

Rocky Road: Washed Clean - Sunday 25th February 2024

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Preacher: Helen Emery

[0 : 00] Good morning, morning. Before I start, we have been talking about Rocky Road for three weeks and I haven't eaten any Rocky Road, so I thought I would rectify that situation and I've brought some just over by the hatch, so when we have coffee and drinks afterwards, help yourself to Rocky Road. So today we are continuing our series, Rocky Road, Life Lessons from Peter.

So over the last three weeks, we've delved in some really great episodes, haven't we? I reckon if the Gospels were a film, then Peter would get some absolutely cracking scenes, wouldn't he? So really quick recap. First, Dave looked at fisherman Peter when he was called from his boat. He asked him to come alongside him with his brother Andrew. Then we heard from the fabulous Kim about when Jesus walked on the water and Peter joined him for a short while anyway. And then last week, Ian unpacked Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarei Philippi.

So maybe before we move on to our next episode from Peter, we could take a moment to have a think about what we took from those three weeks. If you've missed any of those talks, not a problem, you can catch up later, but perhaps we can all just take stock of the thoughts and the feelings upon hearing about Peter's calling, maybe thinking about our own calling, what we learned from Peter about trust. And then maybe as we think about Peter's declarations about Jesus, we can think about who he is to us as well. For me, it's funny that Kim said that she really related to Peter, because to be fair, so do I. His massive overreactions, his all or nothing attitude. He's such a person of extremes, isn't he? So not too far from a description of my personality, to be honest. So maybe you too relate to him. Okay, so the passage that we're going to take a closer look at today is found in John's

Gospel, and it features Peter in a foot washing scenario. Now, I couldn't help but think of my husband Neil's reaction to the idea of anyone touching his feet for any reason, let alone washing them.

[2 : 41] He would absolutely free count. So stick with this if you too are slightly podophobic. We don't usually do this at St John's, but I thought if you wanted to grab a Bible or your phone and read the actual words, then you might find that helpful. We will watch the video, but if you wanted to actually read the words, I find that helpful sometimes. It's John 13, 1 to 17. And while you find that, I will just put a bit of context to it. This episode happens as Jesus is sharing the Jewish Passover meal with his closest friends. It would have been a really important night for Jesus and the disciples in any year, but this particular meal has even more significance as there's this growing sense that his arrest by the authorities is getting closer. So Jesus uses this opportunity over the meal to share with his disciples what's really on his heart. So we can have a watch of that or read if you prefer.

It was just before the Passover festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God. So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel round his waist.

After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him.

[4 : 56] He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, are you going to wash my feet?

Jesus replied, You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand. No, said Peter, you shall never wash my feet.

Jesus answered, Unless I wash you. You have no part with me. Then, Lord, Simon Peter replied, Not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well.

Jesus answered, Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet. Their whole body is clean, and you are clean, though not every one of you.

For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said, not everyone was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

[6 : 08] Do you understand what I have 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. I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you.

Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

So, on first watch or read, if you're like me, I see this as Jesus showing me how we should be ready to serve others, that we should be selfless, not seeing any task as beneath us, but serving each other with humility.

Thinking how this speaks into my experience here and now, I see it as a call to follow Jesus' actions where we find ourselves, to put others first.

[7 : 29] The job that Jesus does here would usually have been performed by the most junior servant in the household, so it shows us how readily Jesus accepts subservience, and we should be willing to do that too.

Peter understood this really well. Writing in one of his letters later, he said, yes, all of you be submissive to one another and be clothed with humility.

It's a verse which shows Peter came to understand the importance of humble service, and maybe the fact that he makes a point of saying be clothed with humility implies that he's perhaps remembering this foot washing act.

We're told Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist, literally clothing himself with humility. Now, all of that is a great takeaway, and we do well to practice this in any way we can.

I'm sure we can all think of examples of how we too can serve others in our own everyday context. However, I wanted to dip our toes, as it were, into a few other things that I took away from reading and re-reading this passage.

[8 : 51] I pondered on the actual act of washing, so the dirtiest part of the body in the context of sandal-wearing first-century Jews would be their feet.

The streets would have been open sewers, really. They'd have been all sorts of animal stuff mixed in with the dusty roads. So I reckon having their feet washed would feel really great.

I was trying then to think of maybe a modern-day equivalent of the worst, dirtiest job like this. maybe changing a child's nappy or cleaning up someone sick or dealing with like a bin of rotting food or something like that.

But in any of those, clean always feels much nicer, doesn't it? It feels better afterwards. Like, when you wash your face in the morning, it feels really quite refreshing, doesn't it?

I always feel that a little bit brighter, a little bit more awake. Or when at the hairdresser's someone else washes my hair, it feels really calming and really, like, pampering.

[10 : 07] I mean, I know I'm paying them, but you get my thinking. It might be that you really like having a soak in the bath because that's quite cleansing and calming.

