

THE DAILY WASHING OF THE ONCE BATHED.

ST. JOHN xiii. 10.

In three several ways we may make the meaning of this sentence more clear and more impressive: (1) by amending the translation; (2) by reading it in the light of Oriental custom; and (3) by recalling the circumstances under which it was uttered.

(1) Let us amend the translation. In our Authorised Version two Greek verbs, which have a marked difference of meaning, are translated by one and the same English word. The first means *to bathe*, to get into water; the second means *to wash*, to apply water to the uncovered parts of the body, as the hands, the head, the feet. To make the sentence exact and clear, therefore, it ought to be rendered, as in the Revised Version it is rendered, "He that is *bathed* needeth not save to wash his feet."

(2) But how should a man who has just bathed, just washed all over, need even to wash so much as his feet? A familiar Oriental custom furnishes a reply. In the East bathing is, and was, a protracted and luxurious operation. The bather was led from room to room, much as we are now in a Turkish bath, walking on his bare feet, or in sandals which many had used before him; and, naturally, one of the last processes was a scrupulous ablution of the feet. In the East, too, it was the custom for guests to take a bath before they went to a banquet. But, as on their arrival at the house of their host, their feet, protected only by sandals, might have contracted some defilement from the streets through which they had passed, they found servants provided with towels and vessels of water awaiting them, who washed the dust from their feet, in order both that they might be saved from discomfort and that the cushions on which they reclined might not be soiled. It was to one of

these customs, probably the latter, that our Lord referred when He said, "He that is bathed need only wash his feet."

(3) Thus far our way has been easy and clear. It does not take long to amend the translation of the sentence, or to illustrate it from Oriental manners. But now, if we are to enter into the real meaning of the sentence, we must give a more leisurely consideration to the circumstances in which it was uttered. These circumstances, while they are of a very special and impressive interest in themselves, are also, when duly arranged, a striking and instructive commentary on the words before us. But here, at the outset, it becomes necessary to make one or two other corrections in our Authorised Version. In Verse 2 we read that, "supper being ended," Jesus arose and washed his disciples' feet. Indeed it is impossible to read the first four verses of the Chapter without deriving from them the impression that it was at the *close* of the Feast—when such an action would have been quite out of place and keeping—that our Lord "took the form of a servant," and in his humility taught us that Love is degraded by no service it can render, however menial it may be. As, however, in the subsequent verses of the Chapter, we find the Feast still going on, we might well suspect to find some mistake in the translation of these verses. There is such a mistake. The words in Verse 2, "and supper being *ended*," ought to be rendered, as in our Revised Version, "*during* supper," or, better still, "when supper was *served*," or "when supper was *about to begin*." And, in Verse 4, where we read, "He riseth from *supper*," we ought to read, "He riseth from *the* supper" as yet untasted, and to understand, not that He got up from eating his supper, and, still less, that He got up at the close of the supper, but that He rose from the table at which the supper was set out almost as soon as He had sat down to it, and before as yet the meal had begun.

Now if we quietly note these corrections, and if we also

bear in mind St. Luke's report of the dispute that broke out at the supper among the disciples, the dispute as to which of them was, or should be, the greatest, we shall find no difficulty in so arranging the details of the scene as to arrive at their true significance.

The supper took place at evening, of course, and in the upper room, duly furnished for the Passover,¹ which Jesus had sent forward two of his disciples to secure. With the other ten, He had walked in from Bethany to Jerusalem, in the afternoon of the day. After their hot and dusty walk, their first care would be to take off their sandals and wash their soiled and heated feet. This office was usually performed by the servants of the house, though sometimes a host, in receiving guests of distinction, would himself do them the honour of taking the servant's place. But during the feast of the Passover, when Jerusalem was crowded with visitors from every land, many of whom had to sleep in the streets or in tents pitched outside the walls, it was impossible to maintain any very nice observance of the rites of hospitality. Those who were so fortunate as to obtain apartments were expected to wait on themselves. The host had his private friends to see to. The very servants would be too busy to wait on strangers and sojourners. The laver, or "bason," would be there,—the large copper ewer, commonly found in Oriental houses, and "the watering-pots," the large earthenware jars from which it might be replenished, and the towels with which the feet were to be dried. But all else would be left to the visitor, or to the servants he brought with him.

