

Christianity as love

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Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] Well, it's great to have this Christian baptism, isn't it? So, I don't know, I'm sure some of you would not have seen that before, and perhaps rather unusual, some of you have seen a Christian baptism before, but it just reminds us of the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ.

And it's great to hear what Hamid was saying about his life and the way God had spoken to him and blessed him. So, that was really an excellent thing.

What I'd like us to do for the next few minutes is to see what the Christian holy book, the Bible, says, and perhaps explore as to why Christianity ought to be an attractive religion.

Where does it come from? And I would like to say that the attractiveness of Christianity comes from Jesus himself. And here's a story which I think illustrates that.

What did Jesus say was at the heart of the Christian life? Did he say that it was basically a religion of observances?

[1 : 11] So, that the essence of Christianity is that you pray at a certain time and then you pray it again at a certain time, or something like that. Well, I would say Jesus did not say that sort of thing, although he did expect his followers to pray.

He didn't make his followers sign up to set observances. Is the heart of Christianity the international understanding of Christianity?

Because Christianity certainly is international, and the Bible is available in every language. Even if you can't find it printed, you can download it from the internet, which is rather amazing.

I don't think it is the understanding that Jesus says is the heart of the Christian life. The Christian life isn't basically about being academic or being a student, although he does intend his followers to have true personal insight.

Jesus says, I don't call you my servants, I call you my friends, because I let you in, I tell you all the things that you need to know. But I don't think that's quite the heart of it.

[2 : 31] Is the heart of the Christian life gaining merit by ethical improvement? Now, to be sure, some versions of Christianity, particularly a few hundred years ago, made difficult ethical achievement, something at the heart of Christian faith.

But I don't think Jesus said that. He said, we are not saved by works we have done. We are saved for good works, but not by our ethical effort.

And I would like to say, certainly for this morning, that it would be right to focus on what Jesus said about love. Because in the chapter that we've read, he gives one command, one statement, and it's all to do with love.

And it comes from him, and that's what I'd like us to think about this morning. So, we have the story, and I hope you could follow it. It's about a meal.

Just before the Passover feast, Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

[3 : 53] The evening meal was being served. The devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things into his hands, and he knew that he had come from God and was returning to God.

He knew his greatness. So, what did he do? He put a towel around him, took off his normal clothes, put a towel around his waist, took a basin and poured water into it.

He knew he was Lord. He put water in the basin, and he began to take feet. That's a foot, in case you didn't get my picture of it. And the feet of his followers, he began to wash them and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

And that's what this story is about. And it's a rather remarkable story. It's there in John's Gospel. It gets a whole chapter, or almost a whole chapter. Here's something for us to understand about the

true heart of Christianity.

And here is the originator of Christianity. He is Jesus Christ, who knows that he is Lord. And what does he do?

[5 : 16] He washes the feet of his followers. And I'd like to say two things. It's an act of love to receive and an example to follow.

So let's go into it a little bit more detail. Jesus washed the disciples' feet. So there he is doing that. The more you think about it, the more you realize that this washing of the feet is on two levels. So they're real feet, and they really smell, and they really need washing, and Jesus really washes them, and they're really clean afterwards.

So there's a real practicality about it. But it's also symbolic. Did you notice that Jesus said in verse 7, you do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.

Well, Peter knew very well that his feet were being washed, or not being washed. But the full meaning of this, it says he would later understand. And also, Jesus says, he says that you are all clean.

[6 : 37] Verse 10, he says, a person who's had a bath and he's only to wash his feet, his whole body is clean, and you are all clean, though not every one of you. He knew who was going to betray him, and that's why he said not everyone was clean.

So as you know, his disciples, one of his disciples, didn't really trust him, and didn't really love him, and didn't really belong to him, and he betrayed Jesus.

And Jesus says, I look at you and you're all clean, although one of you isn't. He's not talking about feet, is he? He's talking about something deeper and more spiritual.

And I would say that the washing that is symbolized is the Christian washing of washing their sins away.

So I think this incident has got two levels. The real level of really dirty feet, but also Jesus is teaching a lesson about washing us from our sins.

[7 : 41] And how did Jesus deal with sins? In the Bible, there are many pictures about the way Jesus solves the problem of sin.

There are many pictures, and no one picture covers everything. This picture is a picture of washing, but it doesn't explain everything. How did Jesus deal with sins?

Well, he washes in his blood. And you would think, well, that's a very strange use of language, because usually if you have blood and clothing, you want to get rid of the blood, you want to clean the clothes and remove the blood.

The Bible puts it in this very strange way. We are washed through the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus died shedding his blood. He died on the cross. He was crucified, nailed to a cross with nails here, and left to die by the Romans.

[8 : 59] And what was happening when Jesus died? Well, something very, very great was happening.

Maybe too great for us to understand the full depth of it, but we are told that we, because of our sin, deserve to die.

We deserve God's anger to come on us. And when Jesus died, he pushed us out of the way and said, I will take your place.

God's wrath will come on me. I will die instead of you. And actually, there was one criminal for whom that was literally true. His name was Barabbas.

Am I telling you the right name? And this is at the heart of Christianity, that Jesus is the substitute for his people. He bears God's wrath instead of them.

