

Smelly Feet

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 5th of March 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Smelly Feet and is from John chapter 13 verses 1 to 20. Well I've got my bowl of kerosene.

That's a bowl of water. John 13, this is the first passage I ever preached almost 18 years ago and I'm back to the beginning again.

So I've dug up an old sermon and thrown it out and started again. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we pray that we may not only be hearers of this word but doers of it also.

We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well they used to be called service stations and when I first bought a car I would deliberately look for service stations that served you petrol.

[1 : 19] That's what they're supposed to do and I thought well if that's what they're supposed to do I'll find one that does it. So I would sit in the car and they would open the petrol thing and they'd put the petrol in. Would you like your water and oil check sir?

Yes please because I didn't know how to do it. It was over a year once I got my car before I ever opened the bonnet myself. And there were all these things there. It was quite amazing really. These days you can only find places like that out in the country it seems to me.

But they're no longer service stations. They're all self-service stations. And service is almost a thing of the past. Today when you go to somebody's house for a meal if they're being a good host or hostess they will give you the opportunity to wash your hands before the meal.

Clean your hands. In ancient times they wouldn't do that. They would give you the opportunity of having your feet washed before the meal. And the lowest of the servants would do that task.

Feet after all would be quickly dusty and dirty when you wore sandals in a place where you didn't just jump in a nice clean car and you'd walk along a dusty path or a dusty track to get from house to house.

[2 : 30] And you didn't have to walk far to get your feet dirty. You'd probably have had a bath at the public baths before going out for dinner. But it was the feet that would be dirty and it was the feet that the lowest servant would wash.

Not any old servant but the lowest one would do that job. The context is a meal. Jesus and his disciples. It's Passover time.

They're in Jerusalem. It's an important occasion. It's an important meal. But there's nobody there to wash the feet. There doesn't seem to be a servant around doing it.

Probably Jesus is sort of the host though it's not his house. And certainly none of his disciples have volunteered to wash the feet either. Not that you could expect them to.

Because though a disciple would often do many menial jobs for his teacher or rabbi. Washing feet was not one of them. In fact the way you could distinguish between a servant and a disciple.

[3 : 38] Was that the disciple would not wash the feet of the rabbi. That was one job he or she would not do. They're at the meal table.

Not sitting on chairs like we would do with feet under the table. But typical to the ancient times. They would recline on their left elbow. It was very rightist.

It's not very politically correct for us left handed people I'm afraid. But they would lean on their left elbow. They would eat by just using their right hand. And implement in their hand or probably use their fingers.

And they'd be on cushions. The table would be low. And their feet would be poking out away from the table. If you had an aerial view. It would be sort of like the spokes of a wheel I suppose.

People's bodies and legs pointing away from the table. Around at least sort of three sides of a table. A triclinium they'd be called. They're just about to start the meal probably.

[4 : 36] And Jesus gets up. We're told in verse 4 that he took off his outer robe. Maybe even stripped down to a loin cloth. He took up a towel and tied it around himself.

Then he poured water into a basin. And began to wash the disciples feet. And to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. This is unexpected.

None of the disciples would have expected Jesus to do it. None of the people there would have expected a disciple to do it. Let alone Jesus to get up.

And wash feet. It's unheard of. It's unprecedented. There is no account in any ancient Jewish or Greco-Roman literature or history that tells us of a master washing the feet of any followers, disciples or servants or household.

None at all. This is unprecedented humility. Humility. Humility. And quite possibly it was met with stunned silence. The disciples wouldn't have known what to make of it.

[5 : 47] They would know, hey, this is wrong. But there's nobody there who should be doing it. They couldn't say to Jesus, Jesus, sit down. That guy over in the corner, he's the servant.

He should be doing it. There doesn't seem to be a servant there. Nor could you expect the disciples to say, Jesus, sit down. It's one of our jobs. It's not one of their jobs. And it's only when Jesus gets around the circle to Peter that we're told that anybody said anything.

And Peter says in verse 6, Lord, are you going to wash my feet? Now, he's not just being stupid there. Lord, are you going to wash my feet, having watched him wash everyone else?

There's a sense of indignation about the way that he says this. You, me, my feet, is in effect what he's saying. He's almost speechless.

He can't quite work out what's going on here. He's perhaps embarrassed that Jesus would do it. And maybe also it seems proud.

