

PEACE IN A TROUBLED WORLD I

The Basin & The Towel – John 13:1-17&34&35

Introduction

Imagine being invited to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen and discovering upon your arrival that Her Majesty greets you at the front door, takes your coat for you, shows you to the living room and offers to make you a cup of tea. You protest, but she insists. A little nervous, you spill your tea over your new suit (or dress). Immediately the Queen jumps from her seat, runs to the kitchen, returning with a damp tea-towel to sponge out the stain.

Of course this image is impossible – the Queen has many servants to do everything for her, and it would be highly inappropriate for her to do any of those things I have mentioned. However, the stoop of servanthood we see in this passage is far more dramatic than that as Christ takes decisive action that is completely counter to the prevailing wisdom of our world.

1. Context – what Jesus knew (vv1-3)

The background to this passage is Jesus' consistent lifestyle of love expressed in three years with the disciples. Having loved them, He now shows them the full extent of His love. This becomes even more remarkable when we consider what Jesus knew, and John spells out three vital facts of which He is aware but the disciples are blissfully unaware:

1. His "hour" had come (v1)

The word "hour" (unfortunately translated by the NIV as "time" in this verse) appears 10 times in John in relation to the ministry of Jesus. It adds momentum to the book as Jesus moves relentlessly forward to the "hour". Of course the "hour" refers to His death, and it is an hour of humiliation but also an hour of glory. The fact that Jesus knew His hour had come adds **urgency** to what He does. This will be the last parable of Jesus, and it is a parable in action!

2. Satan had already prompted Judas to betray Jesus (v2)

Judas is mentioned eight times in John's gospel more than any of the other gospels. The fact that Jesus knew about the betrayal by Judas adds **poignancy** to the scene as Jesus demonstrates love even to the disciple who will betray Him. He will stoop and wash the traitor's feet. It is important to note that we are told that Satan had prompted Judas – Judas was still responsible for his own action in betraying the Lord as Satan prompted him but didn't possess him.

3. The Father had put all things under His power and that He had come from the Father and was returning to Him (v3)

From Luke we learn another significant fact about the context of this scene – the disciples were arguing about who was greatest (Luke 22:24). As they bicker, Jesus, fully aware of the glory and majesty that was His by right, and would be His eternally after His return to the Father. This fact adds **contrast** to the scene as we consider Jesus' rightful position and authority.

Given this knowledge, we know that Jesus was not posturing. This act is not a futile gesture or a false attempt to appear humble but an intentional, calculated action that grew out of a real situation and need. Christ's timing, as always, was impeccable.

2. Action – the foot washing (vv4&5)

To appreciate the full significance of what Christ does here we need some appreciation of the cultural background of foot washing:

- In Biblical times the streets were made of dirt. When it was dry they were dusty and when it rained they were muddy. After a journey by foot the disciples' feet would have been dirty, sore and tired.
- In Genesis we read of foot washing on four occasions (18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24) – in showing hospitality to guests the normal custom was to bring water to the guests for them to wash their own feet. There is no record of anyone actually washing the feet of another person for them.
- In I Samuel 25:41 Abigail said that she was ready to wash the feet of David and his men. This was a statement of utter humility before them, as it would have been unheard of for a woman like Abigail, the wife of a wealthy man, to do such a menial thing. Abigail's humility won David over and led to mercy on his part.

- In Luke 7:36-50 we read of a sinful woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. This event took place in the home of Simon the Pharisee who had invited Jesus for dinner. Jesus rebuked Simon because he had not given Him water for His feet.
- Washing the feet of a guest was generally regarded as the most menial task. Only the lowest of slaves were deemed to be low enough to do it, and under the law of the Rabbis Jewish slaves were not to be asked to do it.
- Foot washing is probably also what John the Baptist was referring to when said that he wasn't even worthy to loosen Jesus' sandals (Mark 1:7). This was an amazing statement of the greatness of Christ, since John was putting himself in a place lower than the lowest slave in comparison with Him.

And so, against this cultural background, Jesus removed His outer garment, knelt and began to wash the feet of His disciples. We don't whether they had already washed their feet, or if not why not. Perhaps they had forgotten to in their haste of preparing for the Passover, or perhaps in their bickering about greatness none of them had been prepared to stoop even to fetch water for the task. Now the One who had all things under His power stooped to put Himself under the lowest of slaves in a wonderful enactment of love. The humility of Christ is breath-taking in its profundity. Andrew Murray (a pastor in South Africa in Victorian times) wrote that "Humility is the only soil in which the graces root. The lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure". How true that is in our own experience. Lord, grant us the honesty to humble ourselves under Your mighty hand!