[10 : 14] And I don't know of any other religion which makes that claim or makes such a way for us to come to God.

That God himself, Jesus Christ, says, I will pay the price. I will stand in for you because of what I do. Because of what I do, your sins are dealt with, your sins are forgotten, your sins are forgiven, your sins are washed away.

And if I may say, there are many, many ways that we can learn about sin. You can do psychology and it will tell us about the problems that we have.

You can do sociology and it will tell you about urban deprivation and violence against minorities and things like that. You can do many, many studies that show us our sin.

[11:23] But I suggest there is only one place that you can find the solution for sin which is here in Jesus Christ. And for somebody to do this, to serve us by washing away our sin at the cost of his own life seems to me to be the greatest possible act of love.

Greater love has no one than this than he lays down his life for his friends. God commends his love in that while we were still sinners, while we were still obnoxious, while we still stank, Christ died for us.

love. This, it seems to me, is the greatest possible act of love. And the Bible certainly makes that statement.

Here is love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his son to deal with our sins, to be the propitiation for our sins.

sins. So, what we have here is an act of divine love, an act of divine service, an act of divine giving and kindness.

[12:59] And you notice in the story that Jesus is doing this, verse 6, he comes to Simon Peter and Simon Peter is conscious that Jesus is his Lord and that he, Simon Peter, is Simon Peter.

And he says, Lord, are you going to wash my feet? And Jesus says, you don't realize now what I'm doing, later on you will understand. And Peter says, no, you will never wash my feet.

So he says, I don't want you to do this for me. I can wash my own feet. I'll get somebody else to do it. I don't want you to do this for me.

And I think there's an element of pride in that. Because the human heart says, I don't want to receive. I will make my own way in life.

I will stand on my own two feet. I don't want God doing this very lowly thing for me. And Jesus says, unless I wash you, you have no part with me.

[14:10] Unless you let me do this, we're not friends. We have nothing to do with each other. And then Peter goes to the opposite extreme and says, well, wash the whole of me.

faith, Christian faith, does not say no to Jesus.

Christian faith says yes to Jesus. Jesus says, I can wash you. I will wash you. And Christian faith says, Lord, thank you.

That's what I need. And what do you say? If you're a Christian, I know what you have said.

You've said to the Lord Jesus, yes. But maybe you're not a Christian. Maybe you're saying, no, I don't believe this. And I would ask you to think again.

[15:16] Maybe you're saying, I am so good and clever and strong, I don't need anybody dying on a cross for me. Well, I would say, you've got that wrong.

Because that's exactly what you do need. There is no other way to deal with your sin. And if God in heaven says, that's what you need.

You've got to let me do that. Then I think you're very foolish to say to him, no, no, no. faith allows Jesus to do that.

So it's number one, an act of love to receive. And number two, it's an example to follow. Because Jesus makes this point as well. He says, when he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

Do you understand what I've done for you? He asked them. You call me teacher and Lord and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

[16:20] I've set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. So he set them an example. He set the key. He set the theme for the whole of the Christian life.

He says, that's what I've done for you and now you must do this for one another. The kindness that I have shown to you, you should show for one another. You should wash one another's feet.

I don't think that has to be taken literally. And I think that if we did wash one another's feet, there would be lots of other things that Jesus expected as well.

So let's take it as an example. And Jesus says, you are blessed if you do these things. love one another.

This is the distinctive thing. By this will all men know you are my disciples if you love one another.

And Hamid, the love and the kindness that impressed you when you first met Christians which they showed to you is now your chance to show this to other people.

[17:39] And how is this to be done? Well, this is where it gets practical. It sets a note, it sets a theme for the Christian community, for people.

Some of them might have smelly feet, some of them might have other things that need doing for them, but we're to serve one another in the church. And it's not just a nice idea, it's meant to be put into practice in a real and practical way.

So, for example, all Christians ought to have a group of other Christians that they belong to and that they know. They know all their names, for example.

So, a Christian church is not like a supermarket where you come in and there's lots of other people there, but you don't know a single person's name, except the person on the till because they've got it written on the badge.

In the Christian church we're supposed to know one another, which is great in a church this sort of size where we can definitely know all of one another's names. We can help one another in our situations.

[18 : 56] We can certainly pray for one another, and hopefully we can do more than that. If there's somebody who's lonely, perhaps we could visit them. If there's somebody who's discouraged, perhaps we can encourage them.

If there's somebody who's weak, perhaps we can pray for them. This is the one command that Jesus gave. I mean, there's lots of other things that the Christian life involves, lots of other things, but if we were to say boil it down to one thing, Jesus does that for us.

A new command I give you, love one another. And notice this, as I have loved you, so you love one another.

By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another. The heart of Christianity is love for others which comes from the love which Christ showed to us.

And there's a blessing here, it's in verse 17. And I always, I'm encouraged to see that Jesus is very practical about this. He says there's a blessing here and he says blessed, you will be blessed if you, do you notice the next word?

[20 : 18] Do. He doesn't say blessed if you think about it, blessed if you pray about it, he says blessed if you do it. And there you are, Hamid. There's something from Jesus for the future to be knowing his love and loving other people, showing his love to them.

We're blessed if we do it. Let's close by singing a song together. We're going to sing.