be shaped around the attitude and action of the Pharisee focusing on his arrogance towards the

publican and his presumptuousness before God. In both of these latter selections for storying, the reward for humility is honor before God and people. This biblical paradox that only the humble will be exalted resonates well with the Sindhi expectation that "the person who is humble will be successful."

#### 5.4 Theme 4: Hospitality

Hospitality is one form of service especially important for Sindhis. To have guests is a matter of strict protocol that signifies honor for both the guest and the host. This value of giving respect and receiving honor points to a fundamental systematization in Sindhi culture by which people are validated in their identity and place in society, and the means by which the stranger enters into appropriate relationship with the insiders.

#### Crafting stories for Theme 4

In the Sindh the host is honored by the open and appreciative acceptance of service by the guest. In the Johanne narrative, Jesus puts on the towel and takes on the role of the host. The story can be legitimately shaped around this concept exploring the relationship of the disciples, particularly Peter, to Christ as viewed through the cultural value of hospitality. The Sindhi host enters into a relationship with guest that is complex and culturally binding. To refuse an invitation is to refuse a relationship and an unexpected guest, even if one's lifelong enemy, must be treated with respect and courtesy. When Peter's interaction with Jesus is understood within these contours the consequence of no longer "having a part" in Christ has significant impact for the Sindhi.

Hospitality is an important concept in the scriptures and selections for storying are many. When Jesus suggests that the disciples feed the crowd (Lu 9:10-17), the thought for the Sindhi is not simply the pragmatic need for finances to fulfill the need at hand, but the implications for the honor of both host and guest if there is insufficient food. The Sindhi guest would be extremely insulted if the host failed to follow through on the promise of an invitation. Moreover, the gathering up of the leftovers in the baskets are often explained in the west in terms of "waste not, want not." However, the Sindhi will see this as a

proclamation of the abundance that God provides as well as a sign of honor from God and the people for both Jesus and the disciples.

Abraham's speech to the three men who appeared by his tent (Gen 18:1-5) resonates with the Sindhi value of hospitality. His anxiety that they not pass by his tent without opportunity to serve them with rest and food is tied to the honor that is received and accepted in the host / guest relationship. Furthermore the hospitality sets the scene for both the blessing of the child and Abraham's opportunity to plead for Sodom. The honoring of a guest brings blessing from God and the resulting relationship sets the stage for further interaction in each other's lives.

One of the most significant acts in the story of Jesus' meeting the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is when Jesus acts as if he will carry on past their house. For the Sindhi it is pregnant with meaning: will the disciples invite Jesus in or will their paths part? It is then at the table with the breaking of bread that the true relationship with the guest is revealed. Such a story not only confirms the Sindhi's view of hospitality but it leads to an invitation to join with the disciples in meeting with Christ at the table.

Elijah and the widow in Zarephath (1 Ki 17:8-16), demonstrates to the Sindhi that the host who gives all will be blessed by God. To refuse hospitality because of personal need is to court disaster, while giving all results in abundance from God. This not only reiterates the dependence of humanity upon God, but underscores the interdependence of community which demands that the need of the guest take preeminence over personal concern.

### Theme 5: Ritual and Spiritual Cleanliness

For most of the biblical cultures, physical and spiritual cleansing are not conveniently separated. The Sindhi people hold to a similar perspective. Because of these religious assumptions the participants did not see Jesus' action as one of a sanitary concern, nor even merely one of bestowing honor or service. Their perspective also included a belief that by washing one becomes ritually clean (*pak*). ... The concept of "pak" can be, at least partially, understood as the opposite of shame. In order to be pure from that by which one is defiled -

whether it is dirt on the feet, a drop of urine on the clothes or sexual intercourse – a cleansing action must be taken. If appropriate action is not taken, the defilement is not removed and one is faced with the possibility of being dishonored. This value of being "pak" is evidence of a worldview that is heavily weighted towards concepts of shame and honor.

Jesus' action was not merely symbolic of spiritual cleansing but is seen as the means by which Jesus could "make the person holy [pak] and so draw the person towards him". Religious rituals are not merely symbolic or arbitrary but are holistic acts, i.e., the act of cleansing physically in the narrative was also indivisibly a spiritual act as well. Three aspects are required to bring about the result of holiness: desire of the disciples to be holy, the physical act of washing - for being "pak" involves the whole person - and the performance of the true prophet who guides people in the way of truth. ... The spiritual desire to become "pak" is met by Jesus through the spiritual service of washing their feet. [Through the act of making them "pak" he sealed] them in their relationship with him as part the larger religious design for life.

