

## Jesus Washing the Disciples' Feet John 13:1-17

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John 13 opens with Jesus and His disciples in a hired room in Jerusalem where they have come to observe the Passover, the most significant of all the pilgrim feasts of Israel. Passover commemorated the deliverance of God's people from bondage in Egypt. For three years Jesus has been training the Twelve, and here, in this quiet and private room, His preparation of the disciples for future service reaches its climax. He is about to embark on another exodus, but not to save Himself. Through His redemptive departure from this world He would accomplish the salvation of His people. From the upper room the disciples will go forth as His witnesses to win the world to faith. In a real sense it may be said that they are about to graduate, although truly all Christ's people remain lifelong learners.

As one of the final acts of training, Jesus surprises His friends by a strange and totally unexpected act. Being in a hired room and self-catering for Passover, there is no household servant to perform the customary courtesy of washing the feet of the guests. Clearly, the disciples were in no mood to serve each other in this way. According to Luke 22:24-27 their mood is very different: in a short while they will be bickering over which of them had precedence over the others and was to be regarded as the greatest. Now the One who was indisputably the greatest among them, unannounced and without ceremony, removed His outer clothing, took a towel and a basin of water, and commenced washing their feet. The deed, deep in its significance, was as shocking as it was simple. So to remove any doubt regarding its meaning, Jesus explained what He had done, turning this action in two different directions. First, He makes a profound spiritual and theological point. Secondly, He teaches an essentially practical point. And by so doing He resolves the age-old tension as to whether we best serve God through mystical 'upper-

room' communion with Him, or by getting our hands dirty in practical and worldly service.

### 1. A symbol of spiritual cleansing (vv. 8-11)

There is a painting depicting the foot washing in the collection of the Tate Gallery in London. Commenced in 1852, it is entitled *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet* and is the work of the famous artist Ford Madox Brown. Jesus is seen in the act of drying the feet of Peter, who looks quite uncomfortable though compliant. When first exhibited the picture caused an outcry. Critics objected to its coarseness as, following the biblical text, Brown depicted Jesus only semi-clad. It remained unsold and unwanted until 1856 when the artist capitulated to Victorian sensitivities and repainted the figure of Jesus fully robed.

I think both the story of the painting and the responses to it accurately reflect the feelings of the disciples in the upper room. What Jesus did was a break with traditional and conventional propriety. Naturally, it confused and embarrassed them, especially Peter, who protested vehemently that it was wrong of Jesus to take the lowest place. They really didn't like it. They were uncomfortable to be served in such a way by their Lord.

Perhaps for some of us too, the idea of Jesus as a self-denying servant is shocking. Many in Africa today, as well as in other parts of the world, much prefer to serve a Lord who will make His people rich and strong by asserting His kingship through miracles, providing the health and wealth many covet. And whilst we may not go along with the Prosperity Gospel, many of us still prefer to hang on to the idea of a dignified and powerful Christ dealing confidently with the world's needs, and making us His followers feel confident and strong as we bask in His shade.

The vision of Jesus as a semi-naked menial servant, kneeling before us to perform for us the most menial service by washing our feet turns everything upside down and makes us feel vulnerable and insecure. But this is exactly what He taught us to expect: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20.28).

Nor would the washing His disciples' feet be the lowest point in the service He would render to His people. As the descending steps of Philippians 2:6-9 indicate, Christ stoops to conquer, even to death on a cross. The reason is clear, the very heart of His service to the world is to provide pardon, cleansing, peace, and reconciliation. His forthcoming death will be an atonement for sin, the means by which cleansing will be provided. So on the basis of His forthcoming and inevitable death at Calvary, Jesus declares that all His disciples – excepting Judas – are clean: "And you are clean, but not every one of you" (v. 10).

If cleansing from the pollution of disobedience and rebellion through His blood is the very heart of Jesus' ministry, then the proclamation of that forgiveness and peace is the core of ours. This is indeed the Good News. The message, that the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanses us from all sin, is the word the world needs to hear more than anything else. In this message is

both the diagnosis of the world's ills and its remedy. It answers humanity's deeply felt, if now rarely articulated, question: How can I be absolved from guilt?

The problem is as old as humanity. I was recently reading a poem called *The Slave Dealer* by Thomas Pringle, a Scot who emigrated to South Africa in the 1820s and settled at Baviaans River Valley, near Bedford in the Eastern Cape. The poem tells the story of a young man brought up in a Christian home who became a cruel and harsh slave dealer, killing a woman and her child. Later, stricken with deep remorse, he came to the conclusion that he was beyond redemption, out of reach of God's grace.

'There's blood upon my hands!' he said,  
'Which water cannot wash'.

And he goes on:

And now with God I have to deal,  
And dare not meet his eye!

But though he was quite right to recognise that his sin was serious and his guilt real, he was wrong to conclude it was unforgivable or that he was hopelessly beyond redemption. It is the joyful task of those called to the ministry to echo the words of Jesus and tell people that on condition of faith they are clean, to declare to those who turn to God in repentance that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us".

Sometimes we preachers face the dilemma of knowing what exactly to preach in any given situation, and whilst we must declare the "whole counsel of God", the full range of the biblical revelation, yet at the heart of all our preaching lies God's grace, Christ's compassion, Cross and cleansing. This was strongly brought home to me when, back in the 1960s, as a young preacher I was invited to preach at a Saturday evening meeting in a mission hall in Glasgow. Unsure of who would be in the audience, I asked the person in charge whether the majority would be Christians or non-Christians and which of two sets of sermon notes I should use. The answer was almost snapped back: "Young man preach the Gospel! Sinners need it and saints love it!" Well, that might not be the most complete answer, but she was quite right in what she said.