Now, before you think I'm missing the point on all this, I just like the idea of us channeling the feelings behind this physical act of foot washing.

Just so we can relate to it a little bit more, I do think there's a real value and power in physical acts in the context of worship.

So, expressing ourselves in body, mind, and spirit in church. So, there are lots of examples of that happening, aren't there?

So, singing is a physical act. Some people might raise their hands when they do that. In prayer, people might hold out their hands as a physical sign of their openness to God.

[11 : 15] We sometimes share in communion where there's taste and texture to be physically experienced. We maybe kneel when we do that and again, hold out our hands.

All ways of informing our worship experience. Then, there's baptism. This being immersed in water as a one-off act of commitment and renewal.

So, here, Jesus uses this physical act of foot washing. This has been done, apparently, in St. John's in the past as part of a service.

I don't know how appealing you would find that, having your feet washed. I'm guessing it wouldn't necessarily be everyone's cup of tea, but it might actually feel a little bit too self-conscious or maybe that is the point that it's a really humbling act for both us and for the person doing the washing. So, for each of us, I wonder what physical acts or demonstrations of faith might help us to relate to God in a different or deeper way.

[12:47] So, back to the passage, there is a long biblical tradition of seeing the physical act of washing as representative of spiritual cleansing.

So, Jesus says in this passage, unless I wash you, you have no part with me. It was expected by Jesus. It was key to his relationship with all of his disciples, including Peter.

Indeed, washing as spiritual cleansing suggests there's a need for us to be cleansed of those things which muddy our spirits, those thoughts or words or actions which tarnish or taint our understanding of ourselves and of God.

So, maybe allowing God to help us to get rid of life's dirt which clings to us just like the sand and the mud and the sweaty feet, I then can't help but make the connection between this act and the idea of confession.

Now, when we think of confession, I imagine we can sometimes see it just as beating ourselves up for getting it wrong, for dwelling on how terrible we are and begging God for forgiveness.

[14:31] Yet, in the light of this foot-washing episode, I'm not sure that that's the understanding of confession that Jesus wants us to have. You see, it's Jesus who initiates the foot-washing without saying a word.

This way of cleansing Peter and the disciples of the dirt that their lives have picked up along the way is almost as if Jesus is saying, let me wash you clean, let me show you how good it feels to be rid of the dirt in life, the unkind or unhelpful thoughts, the mean or selfish behaviour, the insensitive or judgmental words.

See, doesn't that feel better? Now that I've done that for you today, ask me every day to wash off the daily dirt that you've picked up and help each other to get rid of the unhelpful stuff of life and wash each other's feet too.

and we can notice that Peter doesn't actually confess anything either. Jesus knows he needs washing anyway.

Why? Well, this whole passage emphasises it's because of Jesus' love. We're told he loved them to the end.

[16:12] it starts off this whole episode and this act is purely out of love for the benefit of the disciples. Jesus reckons that getting rid of life's dirt which clings to us is a good idea because he has our best interests in mind.

he knows we're going to mess up and he doesn't want us to carry that for too long or have it define us.

Indeed, it's interesting that in all of the healing miracles Jesus performed, they happened without the need for the person to confess.

He might sometimes say go and sin no ball but confession isn't a prerequisite to him working a miracle in their lives.

Instead, confession is for our benefit, to see that life lived God's way is better for us. Yes, God may sometimes lead us into seeing the damage that our actions have done or enable us to appreciate the hurt we've caused by our words or our behaviour either to ourselves or to others.

[17:41] But that eye-opening isn't designed to make us feel guilty. Guilty is never a good motivation for anything, is it?

Rather, it's designed to instil in us a profound desire to change, to repent, to be washed clean of that dirt.

God. So maybe that's where baptism comes in, that one-off act of full immersion in which people with a new faith or a new realisation of God's love for them respond to that love by publicly making a fresh start with God.

But baptism is just a one-off experience, so when Peter gives his classic all-or-nothing response to the foot washing, and he says, not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well, Jesus reassures us that we are already clean.

He says, those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet, their whole body is clean. So maybe we can just let that sink in a bit.

[19 : 10] we are righteous, holy, redeemed, clean already. We don't have to do or not do anything for this to be true.

As Romans 8.1 tells us, therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And that means that confession is not about ensuring God loves us, but it's all about demonstrating our desire for a clean relationship with the one who loves us so much that he wants us to live the best life on offer, life to the full.

I do love the quote that says, God loves us the way we are, but too much to leave us that way. I tried to find out who said that, but Google told me it was like five different people, so I have absolutely no idea who said it, but I love it anyway.

I think that maybe this regular foot washing, this process of getting rid of the surface rubbish is really quite a positive and releasing process.

