

John 13:1-17. The Humble Lord

Today's Mothering Sunday, when we thank God for our mums, for their love for us, and the way they showed that love in all their hard work and dedication in all they did for us, caring and providing for us, often in a self-giving way. And more generally we admire people who give their time and energy to help others, the needy or charity.

Today, from Jesus' *humble* act of washing of His disciples' feet, we'll see how He supremely shows His love and care for us. We're going to think about how our humble Lord surprises us, how He cleanses us, and lastly He sets an example for us to follow.

First our humble Lord surprises us

Imagine you had a knock on the door and it was someone like Prince Charles, or Theresa May or David Beckham, or Sir Richard Branson. And the important person said they wanted to sweep your pathway, or clear your drains or do some job that is considered unpleasant and menial.

We would perhaps be impressed that such an important person showed this humility, but we'd also be very surprised and even shocked, wouldn't we? But this would be nothing compared to the cultural shock that hit Jesus' disciples when He washed their feet.

Jesus and His disciples had arrived at the upper room where they were going to eat their evening meal. The 'table' was in fact the floor with those eating lying down leaning on one elbow, with legs outstretched behind. They had just been walking in open sandals along dusty roads, which were often full of animals, so we can imagine how dirty the disciples' feet could have been! Their feet needed washing!

Footwashing in Israel in Bible times was not only considered a task a slave would do, but it was *so* demeaning that a Jewish slave wasn't expected to do it; it was something that had to be done by a non-Jewish slave.

So we can imagine them wondering who would go round washing their feet.

But *Jesus* got up, took off His robe, wrapped a towel around His waist, and poured water into a basin. Then He began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel He had around Him.

What a surprise! But much more than a surprise! This was absolutely astonishing! And what humility! That their Teacher and Lord, did such a humble act that only a non-Jewish *slave* would do ! Disciples were expected to serve their teachers, not the other way round. *Especially* in the case of Jesus!

And this was much more than a member of the Royal Family, a Prime Minister, a President, an industry leader or celebrity coming to do our drains. It was *God's* special divine eternal King, God's Messiah, adopting the stance of the lowest of slaves and performing the most demeaning and filthy of tasks.

Now Peter, who'd previously come to understand Jesus is God's Messiah (Mark 8v29), and was always quick to open his mouth, probably spoke up for them all in his response in v6. He said to Jesus "Are you going to wash my feet?" V8: "No. You shall never wash my feet".

Why did Jesus wash their feet? Look with me at v1, the second part of this verse, "having loved His own who were in the world – that means His disciples – He loved them to the end." And in the first instance that meant by washing their feet. In this wonderfully humble act Jesus revealed to his disciples the full extent of His love for them. He loved them to the uttermost.

I think, from my experience of loving my fiancée, when you're deeply in love with someone, you want to express that love. You want to serve them and do your very best for them.

Now, the word for "love" here means a love that wants the best for someone however much it costs the love-giver. Of course my love doesn't reach God's standard but by doing the humble act of washing the disciples' feet, Jesus was illustrating how much He loved them in this self-giving way.

We as Christians often talk and think about what we're doing to serve God and others. But Jesus washing His disciples' feet shows us that God must serve us first. We'll see later in vs 12-17 Jesus commanding His disciples to follow His example in serving each other. But this service flows from, results from Him serving us. No-one can serve Christ unless they have been first served by Him. We need our Master to serve us before we can serve Him. We need to know how much God loves us before we can love Him and others.

But why did Jesus show His love for them and humbly serve them in this particular way, by washing their feet...? Exactly *how* does God love and serve *us*?

So we come to our **second main point, our humble Lord cleanses us.**

In v8 Jesus says to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no part in me". This means, unless Jesus washes him, he has no place in God's kingdom, that is, he won't get to heaven. Jesus *had* to wash their feet, including Peter's.

Of course Peter isn't saved or forgiven by Jesus washing his feet, anymore than children, or adults are saved by being baptised. No, the footwashing is an acted out illustration showing us that Jesus serves and loves us by cleansing us from our sin by His sacrificial death on the cross. The disciples needed to understand that and that's why Jesus *had* to wash their feet, including Peter's.

That the footwashing is about the cross is shown by the first part of v1 and also by v3. Jesus knew that the moment He came to earth for, to die on the cross for our sins and rise from the dead was approaching. "So" (v4) He got up from the meal and washed their feet.

Can you understand that to be clean from sin before our perfectly holy God, is the most important need we have? If you knew you were going to meet the Queen, say you had an invite to a Buckingham Palace reception or garden party, you'd want to ensure you were dressed to be your very best. A hired suit or dress would be needed, you wouldn't want there

to be any dirt or stains on your clothes. How much more do we need to be clean, to be completely cleansed from every stain of sin, to be before our holy God, fit for His presence.

But you may be asking this question: Can we *really* be clean from sin? After all, we know we're imperfect sinful people! We all do, think and say things we know are wrong – we don't even meet our own standards, let alone God's! And the worst aspect of sin is our natural desire to ignore God and run our own lives. So can we really be clean from sin?