### Crafting stories for Theme 5

A dichotomy between spiritual and physical cleanliness is a basic assumption in western thought which is lacking in the biblical cultures as well as in Sindhi culture. Because of this more holistic worldview Sindhis are able to relate to many of the biblical customs and decisions that connect holiness to physical action. The John 13 passage can be told using this perspective as the filter through which the significance of Jesus' action is understood. The words of Jesus in John 13:10, "Anyone who has taken a bath is completely clean and does not have to wash himself, except for his feet. All of you are clean - all except one" (TEV), then become the core concept around which the story is shaped. The desire to be holy is met with the power to be holy. Jesus fulfills that desire by making his disciples "pak." These words will not be interpreted as merely metaphorical, but will communicate a holistic cleansing for the whole person that seals the disciple in a holy relationship with the Lord. "Jesus said he would wash their feet and make them holy [pak], that is draw them towards

him" (interview #6). This also has great implication for an understanding of baptism as a means of being made "pak" and becoming a part of Christ.

Stories crafted around this theme of becoming holy through physical action could include Hezekiah's purification of the temple (2 Chr 29:3-17) and Jesus' cleansing of the temple (Mk 11:15-18). In addition, the cleansing rituals of Leviticus, including rules about not touching the dead, sexual purity and the defilement caused by women's menstrual cycles have strong parallels in Sindhi thought.

David's position as "a man after God's own heart" can be understood in Sindhi culture in terms of passion for God's honor, that is, a desire for God to be treated as "pak." In the story of David's fight with Goliath he explains his passionate reaction as a desire for God not to be defiled by this "uncircumcised Philistine" (1 Sam 17:26). To be "uncircumcised" in the Muslim Sindhi's mind is to be "unclean," and this fits well with David's abhorrence to the situation he was facing.

Salvation understood in a shame-honor system lays great emphasis upon becoming pure (*pak*) rather than being declared innocent as in a guilt-innocence system. The story of prodigal son can be shaped to communicate this perspective. The son who has shamed his father, his family, his nation and his religion by becoming defiled through many activities, arrives home and is immediately made holy by the father: the robe removes his defilement, the ring provides a new identity of honor, the shoes cover the greatest place of impurity.

Jesus' cleansing of the leper (Mk 1:40-45) is a story that reverses the expectation of the Sindhi hearer concerning defilement. Touching a dead body defiles the one who touches the body, the drop of urine or blood defiles the whole suit of clothes. But in Jesus' case the holy one touches the impure and, rather than becoming defiled, makes the leper pure. The significance of this act for the Sindhi people is provided by the paradigm concerning holiness and defilement within which they live. The paradigm provides the parameters within which the Bible story can be crafted to provide the greatest impact for them.

## 5.6 Theme 6: Relationship with a Prophet and Being on the Right Path

In Sindhi thought the teacher [murshid] and the prophet are essential for a person to gain the right path to God and avoid destruction. Thus Jesus' statement to Peter that "your part will not remain in me," was significant to some of the participants. In order to be successful [kamiab], one must remain in a right relationship with the prophet. This concept of "kamiab" in this context is, like the word "pak," not divided into spiritual and material success. Rather it is the recognition that success in finding the meaning to life in a holistic sense is only found in a right relationship with the one who can show the way of God.

Being on a true path is not a matter of personal accomplishment, or of exceptional effort on the part of the follower. Rather everything is precipitated upon a right relationship with one who can "show the successful road". Success is phrased in terms of being a "part of" a relationship rather than looking for a means to obtain power. This attitude reinforces loyalty to their own prophet or murshid.

#### Crafting stories for Theme 6

The relationship of Jesus as the *murshid* with his disciples (the *mureed*) in the Johannine passage was significant for the participants. This aspect is further developed by Jesus in 13:20, "whoever receives anyone I send receives me also; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me." These words of Jesus together with the *murshid* / *mureed* paradigm of the Sindhi people form a powerful context within which the story can be shaped. The interaction of Peter with Jesus and its lesson of being in a right relationship with the teacher both affirms the Sindhi conviction concerning the role of the *murshid* in the life of the disciple and proclaims Jesus as a true *murshid* that provides a path to God. Even as Jesus challenges his disciples to stand firm in their faith and commitment to him, so the Sindhi people are challenged to enter into this relationship Christ as a *mureed* and be committed to him in order to receive the one who sent him. This theology of trust in the *murshid* is lacking in NA evangelical circles as is evidenced by the felt need for "assurance of salvation." But the Sindhi who comes to trust Jesus as his *murshid* does not have a crisis of assurance. Total trust in the *murshid* is part of the nature of being a *mureed*.