[6 : 54] Jesus' response is surprising. He says to him, You do not know now what I am doing. Which is a bit odd because he does know what he's doing.

He's about to wash his feet. Anyone can see that. It's pretty obvious. But Jesus says, You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.

That is, the act itself is very evident. But it's obviously saying something deeper about washing feet. That Peter and the disciples do not yet understand.

But later, literally after these things, you will understand. Not after the meal, but after the things leading to Jesus' death.

That's the context of this chapter. The first verse tells us that the hour had come for Jesus to depart from the world. So Jesus is saying later, after these things, that is, after this hour when I'm departing from the world, then you will know what this is about.

[7 : 59] So what has washing feet got to do with Jesus' death, which is the way he departs this world? What's the connection?

Well, Peter's got no idea what Jesus is talking about. And he says to him very adamantly in verse 8, You will never wash my feet. So Jesus now gets to the crunch issue.

Unless I wash you, you have no share with me. And now we begin to see the connection between washing feet and Jesus' death.

Washing feet is an acted illustration of what Jesus' death does to the full. Washing feet is just a little thing, really.

But Jesus' death is the greatest washing. And Jesus' washing feet is pointing to the most significant event. The real washing is done when Jesus dies.

[9 : 11] As John, who wrote this gospel, wrote also in a letter, It is the blood or the death of Jesus that washes or cleanses me from sin.

Now Jesus' words here to Peter, Unless I wash you, you have no share with me, are very strong. Unless I do this, you have no share with me.

That is, there's no other alternative. There aren't a whole range of options of having a share with me, one of which is me washing your feet. But there are all sorts of other alternatives as well.

There's only one way to have a share with Jesus, and it is for him to wash Peter's feet. Well, I should say, to wash Peter. Because Jesus here is referring more to his death than to washing feet.

To say, you have no share with me, is not talking about having a meal together and sharing in a meal. Jesus is pointing to something far more significant.

[10:17] It's to do with inheritance. It's to do with heaven. It's to do with the things beyond death. Eternal life. You will have no share of that unless I wash you.

And notice that it has to be by Jesus. It's unless I wash you. It's not unless you are washed, you will not have a share with me.

It's unless I wash you. There's nobody else who can do it. Jesus is not saying, well, unless you get washed, that is, that servant over there could do it, or one of the other disciples can do it.

No. There is only one person who can do it. Jesus. Nobody else can wash like he can. Now that sort of language is foreign to us, I think.

You see, we are familiar from our television and from our supermarkets to having a whole range of washing options. You can pick Omo because my mother used Omo because of the adverts on TV and it really is very good.

[11:20] But you could also choose Drive because it drives your dollar further, or is that another product? I lose track. Or you could use Fab because if you use Fab, you'll get a phone box full of lemons.

Well, used to 20 years ago on the adverts on TV and I've always wanted to have a phone box full of lemons but I haven't even got the phone box so what's the point of Fab? Nappy sand gets your washing even whiter, so I'm told.

Surf will do it all for the same quality but in cold water, I think. Now, I lose track of it. I just buy the cheapest or what's on special. But the point I'm making is that you have every day, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, a multitude of options for washing detergent.

Omo, Fab, Drive, nappy sand, Surf, just soap or something else. Now, some of you are looking at me foreignly. They're the teenagers who don't know what washing is.

But one day, go home and ask your mum, what is it? What's he talking about tonight? I understood everything he said about Jesus but this washing bit was very foreign to me.

[12:30] Go home and ask, Anthony, when you get home tonight what I'm talking about. The point is that we have a vast array of washing options. Jesus says here you have one.

It is him, him alone and unless you are washed by him you have no share with him in eternity. The hymn writer put it like this, wash me, Saviour or I die.

They're the only options. Brian Keenan was an Irishman, still is an Irishman I think. For several years he was a hostage in Lebanon.

one of several in the mid to late 1980s. For some of the time that he was a hostage he was in solitary confinement.

Sometimes brutalised and terrorised by his Lebanese guards. He didn't know where he was. Most of those six or so years were spent in darkness.

[13:36] For a couple of those years he shared a cell with John McCarthy who was a journalist from London. They became quite famous people in the British Isles and there were substantial campaigns to get them released.

