

Communion Preparatory

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[0 : 00] drama, isn't there, with David? Crises in his life, confused, bewildered, thinks that God has left him, and you sing four stanzas of that psalm, and then you wait for the but, and it comes. And grace triumphs over the doubts and the uncertainties that were in the heart of David.

Well, I'd like us this evening to turn to John chapter 13, and to consider part of that chapter together, the verses that we've read just now. My plan was to have preached this last night, and to look at something in John 14 this evening, but I'm going to go back because I think it's more helpful to do that. These are words that come from the first pre-communion. The Lord is about, or maybe just has, it's not altogether clear. I think he just has instituted the Lord's Supper. So, it's a post-communion in that sense, the upper room discourse. Don't find much of this in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They concentrate on the act of the Lord's Supper being instituted. But here, John records the words, the teaching, the instruction of Jesus that he set in that context. And we do well at a communion to return to the teaching of Jesus surrounding the Lord's Supper. Yes, there are other passages of Scripture to which we can go with profit, equal profit, doubtless. But there's nevertheless something very special about the words that Jesus gave in the context of the Lord's Supper.

And I think it helps us to avoid traditions in the church that surround communion times, that often have their focus not on the good news of the gospel, but on the darker realities of Christian experience, at least traditionally. And I think it's good for us to start, to continue, and to end the Lord's Supper in the context of what it is, a gospel good news remembrance from start, to finish. The disciples last night with Jesus was uncomfortable for them in a number of ways.

And at the point that we've taken up the narrative here in John 13, we see Jesus challenging every vestige of self-righteousness and self-importance remaining among them. We go back to the synoptic gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We discover a dispute arose amongst the disciples somewhere just before this teaching is given. And it's good to remember the arrogance, the pride that was there in the hearts of some of Jesus' followers. It was reflected in the ambitious mother who wanted one son to sit on the left and the other on the right of the Savior at the consummation of all things. And Jesus teaches them that really the right attitude, the right place, is not to be seeking preeminence or even eminence, but to be humble. And he very vividly shocks them out of what we would call today their comfort zone by a very extravagant and uncalled for act. He stripped himself to the waist, and he took a basin of water and a towel, and he went round them one by one, and he washed their dirty, travel-stained feet. For them, the deed was as simple as it was shocking. But if it is simple in one sense, it is deeply complex in another. And Jesus indeed turns this action in two separate directions, to make on the one hand a deeply spiritual point, and on the other hand, an intensely practical point. Let's think first of all of this action of the washing of the feet as a symbol of spiritual cleansing. We see that in verses 8 through to 11 and Jesus' interaction with Peter.

It's an interesting fact that in 1852, the pre-Raphaelite artist Ford Maddox Brown painted this scene, depicting Jesus as the gospel narrative sets it out, semi-clad, kneeling at the feet of his disciples. And it caused an outcry, a sensation, when it was first exhibited. And unlike just about every other picture that Ford Maddox Brown painted, nobody wanted to buy this one. And it remained dark for a number of years, when to get it off his hands and to earn money for it, he capitulated.

[5 : 43] The popular sensitivities. And he repainted Jesus as fully clad. He had no difficulty in disposing of it at all when he did that. The idea of a semi-naked Jesus does not fit in with the susceptibilities and the sensitivities of many Christians. The very thought makes us edgy and uncomfortable.

And if that's so, then our reaction is precisely the reaction of his disciples. Jesus confused them and he embarrassed them. He came to Simon Peter, verse 6, 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. He had in mind, as Jesus refers later on, this is the one who is the teacher, the rabbi. More than that, this is the one who is the Lord. How can the Messiah, the Lord, the teacher, step down to wash the feet of his servants and his disciples? It's unthinkable.

The disciples had placed him on a certain pedestal. Now, this is interesting. Our reverence and our worship is one thing. Giving Christ his due place as set out in Scripture is one thing. But to elevate him to us on a pedestal that has more to do with taste and human attitudes of decency is not right. And he won't have it. And he comes down from that pedestal and he shocks them.

And he says, Peter, Peter, if you're not going to let me do this, then you can't have anything from me at all. I have nothing to give you. This is part of what I am doing and you must let me do it.

[8 : 12] This is indispensable. Receiving me as servant to wash your feet is indispensable to the whole process of salvation. What he was going to do the next day upon the cross would have no significance and no application to Peter unless he submitted to the washing of his feet.

And so we read Peter with his characteristic over-the-top exuberance. Not only wants his feet washed, but he wants his hands and his head as well. And Jesus' comment to him is, a person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet. His whole body is clean. And then these words, the crucial words in this exchange, and you are clean. You are clean. If you don't take anything else away this evening, coming as those who anticipate a seat at the Lord's table tomorrow, coming to prepare your heart for that event, if you don't take anything else away, take away these words of Jesus ringing in your ears, you are clean.

