

The Foot-washing Church

Colossians 3:12-14

As I've reflected on these verses from Colossians 3, my mind has been drawn back again and again to that moment in John's gospel, when in the quiet of a secluded room, Jesus stooped down to wash the feet of his closest friends. Can I read that passage for you? It's John 13:1-17:

¹ 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.

² The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷ Jesus replied, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

⁸ "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

⁹ "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

This is God's Word.

And I think the reason I keep being drawn back to this story, is that it would be easy for us to miss the force of the verses before us today in Colossians.

These three verses are so beautiful it would be easy to see them simply as nice verses you could cross-stitch and hang on the wall. The sorts of verses that you would read at a wedding, and everyone would smile and nod and say to the person next to them, "Oh that's nice!"

If we *only* see these verses as nice, however, there's the danger that we'll think they are somehow up in the clouds and not suited to the harsh realities of life. Good for the high of the wedding day, but not cut out for the ups and downs of a real marriage. We could read them and feel all warm and fuzzy, all the while holding back the lurking suspicion that this just isn't the way the world works.

And that suspicion is actually *right!* This is not the way the world works. It's the way *heaven works*. And John 13 shows us that the life of heaven has come down to earth. As Jesus serves his disciples he catches them up into a life of love that is literally out of this world.

And so if we hear these verses in Colossians properly, they won't leave us stuck in the clouds, they will drive us to wash one another's stinky feet. If we really get what Paul is saying here, we won't just hang them up on our walls, instead we will go down on our knees in humble service of our brothers and sisters. We won't just feel all warm and fuzzy, we will be compelled by Christ's love to get our hands dirty in gritty and practical love.

Because ultimately these verses point us to our foot-washing Saviour, and they call us to be a foot-washing church. Let's go!

1. The Foot-washing Saviour

First and foremost we must see that Colossians 3:12-14 paint for us a picture of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. Before they make any demands on us, they point us to our foot-washing Saviour and they remind us of what is true of us because of him.

And perhaps one of the reasons we so easily skim over these verses is because they can seem to us like ethical common sense. Well of course everyone should live compassionate and kind and humble lives. It's a no brainer!

But the reason we think that is because we live in a culture that is indelibly marked by the Christian gospel. These values are not self-evident for all people in all places. They are Christ-evident, and they only become clear to us as we keep our eyes fixed on him.

So think to that upper room as Jesus gathers with his disciples. What compassion and kindness as he sees his dirty and tired disciples and gets up from the table to serve them. What humility as he takes off his outer robe and wraps himself in the towel of a slave. What gentleness as he get's down onto his hands and knees and washes their feet. And isn't he so patient with Peter. He bears with his hot-headed friend who at first dismisses him and then makes greater demands of him.

And this single moment of tender love is just a glimpse into the cosmic love of God. For just as Jesus got up from the meal and stooped down to serve his disciples; Jesus got up from his throne in heaven and stooped down to save the world. Just as Jesus wrapped around himself the towel of a servant; Jesus wrapped himself in weak and frail human flesh. Just as Jesus poured out water to wash his disciples feet; Jesus poured out his blood to wash us clean from all our sin.

And what's more, earlier in John's gospel, Jesus says that he only does what he has seen his Father doing. This is the eternal heavenly reality that is revealed in Jesus: the selfless, self-giving love of God. The God of the Bible does not stand aloof and wash his hands of the world, rather he stoops down in humble love and wash *us* clean.

He comes from heaven to earth, from the table down to our stinky feet, he goes all the way down into death in order to serve us and to save us.

And so ultimately, what is pictured in Colossians 3, and what is demonstrated by Jesus in that room, is the gut-wrenching compassion and costly kindness of Jesus that leads him all the way to the cross.

As the agnostic historian Tom Holland notes, even Christians can be so used to the cross that we can miss just how radical it is. And we can fail to see how much it has completely reshaped the way we see the world. He says,

...the cross, that ancient implement of torture, remains what it has always been: the fitting symbol of the Christian revolution. It is the audacity of it – the audacity of finding in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of the creator of the universe – that serves to explain, more surely than anything else, the sheer strangeness of Christianity and the civilisation to which it gave birth. Today, the power of this strangeness remains as alive as it has ever been.

And so let's be struck afresh by the strange reality of the cross-shaped love of Colossians 3. And let's go even deeper into the strangeness and see that because of who Jesus is, *our whole reality is changed as well*. Through Jesus' life and death and resurrection, we too are Jesus' very own; we are God's chosen people says Col 3:12.

Like those disciples, Jesus has washed *us* clean. He has cleansed our dirty stinky hearts, and we are declared Holy in him. And we too are dearly loved. Jesus has loved us to the end. He laid down his life for *us* so that we can be fully and freely forgiven.

This is our foot-washing Saviour. He has revealed heavenly reality to us, and he has raised us up with him so that we might live with him, and live like him.