Each of them wrote a book about his time as a hostage. Brian Keenan wrote about the time when for days on end he was ill with diarrhoea.

You can imagine the smell in a tiny cell shared at that time with John McCarthy. There were no soap and basins no running water no toilet paper or tissues or towels.

And every time that Brian Keenan was ill with diarrhoea John McCarthy would use his hands to clean up the mess as best he could.

It's awful isn't it? Hard to imagine doing that isn't it? Now I know that he had a shared interest in trying to make it clean. He didn't want the illness to spread. But it's a pretty revolting sort of job.

[14:49] Brian Keenan wrote that man really loved me to do that. There's something very humbling and humiliating when somebody else washes you or cleans you up.

Little kids are used to it from their parents but we soon grow big enough to want to be able to do it for ourselves even if we don't know where the soap is. And people when they get old stubbornly resist other people washing them or cleaning them.

It's a sign of lack of independence, a lack of dignity, perhaps a lack of respect. It's a bit humiliating to have somebody else wash you and clean you up.

There's no place for pride if somebody does that for you. There was no place for an ill Brian Keenan lying in a Lebanese cell to say to John McCarthy I can look after myself thank you very much.

He couldn't. But he was humiliated by McCarthy having to do it for him. And it's the same with Jesus.

[16:06] We think it's easy for Jesus to clean us up but it takes away our pride. It's humbling to think that we need cleansing that we can't do ourselves. It's humiliating to think that we need washing by Jesus we can't wash ourselves properly.

But it's true and only he can do the job. Only he and Peter's pride you will never wash my feet must be put humbly aside if Jesus is to wash him as he should.

the first point that Jesus is making here is that washing or cleansing is essential if you are to have a share with Jesus in eternity.

It's essential. The second point is that it is enough. It's sufficient.

And that's the point that Jesus makes in the next two verses 9 and 10. He changes the metaphor slightly to make a different point. Again he responds to Peter's ignorance.

[17:26] Peter says to him Lord not my feet only but also my hands and my head. Here is ignorant exuberance. Peter thinks okay well if you've got to do it do the lot.

Let's get on with it. Let's have fun. But Peter's response shows how ignorant he is. Jesus had said to him you do not know now what I'm doing but later you will and Peter's comment here shows exactly that.

He doesn't know what Jesus is doing after all. So Jesus' words in reply in verse 10 make a different point. One who has bathed does not need to wash except for the feet but is entirely clean.

Now after all if you're going out for dinner you'd go to the public baths you'd have a bath you'd be clean and then you'd walk to the place where you're going to. When you got there basically you were clean apart from your feet. Jesus is making a general observation.

But of course he's still pointing to his death at this point. He's not really talking just about washing feet. He's talking about unless I wash you you have no share in me.

[18:37] He said it's essential to be washed by him but now he's saying that to be washed by him is enough. It's sufficient for what you need.

That is it's unrepeatable. You don't keep getting washed all the way through by Jesus. His death is sufficient. It's once for all. And so when a person comes to be washed by Jesus from their sin it's done.

Oh yes down the track there might be other sins that you commit. That's like having dirty feet that get washed from time to time. But the sins that are washed through by Jesus death once need not be washed again.

Jesus death is enough. It's sufficient. Now this is a very important point I think for us all pastorally about how we live as Christians.

There are many people who feel very guilty about things they've done wrong in the past. And Christians are not exempt from that either. There are many Christians who feel very guilty about things they've done in the past.

[19:45] Even things they've confessed to God and asked for forgiveness for. Just the other day I was talking to an old friend of mine. He confessed to me, he said he'd never ever told anybody else this, of something that he'd done wrong over 25 years ago.

He'd asked God to forgive him a long time ago. But he was feeling very guilty and thought that his situation in hospital might be due to God punishing him for his sin.

My friends, not unusual. I'm sure many of us, if not all of us, have gone through stages of guilt like that as Christian people. Jesus' point here is pertinent.

If we've come for forgiveness and cleansing through Jesus' death, it's enough. He's done it. And whatever residual feelings of guilt we might have, they are illegitimate.

Our feelings of guilt are not accurate thermometers of the reality of guilt. if we've confessed something to Jesus and he's washed us for that sin, it is enough.

