

“The Christian Coat of Arms: A Basin on a Field of Towels”

John 13:1-17

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Text Comment

- v.1 That is, the footwashing took place Thursday evening, but before dinner. “Time” is, as we have frequently had cause to note, the NIV’s translation of “hour.” Time and again we read that the Lord’s “hour” had not yet come, but now it has come. In John this “hour” is the time of the consummation of his great work for which he came into the world, viz. his death and resurrection.

Now you will notice the use of the word “world” here in v. 1. World is a very important word in the next section of John, occurring some 40x in chapters 13-17. It is used to draw the sharp contrast between the Lord’s “own,” his disciples, and the unbelieving, anti-Christian community from which they were drawn and in which they must live until their vindication. If God loves the world, it is to draw men and women out of it. Notice the wording, “he loved his own who were in the world...” The object of God’s love in Christ in these chapters will be “his own” who have been brought “out of the world.”

The end of v. 1 indicates that what follows is a demonstration of Christ’s love for his disciples.

- v.2 The Lord’s death was the result of a conspiracy between the Devil and Judas.
- v.3 “All things under his power...” and so we expect that he would fry Judas on the spot and destroy the Devil. But, as always, the Lord takes a different way than sinful men expect. Instead of displaying that power in some dramatic way, he gets up to wash his disciples feet. Here is our first indication that what follows in the footwashing is a picture of, an anticipation of the Lord’s suffering and death on the cross for our salvation.
- v.4 The NIV renders all the verbs in the past tense. In John the first ones are present tenses, for the sake of vividness. “He gets up...he takes off...” The writer sees the scene taking place before his very eyes! You are to picture the disciples reclining on thin mats around a low table. Each is leaning on his arm, usually the left arm; the feet radiate outward from the table. Jesus pushes himself up from his own mat, takes off his outer clothing, wraps a towel around his waist – the way a menial slave would dress for this task – and began to wash his disciples feet one after another. [Carson, 463]
- v.5 The step by step procedure indicates the Lord’s meticulousness. He serves his disciples in just the right way, the approved way.
- v.7 The disciples no doubt watched what was happening in embarrassed silence. They would have been happy to wash the Lord’s feet, but they would never have thought to have washed one another’s feet. It was a task for the lowliest of menial servants. Some Jews

of the time did not even feel it right that Jewish *slaves* should be required to wash feet; it was a job, they thought for Gentile slaves. In one well known story, Rabbi Ishmael came home from the synagogue one day and his mother wished to wash his feet. He refused on the ground that it was too demeaning. She took the matter to rabbinical court on the ground that, in this case, it was an honor for her. No one has been able to find in any Greco-Roman source a case of a superior washing the feet of an inferior. [Carson, 462]

It is Peter, characteristically, who is the first to speak. And the Lord's reply indicates that what he is doing is an illustration of what he has come into the world to do – not to be served, but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many. Peter will understand after the cross and the resurrection. This footwashing is only an illustration of the way in which the Lord took upon himself the form of a servant and made himself nothing, becoming obedient, even to the death on the cross.

- v.9 With characteristic exuberance, Peter asks for the washing not only his feet but his whole body.
- v.10 This was true as a statement of accepted etiquette, one bathed before coming to a feast, only his feet, made dusty by the walk, would need to be washed. But the Lord is making it a picture of theological truth. One is made right with God and justified by faith in Christ. Still, one has forgiveness to seek each day and harmony to maintain with his Father in heaven. So, in 1 John 1:9, John can write to those who are already saved and have already received eternal life, and yet tell them that they must continue to confess their sins and be forgiven.
- v.11 What this means, of course, is that the Lord washed Judas' feet as well. That is a demonstration of his love and forbearance, of course, it is also proof that no outward rite, even performed by Jesus himself, guarantees spiritual cleansing. [Carson, 466]
- v.17 Now there are some who have thought that Jesus literally meant that, for all ages to come, his people should practice this footwashing as a rite. But the Lord is using footwashing as an illustration of the humble service of one another he exemplified and then called us to. Not footwashing in an age of shoes and socks and pavement, but that care of one another that descends to the unwelcome task, the chore that no one really wants to perform – like going to a cross to suffer the cruelest imaginable death!

In a sermon he preached in this pulpit some years ago, Prof. Bruce Waltke, reminded us that when parents go out for an evening, they leave their most important instructions to their children to that moment when they are going out the door. "Don't open this door to any stranger!" "In an emergency, you can reach us at the phone number that we left by the phone in the kitchen." And so on. Well, in just the same way, the Lord Jesus left his most important instructions to his disciples to that moment when he was about to leave them. And the very first of those instructions was this: "wash one another's feet."