3. Reaction – Simon protests (vv6-11)

One of Newton's laws of motion says that to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. That Law seemed frequently to apply to the relationship between Simon Peter and his Master. It is remarkable that in all the gospels, however different the emphasis and whatever stories the inspired writers chose to include or exclude from their accounts of Jesus' life, the characters of the disciples remain the same. This is surely a strong indication of the reliability of the gospels. Peter, as he always was, was impetuous and outspoken on this occasion. The interaction that follows can be considered in three parts:

a) Simon's Oxymoron (v6&8a)

An oxymoron is what happens when two words or ideas that don't belong together are expressed together. Michael Card (Christian singer-songwriter) describes Simon's challenge as "an impossible combination of two words, 'No' and 'Lord'". This is classic Simon – always impetuous, and always concerned for what was proper for Christ to do for him. It is easy for us to fault him, but we must acknowledge that at least he is the one who speaks out! He will not stand for this unacceptable humbling of the Lord He loves. However, we must realise that Simon has a fundamental problem that is well expressed by Warren Wiersbe:

Peter had a difficult time accepting Christ's ministry to him *because Peter was not yet ready to minister to the other disciples*. It takes humility and grace to serve others, but it also takes humility and grace to allow others to serve us. The beautiful thing about a submissive spirit is that it can both give and receive to the glory of God.

How often we too have this problem. In our own pride we refuse to accept grace – we will not yield to be served!

b) Simon's Ignorance (v7)

Jesus says that Peter doesn't understand what is happening. This is a recurrent theme in the gospels, as much of Jesus' teaching and ministry was not understood by disciples until after His death and resurrection. However, Christ's "parable in action" was embedding a seed of truth deep in the consciousness of these future apostles that would later germinate and form the basis for their own teaching. The fact that Peter later understood can be seen in his own teaching to church leaders in I Peter 5:3.

c) Simon's U-turn (v9)

Peter, again classically, swiftly reverses his position. He now requests a total washing from head to toe! Christ's response paves the way for an explanation of the spiritual reality behind this parable.

In verses 10&11 Jesus speaks in clearly spiritual terms:

- They are all clean with the exception of Judas (although Jesus does not name him).
- Unless they are washed they can have no part with Him. The Greek word translated "part" is *meros*. It literally means "participation" or "share in".
- Once a person is washed they don't need a bath again – the all over washing is once for all.
- They do, however, need to have their feet washed even after they have bathed.
- This truth is illustrated in the OT priesthood (which Christ may well have been referring to). At their initial consecration to the priesthood priests had to be washed all over (Exodus 29:4), but each time they performed their duties in the Temple they had to wash their hands and feet at the laver in the Temple courtyard (Exodus 30:18-21).

Christ must surely be speaking here of His coming death:

- His death would cleanse them, making them spiritually clean.
- Only those who have been cleansed through His death can have part with Christ.
- Once a person becomes a Christian they don't need to be washed again.
- Christians do need to confess our sins and to allow Christ to wash feet (see I John 1:8&9). Constant communion with Christ depends on our continuing confession of sin. Sin does not jeopardise our salvation, but it does place a barrier between the Lord and us that will result in a lack of blessing and happiness in our lives.

Before we leave this section it is interesting to contrast Judas and Peter:

- Fundamentally they had a different kind of relationship with Christ as Judas was not washed (v10 – see also John 6:64-71). Although from the outside both appeared to be disciples of Christ, Judas was a false disciple who never really knew the Lord. We should be aware that it is also possible for people today to have the appearance of being Christians but not to have any real faith in Christ.
- It is also interesting that Peter challenged the Lord, whereas Judas apparently accepted the foot-washing without a word. We should not think badly of those who ask questions or who struggle with aspects of the faith. Rather we should encourage people to seek the answers to their questions in the Lord. Perhaps a false believer is more likely to accept everything unquestioningly.
- Both failed in commitment to Christ, although there is one vital difference – Judas' betrayal was pre-meditated and calculated flowing from a fundamental concern for his own desires but Peter's denial was on the spur of the moment and reflected a lack of strength rather than a lack of love for the Lord. The true believer cannot betray his Lord in a premeditated way, but may falter under pressure.
- Only one was restored, and this was the one who truly had faith in first place. The true believer who falls will always be restored sooner or later into a close relationship with the Lord. He will not be lost.