[21:06] It is sufficient. But if we go on thinking, well, I don't think God's forgiven me for that sin, he's punishing me now, I need to do something else in order to gain that forgiveness, we are denying the sufficiency of Jesus' death.

We are saying Jesus' death is not enough for my sin. sin. And that's heresy. And another sin that needs to be confessed. So the two points that Jesus has made so far here are that Jesus' death is essential and it is enough.

His third point, which is the most obvious of all, and it also begins with E, is that his death is an example. After he'd washed their feet and put on his robe and had returned to the table, Jesus said to them, do you know what I've done to you?

No, they don't, because he just said, you don't know now what I've done to you, but at least now he's going to make clear one thing that he's done to them. You call me teacher and Lord, and you're right, for that's what I am.

So if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, highly unexpectedly as I've said, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

[22 : 33] If I, the important one here, can stoop low to wash your feet, then it ought to be relatively easy for you on a par with each other to wash each other's feet, is what he's saying.

For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are the messengers greater than the one who sent them.

Jesus has given them an example. Not so that they literally go out washing each other's feet, but on the other hand, not literally that they go out to die on a cross for each other either.

Jesus' death at that level is unique and is not exemplary for us. But Jesus is saying that his death and the illustration of washing feet has set a pattern for Christian relationships, a pattern of love, humility and service.

That note was sounded in the opening words of the chapter. If you look back to verse one, the end of the verse, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

[23 : 52] Meaning, firstly, to the end of his life because he dies on a cross in an act of love for them, but it also means he loved them to the full, to the max, full-on love or extreme love.

He's loved them utterly, not just to the end of his life, but to the full extent of quality of love as well. Now, this point about the example, there's a few comments to make about it.

Firstly, we can never achieve what Jesus' life and death achieved for us. That's not the point of the example. We can never die as an atonement for somebody else's sin.

That's not what Jesus is saying here. The second thing to note is that we can never say or think that we are too good or too important to lovingly, humbly serve another person.

If Jesus could do it for disciples, then we can do it for anybody. If he could stoop so low as to love them and us, there is no limit to whom we ought to love.

[25 : 03] Third point to make is that this is not optional. It's not an elective that you might choose at school to get out of doing some serious study, to sort of choose an elective of some sport or craft or something like that.

This is a compulsory subject for Christians. If you want to be a Christian disciple, you must do this, love 101 or whatever it's called. This is core stuff.

Jesus says in verse 14, if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to do the same. not an option. It's compulsory.

Fourth point is that we cannot be selective about whom we love either. Jesus washed Judas' feet. He did so knowingly.

He knew that within minutes, Judas would leave the room to betray him. And yet he washed his feet. He washed his betrayer knowingly.

[26 : 07] And interestingly, the very thing that Judas metaphorically does with his feet to Jesus is, we're told in verse 18, to lift his heel to the one against Jesus.

To lift your heel is a sign of despicability and rudeness in the extreme. Even in Arab culture today, it's not good manners to cross your legs in a way that means that the person with whom you're speaking can see the sole of your foot or shoe.

That's rude. It's lifting the heel. Judas lifts his heel in rejection and rudeness at Jesus who has just washed that very foot.

Jesus' example here tells us that we cannot be selective about whom we love. But the fifth point about it is that God's grace to us in Jesus is completed when we practice what he gave us.

He extended his grace and love to us as the recipients of that grace. We are to love each other. You see, benefiting from Jesus' death means that we are appropriated by following the same example of love.

[27 : 28] It's not about knowing it, but doing it. So Jesus says in verse 17, if you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

You're not blessed for knowing them. You're blessed for doing them. I had thought of washing your feet tonight. I got so far as the bowl of caro and the towel.

And often churches have a ceremony of foot washing, usually if they do so on Maundy Thursday, the night before Good Friday. But the danger of doing that is that it trivializes what Jesus is on about in this chapter.

He's not in the end about washing feet. He's on about an act of love far greater than that. Dying on a cross to wash us from the insides out, to wash our sin and guilt away.

That is love to the max, love to the full. His death then for us is essential. It is enough.

[28 : 48] It is an example. One of the modern hymn writers put it this way. Lord of eternity dwells in humility.

Sorry, dwells in humanity, kneels in humility and washes our feet. Lord of infinity stooping so tenderly lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne.

If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. Amen. ■■■. Noomed away as a hello of your with