Other narratives can be used to communicate the concept of Christ as a true *murshid*. The *logos* of Jn 1, in which Christ is the true Word of God, provides the picture of the *murshid* as one with the wisdom of God who communicates the true mysteries of God. The incident of John the Baptist with the Pharisees concerning of the "Prophet" and the "one" that they were searching for (Jn 1:21, cf. Lu 7:19), can be readily crafted to bring out the expectation and need for a true *murshid* who provides the path to God. Other messianic passages also have valuable parallels with the *murshid* concept that can be utilized to craft Bible stories for impact in the Sindhi context.

### 5.7 Theme 7: Submission and Obedience

The attitude of submission of the student to the teacher was stressed clearly and repeatedly in a number of interviews. Even the fundamental concern for honor must give way to the teacher's command. Paradoxically, such disregard for common expressions of honor for the greater is actually an expression of the highest honor - that of absolute trust. Following the true teacher demands total trust and obedience from the student even in the face of all that seems to contradict that trust: "honor and other things, they pale in significance next to obedience". The participants focused on Peter's refusal and were confirmed in the conviction that the essence of discipleship is total submission and obedience to the teacher despite normally unacceptable demands.

The motivation for submission to the teacher is the conviction that the teacher desires the good of the follower. "It is better that we do not question the teacher. The teacher is greater than us and whatever he wants is for our good".

### Crafting stories for Theme 7

The importance of submission and obedience is tied closely to the relationship of the *murshid* with the *mureed* in the previous theme. The distinction comes in the orientation or focus of the story when it is crafted. In theme 6 the concern was on Jesus as the true *murshid* and the need to have a relationship with him. Following the parameters and highlights for the Sindhi people as provided by the analysis for theme 7, the focus shifts towards the attitude

and action of the student or *mureed* to the *murshid*. The interaction with Peter will be used but with a recognition and emphasis of the implications for discipleship in exploring the correct orientation towards the *murshid*.

The concept of the submission of the student to the teacher finds many other parallels in the Bible that can be selected and shaped to bring out a biblical perspective that will resonate with Sindhi thought. The incident of the prophet who commanded another to strike him, and the results of the disobedience (1 Ki 20:35, 36), as well as Elijah's anger towards the king Jehoash (2 Ki 13:18, 19) for his weak obedience in striking the ground with the arrows, resonates well with the Sindhi concept of submission to the "man of God."

Mary's reaction of total submission when the angel comes to her (Lu 1:26-38) will be viewed as right and good by the Sindhi hearer even though the context is one in which she has placed (in the Sindhi mind) her life in jeopardy. This claim to absolute obedience is echoed in Jesus' teaching and is natural for the Sindhi people. In the incident of Peter walking on the water, Jesus' response to his failure is, "Where is your faith?" (Mt 14:31). In the west we are often impressed that Peter got out of the boat; in the Sindhi perspective, as is also indicated by the passage, the lack of total trust is the issue.

### 5.8 Theme 8: Giving Honor and Showing Respect

The importance of giving honor is closely related to the theme of submission and obedience and is an essential concern that influenced the responses of the participants in every interview. As pointed out above honor is the value that reinforces the necessity of obedience. However in this theme, the focus is on the need to preserve cultural expressions of honor. This places it in a position of tension with the theme of submission in that the focus of the participants was on the dishonor that touching the feet signified, rather than the need for obedience.

The unwillingness of Peter for Jesus to touch his feet was, for the participant in interview #3, a means of protecting Jesus' honor and was a commendable act. This, again,

indicates the underlying belief in a hierarchical order in which honor plays an important role to validate that system, as well as the concern for its stabilizing effect to be maintained.

### Crafting stories for Theme 8

In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus deliberately went against the cultural value of the time and disregarded his own honor. This disregard for one's own honor and the importance of showing respect for others is a key element of this lesson around which the story can be shaped. Following this theme, the concern is to emphasize Jesus' perspectives on how personal honor is to be viewed and how others are to be honored. Peter's unwillingness to have Jesus wash his feet did not just demonstrate a desire to honor Jesus, but an unwillingness to follow Jesus in similar actions himself. The connection between disregarding one's own honor ("denying self" Mt 16:24) and giving honor and respect to others is an area that touches upon Sindhi sensibilities.

The logic of Islamic theology proclaims that Jesus could not have died on the cross because God would not allow his holy one to become dishonored. Yet Paul, living within a similar shame-honor culture, teaches that God allowed the cross for that very purpose (Gal 3:14, 15). The story of the cross of Christ can be shaped to fit with the assumptions of honor that underlie the Sindhi culture and Islamic theology. In doing so the impact of the cross will be felt in the contrast between the natural desire to maintain one's honor and the noble sacrifice of disregarding honor for the sake of another.