When the disciples of Jesus arrived at the house of "the good man" who had placed an apartment at the disposal of Jesus and his friends, they doubtless found "the large upper room furnished" with all that they required. And

¹ This, at least, seems to me the more probable hypothesis, although great authorities put the feast *before* the Passover.

probably, though we have no record of the fact, one of them at once removed the Master's sandals, and washed the dust from his feet with the cool fresh water that stood ready to hand. But no one of them, it would seem, would stoop to perform that kindly office for the rest. The old emulation, the old strife, as to which of them should take the highest place, broke out among them again; and there they stood, with dusty feet and with hot jealous hearts, wrangling as to whose duty it was to play servant to his brethren. The feeling, "I am as good as you and a little better," seems for a moment to have ruled them all. No one of them had yet learned the lesson which Jesus had so often taught, that he is the greatest who does most for others, and he the true chief who serves most, most efficiently and most disinterestedly. It was to impress this neglected lesson on them that Jesus, who had already taken his place at the table, rose from the untasted supper, laid aside his flowing outer robe, girt a towel round his tunic—thus appearing among them "as one that served"—poured water into the bason, and "began to wash his disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded." But for his grace, *they* might have sat down unwashed and angry, and *we* might never have learned the dignity of service, the glory of humility. *They* surely must have felt humbled and ashamed as they saw Him whom they called Master and Lord assuming the menial part and discharging the servile office which they had refused. And *we*, who also call Him Master and Lord, may well learn, from this act of humility, that "the servant is not greater than his lord, neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him"; that it is not in standing up for our own rights and insisting on our own claims and exalting ourselves above our neighbours, but in stooping cheerfully to the lowliest duties and the most generous service that we rise to the highest honours, and "do as He did," whose Name is above every name.

When, in the discharge of the lowly office He had assumed, Jesus came to Peter, Peter's conscience pricked him, and he displayed his characteristic impetuosity and self-will even while also displaying his characteristic loyalty and love. This Apostle who, as the greatest of all, might well have stooped to be the servant of all, but who had hotly refused to take the part his Master had now assumed, exclaimed with reverent astonishment, "Lord, dost *Thou* wash my feet!" "Yes;" Jesus virtually replies, "suffer it to be so now, and by and bye you will understand that I am your Lord precisely *because* I am your Servant; and that in washing your feet I have set you an example of humility, that you may do to others even as I have done to you." "Nay," retorts Peter, "Thou shalt never wash my feet," meaning, "I will never suffer Thee so to degrade Thyself." Often as he had been taught to see a meaning in Christ's actions that went beyond the action of the moment, and though Christ had just warned him that there was in this action much more than met the eye, the impetuous Apostle cannot wait for light, but speaks from the darkness of his self-will,—an instance of blundering haste which might well remind us of the virtue which resides in being "slow to speak." Drawing back his feet from the bason, he emphatically declines to let his Master become his Servant. "He wist not what he did," even as he understood not what Jesus had said. And, therefore, Christ speaks to him very solemnly, and in words of direct spiritual import: "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me," no *portion* with me, as the word implies; "if you will not suffer me, as your Host, to wash your feet, you are no guest of mine; no portion, no *mess*, no dish, is set on my table for you; you stand outside my circle, outside my fellowship." The mystical, or spiritual, significance which Christ had declared his action to possess is partly disclosed in these words. For they cannot be taken liter-

ally. It was not necessary that Peter's feet should be washed by his Master and Lord in order that Peter should have either his portion on the table or his part in the kingdom and grace of Christ. But it *was* necessary that he should submit his will to the will of Christ, and learn to take a law from his lips. It was necessary that the whole round of his activities, symbolised by the feet, should be cleansed and purified. If we believe in Christ, we must walk even as also He walked: and where shall we get strength to walk aright save from Him, and as we follow Him, who never at any time transgressed his Father's commandment?

This was the spiritual meaning of Christ's rebuke to Peter. It was not enough that he should once have witnessed a good confession, or that he should still acknowledge Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. Day by day, as often as he contracted new defilement, as often as the dust of the world or of the worldly self-willed spirit, gathered upon him, he needed to be cleansed from it, to have his stains and sins washed away, washed out of him. Peter did not fully take the meaning of our Lord's words, or he would not have uttered his second rash and hasty speech. But he was so profoundly impressed by the solemnity of his Master's tone and manner, so appalled at the mere thought of having no portion with Him, no mess at his table, no lot in his kingdom, that he cried out vehemently, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head! Wash all of me that is uncovered, all that is open to the soils and infections of the world!" He had missed the more delicate distinctions of his Master's thought; but his heart was in the right place: he would do and suffer anything rather than permit the links which bound him to Christ to be severed. And, therefore, Jesus expresses his thought still more clearly in the words: "*He that is bathed*"—he that has once been plunged in the

laver of regeneration, he that has become a new creature—*needeth not save to wash his feet*: but *this* is a daily necessity with him. His feet, soiled by contact with the world's dusty paths, must be cleansed, if he is to be clean every whit. When men first truly believe in Christ, when they sincerely accept the revelation of God's redeeming love made in and through Him, they are bathed, they are regenerated, they are created anew, they become new men in Him; their whole moral nature is cleansed and invigorated. But as they go on their way, they contract fresh pollution, their old nature breaks up through the new, as here St. Peter's old impetuosity and self-will break up through his new love and reverence for Christ: or they are brought into temptation by being brought into contact with the world's maxims and laws, or even by being brought into collision with the evil and angry tempers which are not altogether unknown even in the Church, as St. Peter had been excited by the strife with his brethren: and hence, though bathed, they need to repair again and again to the Fountain in which they were first cleansed, the inexhaustible fountain of the Divine mercy and grace.