So, we can thank God for Simon, the questioner and bungler, because His story reveals Christ's unfailing grace to those who trust in Him

5. Implication (vv12-17, 34&35)

After He had finished His "parable in action", Jesus returned to His place at the table. He proceeded to spell out for them the full implications of what they had just witnessed starting with a question (v12). Christ is rightfully their Lord and Teacher (v13) – the fact that He accepts these titles so readily is further testimony to the fact that he was indeed God in human form. Christ tells them that they must follow His example and wash one another's feet (v14). In verses 15-17 He spells this out for them:

- **His example** – if the Master shows such humility and grace so must we. No servant is greater than the master, and Christ is effectively telling these sent ones (apostles) that if they fail to show the same humility He has shown they are declaring themselves to be greater than Him.
- **His command** – the disciples must do the same as He has done. A Christian is fundamentally a Christ follower, an imitator of the Master.
- **His promise** – Christ promises that they will be blessed for doing this. Some Christians have interpreted this to mean that foot washing is an ordinance of Christ for the Church just as baptism and the Lord's Supper are, but this seems unlikely as there is no record of it in early church practice (I Timothy 5:10 is the only other New Testament reference to the practice). Rather it seems that Christ is commanding a similar humility and servanthood among His followers and promising a blessing for those who obey.

Christ adds to this command in verses 34&35 of this chapter where He gives the disciples His New Command, that they are to love one another as He has loved them. The command to love is not a new idea as the Old Testament Law also required God's people to love their neighbours as they loved themselves (Leviticus 19:18). Rather, it is a "new" command because:

- It is the command of a new Lawgiver – Christ rather than Moses (see John 1:17)
- It has a new measure – as He has loved them
- It is the command of a New Covenant – Christ has been forming the New Covenant community of God's people that will become the Church (Israel was the Old Covenant community).

So, Christ defines love in this chapter in the only way that love can really be defined – in action! From His example we learn that love:

- Is always linked with humility – it is not proud and does not hold back because of position
- Is an action word – love is about action and commitment, not just feeling and sentiment
- Always seeks a way to demonstrate itself (it will not rest unexpressed)
- Is selfless and sacrificial – it focuses on the needs of the other person

- Always seeks to teach the other the way of love – true love wants to see the other person become a better person, not to control or smother them

Why does Jesus enact this parable at this point? Because this is the opening of His final teaching in which He will describe the normal life of His disciples in a world without Him (Chapters 14-16).

6. The “Ship” Launching

Love is the defining quality of the New Covenant community Jesus is launching. It is by our love for one another that all men will know that we are His disciples (v35). Love is something that the Church can offer a world that is starved of true love and grace. However, we must ask ourselves some important questions in light of this chapter:

Have you been washed by Christ, and if so are your feet clean today?

- Chapters 14-16 are teaching for the New Covenant Community Jesus is founding:
 - To be part of it you must have been cleaned by Him – have you humbled yourself before Him and asked Him to be your Saviour and Lord?
 - To be in harmony with the community you must have feet washed repeatedly – are you walking in obedience to the Lord or do you need to confess your sins to Him?

When did you last wash the feet of your brother or sister or yield to have yours washed?

- When did you last take this kind of decisive action and do the thing that will be for them the same as Christ’s washing of their feet was for the disciples? Take time to think – ask the question how you can wash the feet of the people in your church or how you can yield to your brother or sister to enable them to serve as they ought.

This act defines for us three great “ships” of the Christian faith:

- a) **Leadership** – there is only one Biblical pattern = servant leadership
- b) **Discipleship** – there is only one Biblical command = love one another as Christ loved us
- b) **Fellowship** – there is only one Biblical model = humility and love in action

If we want to be effective witnesses to this world we must model that authentic community – then the world will see that we are Christ’s disciples.

I love the lyrics of Michael Card’s song based on this passage, and I will leave you with them:

In an upstairs room, a parable
is just about to come alive.
And while they bicker about who’s best,
with a painful glance, He’ll silently rise.
Their Saviour Servant must show them how
through the will of the water
and the tenderness of the towel.

Chorus:

And the call is to community,
The impoverished power that sets the soul free.
In humility, to take the vow,
that day after day we must take up the basin and the towel.

In any ordinary place,
on any ordinary day,
the parable can live again
when one will kneel and one will yield.
Our Saviour Servant must show us how
through the will of the water
and the tenderness of the towel.

Bridge:

And the space between ourselves sometimes
is more than the distance between the stars.
By the fragile bridge of the Servant’s bow
we take up the basin and the towel.

Let us take up the basin and the towel, and let us rejoice in being served.