Now there is a fabulously important connection that must be observed in this text, this account of the Lord's washing his disciples' feet and then the lesson he drew from it. In the opening section

and in the explanation the Lord gives in vv. 8-10 it is clear that the footwashing is an anticipation of the Lord's self-giving for us and our salvation. The disciples still did not understand what the Lord had come to do or why he had to do it. Peter makes that clear in his response to the Lord. He still did not get it. He still did not understand that the Messiah had to come as a servant and to be among them as a servant and had to suffer and die for them. The triumphal entry, the miracles, the authoritative teaching, it all still seemed to confirm the disciples in their glorious expectations of Jesus' triumph and reign as a new King. They were not expecting the cross for the very same reason they didn't expect him to get up and wash their feet. Kings didn't do such things. Kings who had come from heaven itself *really didn't do such things!*

But, then, there is a shift of focus in v. 12. Now the Lord turns what he has done into ethical training, into an example that he wants them to emulate. This is, of course, a common shift in the Bible and in the Gospels – between what Christ has done for us and what we are to do in emulation of him. In Mark 8:31ff., for example, we hear first of Christ going to the cross and then, immediately, of the necessity that we take up our cross and follow him. Just a short ways back, in John 12:24-25, we read first of Christ's death and then of our dying. Christ has, as Peter put it, left us an example that we should follow in his steps. And he has left us no greater example than simply his own self-giving, self-sacrifice for the sake of others. As he has loved us, so we are to love one another, John says in his first letter, and when he wrote those words, I expect he thought back to that night in the Upper Room and recollected that extraordinary scene when the King of Kings washed his disciples' feet, including Judas' feet. And then Paul says it right out in another place, we are to have the same attitude Jesus did, who gave up everything and took the form of a servant and considered everyone else's interests before his own.

Many people today would like to be Christians in a way, to a degree. They are attracted to the life of Jesus and to Christian ethics, at least in part. But they cannot bring themselves to admit that Christ died for their sins, *or that he had to die if they were to be saved*. They admire his life and his moral teaching, but it is too much for them to admit that apart from Christ's death for them, in their place, they must remain lost in sin and guilt before a holy God. This was one of the chief "scandals" of Christianity for the men of the Greco-Roman world and it is one of the chief "scandals" of Christianity for modern man.

But, you see, it is that understanding of Christ's suffering and death that lies beneath the Christian life, that is its engine, its inspiration, its pattern. You cannot get to washing one another's feet in any other way but through embracing for yourself the self-giving of Jesus Christ for sinners, his humbling of himself for us. **For, believe me, you do not find this kind of footwashing among human beings naturally or commonly. There is a heroism required for such footwashing that men, by nature, do not display.**

Amy Carmichael, the intrepid missionary to India in the first half of the 20th century, used to require higher caste converts to hew stones and dig foundations for a house right in front of low caste coolies. In Indian culture, nothing could be more degrading than for a high caste person to perform work that was strictly low caste labor, and it was even worse to do that work in public where everyone could see. No sterner test could be found. She pointed out that she could have given these new Christians any amount of other work to do and it would not have required any of the spirit that Jesus showed here. As she put it, "It is honorable to preach and grace in teaspoons

would have been enough for a preaching tour. But ditch digging lent dignity to nobody. Grace in rivers was required for this. Day by day they grew in manliness.” [E. Elliot, *A Chance to Die*, 264]

Now, we do not have Hindu caste in American culture. But, perhaps we have a force even more powerful that exercises its influence against the spirit of Jesus’ as he washed his disciples’ feet. I mean democracy, the spirit of egalitarianism that is the most sacred orthodoxy of our culture. Perhaps no people in the history of the world have been as preoccupied with their rights, worried that someone may be gaining an advantage, as the people of the western democracies in the modern era. Perhaps no people has ever spent more time comparing themselves with others. And, certainly, there is nothing more characteristic of the modern proletariat, the modern democrat himself, than that he has been trained by his culture from infancy to be satisfied with himself or herself, and, that if there is something about himself that he cannot be satisfied with, to be sure that it is someone else’s fault! Whatever may be wrong with the world, someone else is to blame for it.

And, so, at last, western democrats are just like Hindus who would never dig ditches or Jews who would never wash the feet of their peers or their inferiors. It is not in us to forget ourselves so completely as to do anything and everything that is necessary to foster the welfare of our neighbor. Or, in other words, it is not in us to do for others what Jesus Christ did for us. It is worth our remembering that, according to the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this very night, in this very room, indeed, many have thought right before Jesus got up and began to wash his disciples’ feet, there was a dispute between these 12 men about who was the greatest among them. Imagine that. The night of his betrayal and the evening before his cruel death they are arguing among themselves about which of them deserves to be considered the greatest. Well, I am, said one. No, I should be for these reasons, said another. Well, said either Peter, or James, or John, I have been in the Lord’s inner circle and he has shown special attention to me. And on and on across the table. Until the Lord Jesus interrupted this unseemly display of a complete failure to appreciate the moment and the significance of the hour! And, do you remember what he said?

“...the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is the greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

Can’t you imagine him saying those words and then immediately getting up to begin to wash their feet? Isn’t it quite likely that this is what happened? Oh, it is our pride that ruins us, isn’t it. Our inflated view of ourselves that keeps us from appreciating what Christ did *as our servant* and how right it must be for us to serve others. If the King of Kings did *that, did so much* for us, how can we not do some small thing for others? And not but once, but always, as a characteristic manner of life.