To answer this, we're going to think about from this passage *how* Jesus death on the cross cleanses us from sin.

Look at down v10. Jesus was replying to Peter who effectively said if Jesus wanted to wash his feet He should wash all of him.

Jesus' replied, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though (referring to Judas) not every one of you." Incidentally, that Jesus washed Judas' feet, who was not clean, and who went on to betray Jesus, shows us that going through a ceremony or ritual doesn't in itself cleanse and change us.

So what's Jesus saying here? You see, He was referring to a custom in Israel in those days which was that people would have a bath in their own home before going out for dinner. So when they got to the home of the host, only their feet would need a wash. Perhaps a bit like we'd have a bath or shower once or twice a day, but wash our hands several times a day. We don't have a complete bath every time we need to wash our hands. In our passage, except for Judas, the disciples, including Peter, were clean. But they needed their feet washed from the dirt picked up along the way.

So we have the "bath" and the footwashing. We can now see the cross cleanses us in two ways.

First, the "bath" which cleans the whole body speaks of an initial complete once for all cleansing from sin. God knows we'll never be able to satisfy His perfect holy standards - we are naturally imperfect sinful people. So God chooses to *regard us* as completely clean from every stain of sin. He does this when we first turn to trust in Christ and His death on the cross alone and to live for Him as our Lord and King. He even sees us as holy as Jesus. We're no longer guilty because on the *cross* Jesus took the punishment for our sin, satisfying God's holiness and justice. So God can forgive us and regard us as completely clean as there's no punishment left for us to suffer if we trust in Him. And we remain clean in God's sight forever.

So what does the footwashing mean? Like the disciples needed their feet washed from the dirt picked up along the road, the footwashing speaks of the daily cleansing and forgiveness we need from the sins we commit after our initial complete spiritual bath. We need to *remain* dependent on Jesus' death on the cross for cleansing, for our forgiveness every day.

So what about when, say, we're tired and grumpy and snap at someone...or a motorist cuts us up and we react. Or we bite at the children. Or we've dwelt on an impure thought too long before rejecting it. Or when there's a queue at every till in the supermarket and we have impatient thoughts. Or we've succumbed to a temptation we particularly battle with... Or

there may be a sin or a mistake we've made that we find it particularly difficult to believe God forgives - the memory of that failure might sort of niggle us inside.

What do we need? If we're already trusting in Jesus alone for cleansing from sin, and living for Him as Lord, we do not need to be saved again! Like Peter, we do not need to start all over again with that initial thorough complete cleansing bath! We remember that it's only because of Jesus' death on the cross that God regards us as completely clean from sin, and no sin can change that. And there's no sin too big for God to forgive. We need ongoing cleansing from sin. We need to confess it to God trusting in the death of Jesus on the cross for forgiveness. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, (God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." That's what Jesus' footwashing illustrates.

Remember that earlier we thought about Jesus as our humble Lord, who stooped so low to do such a filthy demeaning task only a non-Jewish slave would do. But more than this, He, God's divine sinless eternal King, died the most painful demeaning death ever devised, a punishment that was designed for the worst of criminals. And worse than even that, on the cross, He was under God's curse bearing God's wrath for our sin. He, although remaining God's perfect Son, became *as* the worst of dirt, so that we imperfect sinful people, are, if we trust in Christ, forgiven and accepted by God as completely clean and holy. That's what our humble Lord did to serve us and love us.

So, our humble Lord surprises us by His humble act of washing the disciples' feet. Our humble Lord cleanses us from our sin. And..

Third, more briefly now as we begin to close, **our humble Lord sets an example for us to follow.**

We've seen that Jesus must wash us from our sin through His death on the cross, that we must always depend on the cross for our forgiveness and cleansing. But now we see Jesus' humble service is what our Christian discipleship must be modelled on.

Vs13-16 show us that Jesus is saying that as He's their teacher – and also their Lord, which is a title indicating His deity, as *He's* done the humble thing and carried out the most humble task of a slave to serve and love they should follow His example in the way they love and serve each other.

What does this mean for us? I don't think it means we need footwashing ceremonies! It does mean Christians are called to love and serve each other with the same *attitude* of humility and self-giving as Jesus displayed.

We see and value the various ways people humbly serve: flower arranging, preparing food, serving refreshments, cleaning, giving lifts, home group leading, childrens' helpers, musicians....

If we're trusting in Jesus for our washing from sin, we're Christ's disciples. So being an active part of a local church is where our humble serving of each other starts. Yes on Sundays. We could volunteer to help in an area of work in the church that needs more

helpers. But also being part of a home group helps us to know a smaller group of believers and their needs more, so that we can help each other. Both practically and also encouraging each other from God's word the Bible and praying for each other.

But remember serving and helping each other is something that we do because we have been served, washed and loved by Jesus first.

The Bible says, we love because He first loved us. (1 John 4v19)

Let's pray