[20 : 46] So what might confession this picture of foot washing actually look like in our everyday lives today? Well, to go back to the concept Matt was sharing last month of our salvation being this two-way relationship, in any relationship there is stuff that we do or don't do which isn't in the best interests of that relationship and we say sorry when we know we've acted that way.

In our relationships with each other, we share successes, we ask for help when we need it. So in the same way, there's a place for all of that in our relationship with Jesus.

So that includes the saying sorry. me, I for one know that when I make these wrong choices, those sins, deep down you just know it wasn't a great idea, don't you?

I don't need to share the examples, we all know the sort of thing, but since these things, the things that we do wrong, look different for each and every one of us in our relationship with Jesus, I'd suggest Jesus meets our sins and our need for cleansing in ways which are personal to us.

The theologian Derek Flood, I wanted to share a quote but I couldn't help laugh at his name, we're talking about water, his name's Flood, brilliant. Jesus did not have a formula, he encountered each person differently.

[22 : 51] he looked into their heart and said to them what the spirit told him to say so that they might find life. And we need to do that too, not with a formula but through the spirit meeting each person at the point of their need with the gospel.

It isn't therefore about seeing confession as a legalistic ritual done because it's expected or we're told to but it's part of the full relationship, the communication and experience of living with Jesus. Confession is part of a whole long list which also includes celebrating the good, bringing him your questions, thanking him for the positive, asking for support with the difficult.

My personal experience of confession is that enabling me to let go of the guilt, to leave with Jesus those times that I genuinely messed up, not because he needs it but because I do.

Because I need to let go of thinking over and over that conversation when I reacted unkindly or the attitude towards that person I had which wasn't loving.

[24 : 32] To stop my identity being wrapped up in that habit or that mistake I made, defining who I am.

So how do you feel when someone says sorry to you? You feel really loved, don't you? The relationship is improved, your sense of connection is restored and I think maybe Jesus feels a bit like that too.

So how do we actually do this? How do we confess then? The priest theologian John Stott suggests three different ways which I'll go through.

First off, it could be in secret to God, part of that ongoing conversation between you and Jesus. It might be in private to a person whose relationship with you has been harmed by something and you want to restore that relationship.

or thirdly, it could be a corporate act, something that we do all together as a church so we know we are all in this together.

[25 : 55] Confession can therefore be a private thing between us and God, it can be a personal thing between us and someone else, or it can be a collective thing where we as a church

community confess where we've gone wrong or not followed God's way in order for him to wash our feet and set us back on the right track again.

Now you might have your own ideas about what this collective sin might be about. For me, I suspect we do well as a national body of believers to confess the times when we failed to be inclusive, as we should have been over the years, but maybe you've got your own ideas of collective failings.

Another practical way of thinking about confession comes from my previous minister, Reverend Ian Hayter, over at Wade Street Church that I went to in Litchfield, and he summarised confession with a load of R words.

I love a bit of alliteration to keep your attention. So we'll go through all of these R words in turn. First off, there's this need to be real.

So a reality in accepting that we all do wrong. There's no point faking it or pretending that we're all perfect or, like I often do, pretending that those things that we do or the attitudes we hold are actually absolutely fine, really, aren't they?

[27 : 42] They're just normal. Everyone else does that, don't they? So being real. We can then recognise our sins as we acknowledge them to God.

now that can feel really difficult to admit to, but by responding to that prompting in our conscience that we know deep down wasn't a great idea, as the first step on the road, we can then move to repentance.

This way we keep the dirt from around our feet from dragging us down too much. We then need resolve to avoid making the same mistake again.

Now this resolve is really hard, isn't it? I'm going to share that we had January, didn't we? And now we've got Lent and it's full of all those resolutions and giving stuff up and not eating chocolate and taking up running.

I will fully admit that my dry January lasted about 17 hours and my Lent promise to do a new Bible reading app started three days late.

[29 : 05] It was supposed to be like every day. I started it three days late and I'm two days behind already, which is quite bad. And I know that they're quite frivolous examples, but I'm making the point that this developing the habits, the healthy habits, so that we don't go back to the same state as before, might stop this cycle of guilt and we can live in the freedom that life in relationship with Jesus offers.

So having that resolve means we can then move on and enjoy release and relief that God offers and we can rejoice in him and in his love for us and in the forgiveness that he offers.

So if we do feel like we need to unburden ourselves to give over that mistake we made to God or that thing that we said or that action that we took before it consumes us and becomes our identity then we can see confession as a gift and a benefit that it is God washing us clean and refreshing us for our journey ahead with him.

So as we finish up with our foot washing episode, I just hope that something's resonated with you. I'd encourage you to consider how it feels to be clean, how confession as one of the spiritual practices might at times be helpful, but that we can rest assured that Jesus has already washed us fully so we can enjoy a life.

Free from the pressure of having to do it right to be perfect, we can let go of carrying guilt and experience a full and joy-filled life of relationship with Jesus.

[31 : 28] Amen.