We talk about the love of others, of course. Everyone does, Christian and non-Christian alike. But the Lord’s dramatic illustration of footwashing, of demeaning himself – that is precisely how it seemed to the disciples that night – demeaning himself to show this courtesy to others, to attend to their needs, even this non-urgent, non-necessary need; that is something else. Listen,

no one was expecting anyone's feet to be washed. It was a room full of adult men. No one gave a thought to it. There were no servants and so no one expected any footwashing. No one would have given it a thought and certainly no one would have been offended that no provision had been made for the washing of feet. This was a banquet, a sacred feast that these men had put on for themselves, as it were. Everyone, if he had thought about it, would have understood completely why there was no footwashing provided.

And then the Lord got up and embarrassed all of them by doing what only servants should do, what none of them had any inkling to do for one another. No one had even offered to do it for *him*, though had he asked Peter would have quickly volunteered. But, the fact is, nobody even thought about doing it. They never did it. It wasn't done!

And it will not take you or me very long to think of a hundred things that you don't do, that you never do, that you never think of doing for others, that you would be embarrassed and, to be honest, they might be embarrassed for you to begin to do for them. And, on the contrary, it will take you a long time, as it will take me, to think of anything that you or I have done for others that is at all similar to or that remotely compares with what Jesus Christ has done for you and me. Tell me, how often of late have people been simply astonished at what you have done for them. No ceremony, no calling of attention to yourself, just real kindness, real self-effacing service, real investment in others – the kind that really makes a difference – and all at your own expense.

You remember the Rechabites from Jeremiah. This was a family that Jeremiah admired for their faithfulness to the family code! Their forefather, Jonadab, had sworn them to a nomadic life forever. No vineyards or farms – and so no wine drinking – no houses and so always living in tents. The Lord once told Jeremiah to invite the Rechabites to the temple and offer them some wine to drink. It was a test. He did and, predictably, they refused. They were faithful to their family code, to the vow their ancestor had taken for them.

Well, we Christians have a family code, even a family crest, a coat of arms, as it were. I remember seeing the coat of arms of, I think it was the Elphinstone family, the family of an important early bishop of Aberdeen, on the outside of the magnificent 14th century chapel at King's College in Aberdeen, Scotland. The bishop in question is buried right out in front of the chapel. There was a Latin motto on the coat of arms and I was unfamiliar with the words, so I asked Dr. Marshall, my advisor, who happened to be standing there, what the words said. "Well," he said, "loosely translated it means, if anyone bashes me, I'll bash him back a lot worse!"

That is not our coat of arms! But, there are many Christian coats of arms or family crests. One of my favorites is that of the saintly Bonar family. Below the emblem it reads, "Denique Coelum," "Heaven at last!" And you can read and sing Horatius Bonar's hymns and know for sure that the family tradition had an impact on Bonar's life and work. He wanted to be true and he was true to his family's motto. There is the longing for heaven in many of his greatest hymns, including his immortal communion hymn we will sing in a few moments.

But, there is another coat of arms for all of us as Christians. A coat of arms usually has some crest, emblem, or insignia, and then often a motto above or below. Our coat of arms, yours and mine, has a basin on a field of towels, and below it the motto, “As I have washed your feet...” We know, because we belong to this family that Christ has saved out of the world, we know how the motto ends. It does not have to be written. “As I have washed *your* feet...” you finish it in your own mind. Now, will we be, like the Rechabites, loyal to our family crest and motto, to our coat of arms? The answer to that question will always be determined by the extent to which we really understand how, and why, and at what cost the Lord Christ first washed our feet!

I recently got a wonderful book of letters that C.S. Lewis exchanged, in Latin, with an Italian priest by the name of Don Giovanni Calabria. The letters were written between 1947 and Calabria’s death in 1954. Father Giovanni, or John, was beatified by the Roman Catholic Church in 1988. They are delightful letters and a wonderful exercise in Latin, for someone with as limited facility in the language as I have, because Lewis wrote Latin as clearly and simply as he wrote English.

In one of their exchanges they are commiserating with one another about the low spiritual condition of Europe and the still darker clouds on the horizon. But Lewis called them back.

“I believe that the men of this age (and among them you Father, and myself) think too much about the state of nations and the situation of the world. ... We are not kings, we are not senators. Let us beware lest, while we torture ourselves in vain about the fate of Europe, we neglect either Verona or Oxford. In the poor man who knocks at my door, in my ailing mother, in the young man who seeks my advice, the Lord Himself is present: therefore let us wash His feet.”

Exactly. You say, well I would be honored above all men if I were allowed to wash *his* feet. But he said, to the extent you do it to the least of these my brothers, you do it unto me! And, exactly right in another way. We may or may not be able to do anything about the fate of the nations, but we can certainly wash one another’s feet. And, after all, that is what Jesus told us to do and made a point of telling us to do it just as he was leaving this world!

Is there a Christian here who does not see with perfect clarity his or her calling and the perfect rightness of it. Is there a Christian here who does *not* want to be like Jesus in this very way, supremely like him, always like him? It is, after all, *our* family heraldry, *our* coat of arms. “As I have washed your feet...”