

The Towel, Bethesda Coffee Morning, 11 May 2016.

We are currently looking at seven instances where the New Testament refers to our Lord's garments. You could almost say, I suppose, that our talks enable us to sneak a look into 'our Lord's wardrobe'. And this morning we are going to focus briefly on a towel, and what our Lord did with it.

Our Bible reading is taken from John's gospel, chapter 13 – a passage which records an event that took place on the evening before our Lord's crucifixion:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end (probably with the meaning, 'to the uttermost'). During supper ... Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands,¹ and that He had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper, laid aside His outer garments, took a towel, and tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel He had wrapped around Him.

When He came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?' Jesus answered him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand'. Peter said to him, 'You shall never wash my feet'. Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with me'. Peter said to him, 'Lord, then not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!'

Jesus said to him, 'Those who have bathed are completely clean, and do not need to wash themselves, except for their feet. And you are clean ...'.

When He had washed their feet, He put on His outer garments and resumed His place, and He said to them, 'Do you understand what I have done to you? ... If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,² you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that, as I have done to you, you should do also'.³

And I guess that must rank as one of the most remarkable actions ever performed by the Lord Jesus. But, alas for me, my familiarity with it threatens to rob me of much of its impact.

And yet I have no excuse, because our reading goes out of its way to lay tremendous stress, on the one hand, on the greatness of the Person who performed that action, and, on the other hand, on the lowliness of the task itself.

We can hardly miss the way in which the declaration that He 'laid aside His outer garments' and 'took a towel', stands in marked and deliberate contrast with what was said immediately before – namely, 'Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God'. It is being emphasised for us, that is, that, at that very time, when our Lord was fully conscious, not only of His heavenly origin and destiny, but that the Father had placed 'all things' (had placed universal sovereignty) in His hands, He chose then to humble Himself and to take a towel into His hands.

I say 'a towel', but I understand that the word translated 'towel' describes a linen cloth worn by a slave.⁴ In Bible times, although sometimes a person would wash his or her own feet,⁵ often the task was performed by a slave. Yet, in the latter case, feet-washing was regarded as such a menial and demeaning task by the Jews of those days that no Jewish slave could be required to wash the feet of his Jewish master. That humiliating duty was reserved for non-Jewish slaves.⁶

I have no doubt that any one of the disciples present that evening would have gladly performed such a lowly service for our Lord Himself had He asked. But there was no way in which any these men – who, on more than one occasion, had been heard arguing among themselves who was the greatest⁷ – was ever going to perform it for his fellow-disciples. Not on your life!

As we read, the Saviour gave the disciples *two* explanations for what He did that evening.

His one explanation came after He had finished washing the feet of them all, when He applied to them the personal and practical implication of the example He had modelled for them. In His own words, 'If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that, as I have done to you, you should do also'. No true follower of His, He made clear, had the right to regard any lowly and menial task beneath him or her when it came to serving others.⁸

The Lord gave the other explanation while still engaged in washing the disciples feet.⁹ For, when He had come to the apostle Peter, he (Peter) had first protested indignantly, 'You shall never wash *my* feet',¹⁰ but then, when Jesus had cautioned him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with me',¹¹ the apostle had swung like a pendulum, demanding that Jesus wash, as he said, 'not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!'

At which point, Jesus explained to him (and I quote), 'Those who have bathed are completely clean, and do not need to wash themselves, except for their feet'.

At the natural, physical level, our Lord's words were, of course, obviously true. A man might have taken a bath or have washed all over at the beginning of the day, but if, when wearing sandals (as all did then), he walked outside on the dusty roads, he would still need to wash his feet on entering anyone's house.

In addition, that is, to the once-for-all cleansing there remained a need for the repeated washing of the feet from any fresh defilement.