You are clean! – this message of forgiveness, cleansing and peace with God, through the Cross, is what our trouble-torn and burdened world needs to hear. You are clean! – is what believers with troubled consciences need to hear. You are clean! – is what we unclean and unworthy servants of the Gospel need to hear. You are clean!

This truth is so essential and necessary that I used to tell my liturgics classes here at Dumisani Theological Institute and in Edinburgh Theological Seminary that every single service of worship should contain not only a

prayer of confession but also words of absolution. This good news is for all who feel themselves condemned by the Law of God, distressed by a guilty conscience and afraid of the judgement of God. Christ has instructed His ministers to declare absolution, forgiveness, and healing to all who seek pardon and peace. The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* hits the nail on the head when it teaches that God:

hath given power, and commandment, to his ministers  
to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent,  
the absolution and remission of their sins:

It is the knowledge of pardon and cleansing that gives God's people humble confidence, hope, and assurance and makes them useful in His service. The great Scottish Reformer John Knox understood this very well and referred to the ministerial declaration of forgiveness as: "Holy and wholesome medicine taking away all trembling and dreadful fear and giving a strong courage in the midst of ... adversity."

But hearing and receiving the words of absolution once does not mean there is no need for repeated repentance and confession of sin. Every man will readily understand this. He knows that if he shaves his beard this morning it will grow back and he will need to shave tomorrow. So it is with sin. No sooner are we cleansed than we fall into temptation and defile ourselves again and the process has to be repeated. Which is why Scripture spells out the need for perpetual repentance: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7, 9).

## **2. A standard of humble service (vv. 12-17)**

If Jesus' action in washing the feet of His disciples was indicative of the place of pardon and cleansing in the scheme of redemption, it no less carried a profound practical imperative: you should do as I have done for you. Let us note: Jesus did not wash the feet of His friends to seek their adulation, but for their emulation. Like them, we are to follow His example, reproducing His service and imitating His love. There can be no conceivable reason for refusal.

Today is a day of achievement and accomplishment for all of you who as successful students are shortly to come forward to be awarded. For you it is a day of dignity and honour. Those of you who have graduated Bachelor Theology have good reason to feel satisfied with hard work accomplished and diligence shown. Indeed, there is a right sense of satisfaction – together with huge gratitude to God – you are entitled to feel. But beware of pride. C. S. Lewis once commented, "It was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of

mind..." Likewise the late John Stott said, "Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend." So do not think for one minute the conferring of a degree lifts you above the level of any service, no matter how menial, or that you are called to serve only those whose status is above yours. The example of Jesus teaches us that these academic hoods of ours would be better used as towels to wipe the feet of others, rather than become the means of luring us into the trap of spiritual or academic pride.

On his journey in 1773 to the Western Islands of Scotland, Samuel Johnson heard the story of how, when Charles Edward Stewart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) was fleeing west across the Scottish Highlands, after the defeat of his forces in the battle of Culloden in April 1746, he disguised himself as a servant of the Highland chieftain, Malcolm Macleod of Rasaay. It was unsafe to use the main roads, so the two of them crossed bogs and inevitably were dirty up to their knees. When they arrived at the home of Macleod's relative, Captain John Mackinnon, Macleod turned to a servant girl and said, "You see that poor man there. I hope you'll wash his feet." "No such thing", she said, "Although I will wash my master's feet, I will not wash his servant's feet." Little did she realise that the person she refused to serve was not her master, but her king!

There in the upper room the proud disciples' unspoken response was very similar, "What me, wash his feet?" To which came Jesus implicit reply, "Yes, you!" Such pettish reluctance might, perhaps, be our response too when faced with humble service to others. Few Christians willingly seek the humbler path. They are willing enough to serve Christ the Lord, but we don't want to wash the feet of His servants.

But therein lies the problem, because like Prince Charles in the story, Christ often stands before us incognito. To serve our Lord, we must serve others. In our South African context, Jesus may confront us as the poor person hungrily opening our rubbish sack to find something to eat or a discarded item to sell. Or He comes to us as the disheveled car guard who obviously has a drug or alcohol problem. Perhaps He stands before us as an HIV/AIDS orphan, destitute and forlorn. Or He calls us to serve an impoverished white widow, with no pension, no family, and no hope. You think I am exaggerating? Listen then to Matthew 25:

And the King will say, "I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me." Then the righteous will reply, "Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will say, "I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my broth-

ers and sisters, you were doing it to me!”

Such a Christ-aware spirit is inherent in this prayer:

Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick, and, whilst nursing them, minister unto you. Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognise you, and say: "Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve you."

This is the antidote to arrogance, pride, or self-importance in Christ's ministers: if washing His disciple's feet was not beneath the dignity of the Lord of glory, it certainly cannot be below mine to serve Him in others. Please note, Jesus doesn't call us to make foot-washing a sacrament or a Church ordinance. He does not want us to sanitise something so inherently menial and turn it into a ritual whereby we wash already clean feet. He calls us to real life service, serving one another in a spirit of true humility that expresses itself in repeated inconvenient and even unpleasant acts of helpfulness and kindness. Nowhere is this mindset more clearly seen than in Phil 2. 5-7:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant...

Not only in Africa, but all over the world, there are ministers who ruin the ministry of the Church by acting as celebrities, insisting that they be served, treated with respect and dignity, and honoured for their reputation. Such an attitude is not the mind of Christ, who as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin makes this helpful observation:

I was always exceedingly delighted with that saying of Chrysostom, "The foundation of our philosophy is humility"; and yet more pleased with that of Augustine: "Concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, I will answer, first, second, and third, Humility."

So as we go forth in the Lord's Name to serve the Lord and His people, we do well to have the words of C. T. Studd, pioneer missionary to Africa, ringing in our ears. With excellent theology and perfect logic Studd once said: "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him."

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord in His people.