But you say, what about this self-examination thing? Are we not supposed to examine ourselves and to discover our sin? Well, the answer to that, of course, is yes and no. I think the reality is we examine ourselves to discover our sinfulness, not necessarily to trace over every sin and failure in our lives.

It's a very real sense in which the Christian has to learn to leave that behind. Forgetting the things that are in the past, we press on, Paul tells us. In the Old Testament, the Lord says he takes our sins and he casts them into the depths of the ocean.

And he's talking about the Mariana Trench off Guam, the deepest place in the ocean that nobody knew about then. He's using it as a figure of speech, of course.

[11 : 05] And we know recently that that Mariana Trench was penetrated again in an amazing expedition, dropping hours at a time to the depths of the ocean.

And the Lord has taken our sins and he's cast them into the depths of the ocean. And that very wise old Dutch Christian, who's no longer with us, Corrie Ten Boom, said, yes, she said, and you know this, he puts up a sign and it says, no fishing.

It's gone. It's gone. My sins and faults of youth, do thou, O Lord, forget? He has. He's chosen not to remember these things.

He hasn't actually forgotten. He isn't capable of forgetting. But he's positively chosen not to remember our sins and our failures, not only of youth, but of middle age and old age too.

They've gone. You remember the picture of Pilgrim, who comes with his burden to the cross.

[12 : 19] And there he looks upon the cross. And his burden is loosed. And it bangs away down the hill.

And it disappears into an open sepulchre. And what does he say? I didn't see it again. It had gone. I saw it no more. And my friends, the Lord is saying to you this evening, you are clean.

And if you're not, there's something wrong with his work. You are clean. As a result of his death, our sins are fully dealt with.

And this is the nature of the gospel. This is the root, the heart of the gospel. This is the good news. This is what David longed to hear and never really heard.

You only get a glimpse of it in the Psalms. It hadn't come to its full revelation. It comes to full revelation in the New Testament. In the work of Calvary and the exposition of that work, particularly through the writing of the apostles.

[13 : 38] Christ's work has our redemption. He doesn't have our cleansing possible. He actually redeems.

He actually justifies. He actually cleanses. He washes us from every sin and from every stain and from every fault.

And you know, God's people need to hear this. And they need to hear it time and time and time again. I think it's a great pity that in the liturgy, if you like, of the free church, we don't have a place for the sins of God's people to be declared forgiven.

John Knox, having worked on the book of Common Prayer with Cranmer to some degree, knew the importance of this.

And he referred to the ministerial declaration of forgiveness as, let me quote him, holy and wholesome medicine, taking away all trembling and dreadful fear.

[14 : 54] And then he adds, communicating a stout courage in the midst of adversities. The devil will accuse you. Your conscience will accuse you.

Wrongly so at times. Rightly so at others. Others will accuse you. You see, that work of accusation is of the essence of Satan's work.

He's the accuser. The conviction of the Holy Spirit is quite a different thing. The conviction of the Holy Spirit is usually quite precise.

He lays his finger on issues. We can deal with these. We can repent of them. We can seek help. We can seek grace. But the satanic accusation is a nag.

It's never precise because the devil never wants you to get your finger on it. He never wants you to be able to repent of it. He never wants you to be forgiven of it. He just wants to cast you down and discourage you and distress you under an indefinable burden of sin and guilt.

[16 : 03] And Jesus breaks through all that darkness and all that morbidity. And he says, you are clean. And Knox says, to know that will give you a stout courage in the midst of adversities.

That declaration of pardon, Jesus sees, as part of showing us the full extent of his love. Look at verse 1. The second half of verse 1.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. So he washes their feet. And then he interprets it. And he says, you are clean.

If he is showing us the full extent of his love, we must receive the full extent of his love. We must allow his word to triumph over every thought and every sensation and every dark mood that would beset us.

This is really the battle in the valley of the shadow of darkness. Will we believe Christ or will we believe the accuser? Will we fight him by faith on the ground of the word of God?

[17 : 27] Or will we capitulate and allow him to nag us and rob us of our peace and rob us of our Christian joy and rob us of our stability? You are clean.

But we must, at the same time, be careful lest we misinterpret what this definitive cleansing is.

it does not mean it does not mean that there is no cause or need for ongoing repentance and confession of sin. Christ says, you are clean and so we are.

And we rejoice in that tonight. We allow that word to triumph over every other word that would come to us. You are clean. How can I come to that table?

You are clean. How can I serve you? You are clean. How can I have hope for heaven? You are clean. There's your answer. But we do sin and we do fail daily, hourly, moment by moment.

[18 : 42] And God's word sets out very clearly a process here. If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all our iniquity, the same apostle John recalls.