But our Lord was pointing His disciples to a deeper significance to what He was doing than that. He was talking to them about how this all this worked at the spiritual level. Namely, that the initial and total cleansing which He provides when somebody becomes a Christian by faith is a once-for-all 'bathing', and that that once-for-all cleansing from sin and guilt does not need to be repeated – indeed, it cannot be repeated. As the apostle John expressed it in one of his epistles, 'the blood of Jesus (God's) Son cleanses us from all sin'.¹²

And yet, for as long as the believer is in the world, he or she will continue to contract spiritual defilement. And the repeated *washing* of the feet of which Jesus spoke corresponds to the regular removal of that defilement from the Christian's conscience by the Christian's confession of any known sin to God.¹³

Not that Peter or any of the other disciples grasped any of this at the time.¹⁴ Still less did they grasp that the basis for anybody's once-for-all cleansing lay in our Lord's suffering and death the following day. But it did.

And we must not miss that, at the very outset of his record of this incident (which centred in our Lord's use of the towel), the apostle John said of the Saviour that 'having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end' – 'to the uttermost'.

For John wanted his readers (us included) to know that, although Jesus had loved His own all along, He was now about to show them the full extent of His love – and to do so, not only in an act of extreme humility and self-abasing love (performed with a towel, water and a basin), but in an act of extreme suffering and self-sacrificing love (performed on the hideous cross of Golgotha).

And so, in a way, the towel in our Lord's hands which we consider this morning provides us, not only (i) with a model of Christian conduct, and (ii) with a symbol of spiritual cleansing, but (iii) with a display of matchless love.

Notes

¹ Cf. John 3. 35. But the point at the beginning of chapter 13 is not that of the Father's love for Him, but of His love for them, John 13. 1.

² Cf. Luke 22. 27.

³ John 13. 1-15.

⁴ The word translated 'towel' is the Greek *lention*; this is a transliteration of the Latin *lintheum*. 'The *lintheum* is worn by a slave; Suetonius, Caligula, 26. 2', C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John*, on John 13. 4. See R. Routledge, *Passover and Last Supper*, *Tyndale Bulletin* 53.2 (2002) 203-221, Footnote 32.

⁵ Luke 7. 44.

⁶ See G. R. Beasley-Murray's comment on John 13. 4-5 in the *Word Biblical Commentary*: 'The menial nature of footwashing in Jewish eyes is seen in its inclusion among works which Jewish slaves should not be required to do; the task was reserved for Gentile slaves and for wives and children'. *Mekhilta* on Exodus 21. 2: accessible at <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eaymyOWLPOQC&q=wash+the+feet#v=snippet&q=wash%20the%20feet&f=false>. (This Jewish tradition was based on Lev. 25. 39-40).

'In one well-known story, when Rabbi Ishmael returned home from synagogue one day and his mother wished to wash his feet, he refused on the ground that the task was too demeaning. She took the matter to the rabbinic court on the ground that she viewed the task, in his case, as an honour (cf. SB 1. 707)', D. A. Carson, *Pillar Commentary* on John 13. 3-5.

⁷ See Luke 9. 46; 22. 24.

⁸ And clearly neither John nor Peter (who both had their feet washed by the Lord) forgot that moment: (i) John because he still recalled it when writing his gospel, and (ii) Peter because of the clear allusion he made to it towards the close of his first epistle when exhorting his readers, 'be clothed with humility', 1 Pet. 5. 5 – where the word translated 'clothed' has the idea of tying on securely, and, it is claimed, refers to the apron worn by slaves (The word translated 'clothed' is derived 'from κόμβος, a roll, band, or girth: a knot or roll of cloth, made in tying or tucking up any part of the dress. The kindred word ἐγκόμβωμα, from which the verb is directly formed, means a slave's apron, under which the loose garments were girt up', *Vincent's Word Studies*, Volume 1. Cf. Robertson's *Word Pictures* and the comment in the *Cambridge Greek Testament*).

⁹ John 13. 12 suggests that most of the feet-washing was performed after Peter's interjection.

¹⁰ Again, as at Caesarea Philippi, Peter was well-motivated, but in error; Mark 8. 32-33.

¹¹ Unless a person has been cleansed by Jesus' blood, he or she can have no part with Him.

¹² 1 John 1. 7.

¹³ 1 John 1. 9.

¹⁴ See John 13. 7; 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand'.