2. The Foot-washing Church

And this gives us a new perspective on what it means to live the Christian life. As Simon said last week, our obedience does not come simply from duty. It's not even just gratitude, like "well given Jesus has done so much for me, I should at least show him how thankful I am." No. Jesus has brought us into a *new reality*, and he has welcomed us to a new home, a home where we all wash one another's feet. The foot-washing Saviour is creating a foot-washing church.

And so Jesus says to his disciples:

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.

Colossians 3:12 uses the image of clothing. In Christ we're given a new identity, and so we have new clothes to put on. But it's not a royal robe.

Like our Lord, we are to clothe ourselves with the same servant's towel and we stoop down to serve each other with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness. We wear the garment of self-giving and sacrificial love that marks us out as disciples of Jesus.

This is how people will know you are my disciples, Jesus said in that room, that you *love one another*.

And now we can really start to wrestle with what that means for us. If we are to love each other in this way, it will be a love that looks like carrying a cross. It's not an up in the clouds, pie-in-the-sky niceness, it will be a quiet, persevering service of our brothers and sisters..

And so how do we wash one another's feet? How do we put on the clothing of Christ?

Well, we will pray with and for each other. We'll take that risky move to go beyond talking about work and sport and speak the gospel to each other.

We will seek out conversations with brothers and sisters who are different from us, or who we find difficult to talk to.

We won't just congregate with our friends, but welcome others into our circle of fellowship.

As one of the boys said at youth group on Friday, we'll ask how someone is going and genuinely listen to their answer.

We won't avoid talking with people going through a difficult time, but will enter into their suffering with them, and seek to carry their burdens with them, even when we have no idea what to say.

We won't put on a false front, but we will be honest about our own weaknesses and struggles.

We will look for ways to honour and encourage each other rather than bringing others down. One of the girls said at youth group it'll mean not talking behind each others' backs, grumbling and gossiping about someone at church.

We will treat a 6 year old, and a 16 year-old and a 60 year-old, all as full members of our church family.

If you're an adult it might mean persevering in a conversation with a teenager who isn't giving you much in return.

If you're a teenager it might mean persevering in a conversation with an adult who you think is asking you way too many questions.

As a pastor it will mean giving as much energy to those things which no one else sees, as I do for those things up the front. It will mean not

showing favouritism but seeking to serve our whole church family with all the energy that Christ gives.

You could probably think of whole heap of examples for yourself through the week.

But whatever it is, it will always mean setting aside your own self-interest, in order to pour yourself out for the sake of your brothers and sisters.

And so initial reaction to this passage is going to be less, "Oh that's nice!" And more "Oh that's hard!" And it is hard! We are all forgiven sinners on our pilgrimage to our heavenly home. We will need to bear with others and forgive them again and again. And I hope you know that others will need to bear with you and forgive you over and over too. But what a privilege go beyond nice and be caught up into the heavenly reality of God's eternal love.

This sort of love will be often unseen and unglamorous, often uncomfortable and costly. But it will always be powerfully transforming and profoundly beautiful.

Oh, that's hard!

And so how can we live out the hard but good life of love to which Jesus has called us? Well, to finish today we must remember that this love is the fruit that grows when our roots are tapped down deep into Christ and his gospel. We will be a foot-washing church to the extent that we keep our eyes fixed on our foot-washing saviour.

We will love as we rest in the fact that Jesus has *already loved us*, and we will forgive as we realise more and more just how much we have been forgiven. For the wonderful promise of this passage is that we are *already* his chosen people, holy, and dearly loved. We don't need to earn that, in fact we never could. And it seems to me that the lust, and the greed, and the anger and malice and lies that we read about last week are the result of our own desperate attempts to get for ourselves what only Jesus can give to us. And to protect for ourselves what only Christ can make secure. There's no need to hold onto our own safety or security, because we already have fullness in Christ.

And we will grow in serving each other as we run again and again to let Jesus serve us. For Jesus has not only saved us, and made us his holy people, he's also reshaping us to be more and more like him every day! He has promised us a new future, but also promised us his presence. So we trust his promises and we receive his generous provision.

And there's no need to hold back, wondering what we will say, or do, if we reach out in love to someone around us. Instead we can launch out into the deep trusting that Jesus will carry us and give to us all that we need to serve him.

Our Lord Jesus is with us and he looks upon our feeble efforts with compassion and kindness. He stoops again and again to help us with humility and gentleness. And oh how patient he is with us! He bears with us when we retreat back into ourselves, and he forgives us for our every failure.

And in everything his love goes all the way to the end.

Our foot-washing Saviour is creating a foot-washing Church. He's shaping us into a place where messy sinners come and encounter his love. Where complicated people are not met with harsh condemnation or aloof suspicion, but with the gentleness and grace they need to be free. Where we stop trying to protect ourselves and open ourselves up in compassionate kindness. Where we don't stand at a distance but stoop down in tender care of one another. He is making us into a church clothed with the Servant's towel of Christ, willing to get our hands dirty, so that our sisters and brothers may be clean.

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Lord Jesus, make that true of us, more and more we pray, Amen.