And that's really what he was saying to Peter. Peter says, Lord, not just my feet but my head and my hands. And Jesus said, if you've had your feet done, you're clean. Amen. I suppose in a way every male in the congregation knows something about this.

I'm looking around to see if we've got any bearded men here but I don't think we have tonight. Imagine you had grown a beard and you decided you were done with the beard.

So you shave it off. You're now clean shaven but you have to apply the razor every day. You're still clean shaven.

Even when a little bit of stubble grows, you can still say you're clean shaven. But you do need to apply the razor. And so it is with our sins and our failures. It doesn't deprive us of our definitive cleansing at all that devil would love to make us think it did.

[20 : 10] It doesn't deprive us of that cleansing. But it is wrong and it needs forgiveness. And so we confess our sins and he who is faithful not so much to us that's not John's thought.

It's not that he's being faithful to us in forgiving us. He's being faithful to his son who has paid the price for our forgiveness. He's recognizing what Christ has done.

Because of what he has done he forgives us and he will forgive us and it's his delight to forgive us and he loves it when we come to him and confess our faults and our failings and he will never nag us and he will never rub our noses in it and he will never make us think we are failures.

That's the work of the devil. He takes us as a loving father and he picks us up and he dusts us down and he sets us on our feet and he establishes our way.

Sounds like a psalm doesn't it? Well of course it's there and he sets us going again. So there's always that need for living in the light of our cleansing never taking it for granted but never for one moment diminishing the momentousness of that declaration.

[21 : 32] So Jesus takes the foot washing and first of all he uses it as a symbol of spiritual cleansing and he says to his people there in the upper room you are clean.

Now he adds and I don't spend too much time on this he adds but not all of you and then that is very precisely interpreted for us to leave us in no doubt at all what he meant by that for he knew who was going to betray him and that was why he said not everyone was clean.

There's only one exception amongst the disciples of Jesus there's only one exception amongst his true followers united in grace to him and that's the son of perdition that's Judas Iscariot there never was never has been and there never will be another he's completely unique you don't need to fear you could be another you can't be another there was in the nature of the case only one who would betray him and that's why later on in this same upper room discourse although the discourse has changed somewhat he's not now Jesus is not now addressing his disciples he's addressing his father in chapter 17 and he's allowing them to hear this prayer and he says of all that you've given me I haven't lost one of them except the son of perdition that the scripture might be fulfilled so you can take that word of cleansing to you and not fear that you're the exception by the nature of the case there is no exception all those in union with Christ all those who are true

Christians they have received that cleansing but the second thing Jesus does he takes the foot washing and he uses it to set before his disciples a standard of humble service a symbol of spiritual cleansing and a standard of humble service we see that coming out in verses 12 to 17 we've referred already to that display of pride amongst the disciples that Luke records in chapter 22 and that was the immediate context and perhaps the trigger for the foot washing itself if so if that is the case we can easily see how Jesus goes beyond his unique ministry of dealing with sin to show how Christians should respond to each other when Jesus uses the foot washing as a symbol of spiritual cleansing he's referring to a work that only he can do he only has that power to forgive sins we can't follow him there there's no ministerial priestly function that equates to his definitive absolution we can't follow him there because we can't follow him to the cross we can't reenact that work of redemption that is a unique ministry to Jesus but he also wanted to make the point that there was something about the foot washing that was not unique to his redemptive ministry something that was truly an example where we can follow him and where we can put into practice what he did himself so he says in verse 15 he said

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you you should do as I have done for you and can't you hear the response what me do that for him or her or them and Jesus says yes you for him for her for them Don Carson in his commentary on John reminds us that one of the ways human pride manifests itself in a stratified society which ours still is very largely is in refusing to take the lower role that's not my job that's somebody else's lower down the pecking order that's beneath my dignity oh we don't usually say that we might not even have the courage actually to think it but we feel it and we respond like that we imagine ourselves fitting in there are those above us there are those below us and we're not comfortable in losing our sense of self worth losing our niche in the pecking order losing our sense of dignity refusing to take the lower role it's endemic in church life and it's true generally in human society but it ought not to be true in the church it's a very interesting incident in fact

[27 : 38] I was just recently rereading the travels in Scotland of Samuel Johnson and the story is told that when Prince Charles Stuart was hiding in sky disguised as a servant of Malcolm MacLeod of Razay they came footsore and weary to something that was not much more than a hovel and the old lady that was in the house recognised Malcolm MacLeod of Razay and honoured him by washing his feet but she thought it beneath her dignity to wash the feet of his servant who in fact was his lord she was prevailed upon to do it and the answer to such a sense of self importance is simple strikingly simple totally uncomplicated if it was not below

Christ's dignity to wash the feet of his disciples he being their lord and teacher it certainly cannot be beneath our dignity to wash one another's feet and at this point Jesus says this and he does it not to attract our adulation he does not want the response from us isn't that wonderful isn't that amazing that he would do it that's not the response he's looking for at all he's not wanting our adulation he wants our emulation he wants us not to approve of his action who are we to approve of what the son of God does he wants us to do what he did he wants us to follow him in his example and when you set it in those stark terms there can be no conceivable reason for refusal and then that raises the question ought we then to have ritual foot washing in our churches as some churches do and of course

I think without too much difficulty we can come up with many reasons why not but I think there are two that are very cogent and important and the first reason of course is that it is dangerous to base any doctrine or practice on one or two passages of scripture Jesus does this he doesn't command that we do it ritually but the second I think is even more powerful and it's this to ritualizing foot washing would deprive it of its ordinary everyday significance we can do it in a sanitized churchy context and satisfy ourselves that we have done it we would wash the feet symbolically of people who have already washed their feet at home but Jesus doesn't want us literally necessarily to wash feet he wants us literally to be servants of one another he's going to say

I have come not to be served but to serve and he's going to say I do not call you my servants I call you my friends and it is in that context of friendship not just fellowship I think our word fellowship sometimes can be a mask it can be a substitute for friendship we can have fellowship with people we're not particularly friendly with and there's something I think very important about what Jesus says you are my friends and if you're my friends you're friends of one another and that makes the serving easier in a sense we're serving our friends and we're serving the friends of Jesus serving him in them and that's very important to grasp that our response to Jesus example and command therefore is not to be ritual and sacramental but ordinary and everyday attitude of humility that expresses itself in repeated acts of well helpfulness helpfulness it's nothing particularly grand it's just helping one another so Jesus wants us to do support one another encourage one another by all means pray for one another but there's a little bit of a hypocrisy about our praying for one another when it doesn't have a practical bent to it and nowhere does this combination of helpfulness and humility find itself expressed more clearly I think than in

Philippians chapter 2 where Christ makes himself of no reputation and in a graded series of steps descends from the glory of heaven to the dereliction of the cross and he does it because he wants to help us to help us to do what we cannot do ourselves and to help us in one million other ways if he gives us the greater will he not give us the lesser not the principle Paul unrolls in Romans chapter 8 if God the father does not spare his own son for us how will he not also with him freely give us all things the lesser is included in the greater I think there are far too many who imperil the ministry of the church

[34 : 17] I mean it's ministry right there it's mission who imperil the mission of the church by allowing their sense of personal dignity to get in the way have we not seen tragedies along these lines how we long to see people coming to Christ perhaps from the most difficult of backgrounds and then they come to Christ and they receive a cold shoulder in the fellowship of his church not really included not really welcomed and not really befriended we must not stand on our dignity we must permit ourselves to lose what status we have in our own eyes and the imagined respect of others

Jesus quite readily took risks with his own reputation he was accused of being a drunkard and a wine bibber and associated with people of loose morals his reputation was in tatters in the eyes of polite society but it didn't cost him a second thought there's a sacrifice in that there's a self sacrifice and I suppose it is one of the problems in our church is that that idea of self sacrifice rarely occurs to us in some traditions they have the idea of self sacrifice of giving up small luxuries for Lent we don't have Lent so we don't even give up small luxuries there's a danger we don't think self sacrificially as Jesus did it was

Siti Stud who saw so clearly the lesson of John 13 and his logic was impeccable and his theology was impeccable when he wrote those words if Jesus Christ be God and died for me then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him and much the same can be said of Isaac Watts when he penned those words when I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride and don't you catch the irony in that last line pour contempt on all my pride it's my pride that enables me to pour contempt on others and what says in the eyes in the light of the cross the only thing that is contemptible is my pride it's pride that leads us to look disdainfully on others it's pride that makes us think ourselves in any way better more important than they but what's his right what is truly contemptible is our pride and the foot washing demonstrated the love that took

Jesus to the cross and when we see it like that there is only one response from us and that is to offer ourselves unconditionally and wholeheartedly in his and in one another's service so let's reflect on that as we leave tonight two lessons one event the foot washing a symbol of our spiritual cleansing he says to all his people you are clean and he says in the light of that now go and do what I've done wash one another's feet serve one another in the most menial humble role if necessary and then we know his blessing and we know real friendship not just a woolly fellowship and then we're a powerful dynamic force in the world where he has placed us it was said of the early

Christians Tertullian records this for us it was said of the early Christians how they love one another how they love one another yet when our clever journalists look at the Presbyterian church in Scotland today and see eleven different denominations they say oh they talk about it but they don't practice it a lot of hard work to do but in the knowledge that we are clean we can go with courage and resolution trusting in Christ to help us bit by bit increment by increment to set right what is wrong and be a powerful testimony to him in this world where he has placed us may he bless his word to us tonight