I. This, then, is the first lesson suggested by the words, "He that is bathed need only wash his feet." We sin *after* we have believed. We take fresh soils and stains *after* we have been renewed in the spirit of our minds. *We need a daily cleansing, therefore, though not a daily regeneration.* Once born again, born from above, we enter on a life that cannot die; we lay hold, once for all, on eternal life. But this life may be checked, lowered, thwarted by the evil and selfish passions in which our old life still asserts its existence and power; by the cares and pleasures of the world in which we still have to live; by the frets and anxieties that spring from the toils by which we gain our daily bread; by an undue addiction to our personal interests or to the things of this present world; by the evil tempers stirred

in us by the contradiction of sinners, or even by the contradiction of saints. Daily, therefore, we need to be washed from these ugly and defiling stains. It is not enough that we were *once* quickened and enlightened, that once we tasted of the heavenly gift and felt the powers of the world to come. Day by day we need to be again renewed unto repentance, to be purged from our selfishness, our sullenness, our vehemence, our unfriendliness, our pride, envy, self-will, our infidelity to our own highest aims and best resolves. That in us which lies nearest to the world, which comes into closest contact with it, that in us which is lowest and most exposed to moral contamination and most susceptible of it, needs to be steeped as in pure water, to be released and purified.

Who that knows himself at all can doubt that, in his single being, two men, two lives are contending together for the mastery; the one lifting him toward heaven, the other holding him down to earth; the one prompting him to walk by faith in the things which do not appear, the other persuading him to walk after the sight of his own eyes and the desires of his own heart. It is in this inward strife that we so often fail, and are so often overtaken of transgression, just as it was in their strife with each other that the Apostles became unclean; and are constrained to own that if, after the conflict and turmoil of the day, we are to settle down into that fellowship with Christ in which our spirits are renewed, we must first be washed from the dust and heat of the strife. Nay, it is the sense of this painful endless conflict, the dread that evil is not being overcome of good in us, and the fear lest no to-morrow should find us further or more victorious than to-day, which at times takes all heart out of us and leads us to despair of ourselves. To *bathe* once for all is not so hard; but this daily *washing* tries our patience and endurance. To believe once for all in the Divine goodwill, and so to lay hold

on eternal life, so far from being hard to us, may be the keenest joy we have known; but to confess day after day that we have sinned against that good Will, to fear lest we should not be able even to hold our own against evil, much less conquer it; to feel that if we daily overcome it at some points, at other points we are daily overcome by it, and *still to maintain the conflict*, this is the labour that taxes our strength, this the task which tries, and sometimes exhausts, our patience. "Will it be always thus with us?" we cry; "we so weak, so easily betrayed, and evil at once so strong and so insidious; we so infirm of purpose and the world around us so full of seductions and constraints which draw us from our purpose; time and opportunity slipping by so fast, and we making so little progress, even if we make any! Is there no hope for us, no comfort—no comfort in the present, no hope for the future?"

II. Yes, there is comfort, there is hope. For the second thought here suggested is, that *He who declares our need of daily cleansing, also declares—nay, both declares and proves—his willingness to cleanse us*. When once we think of it there is something infinitely pathetic and consolatory in the fact, that it was as Christ stood girt about with the towel, and the laver within his reach, He said to Peter, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no portion with me;" for how could He more impressively or more expressively signify his willingness to wash his disciples' soiled and heated feet? And as then, so now, He is among us as One that serveth,—as the Servant whose duty and function it is to cleanse us from the pollutions of the way. If we confess our sins, He is faithful—faithful to Himself as the Lord and therefore the Minister of all—to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

It was in no happy or receptive mood that the Twelve entered the room in which they were to eat their last

supper with Him. Their hearts were haughty, their eyes lofty, they were too engrossed in their strife for precedence to remember the lessons He had taught them. The dust of the world lay on their spirits more thickly than the dust of the road on their feet. And He who washed their feet also calmed and purged and softened their spirits, quickening humility by shewing humility, and love by shewing love; while, by serving them, He taught them to serve one another. Why, then, should *we* despair of his grace, or doubt whether it will be sufficient for us? He who forgave them, cleansed them, raised them to a better mind, will He not also forgive, and cleanse, and raise us? Yes, to us, as to them, so often as He comes to rebuke sin, He comes with cleansing and forgiveness in his hands, shewing us his love that we may feel and confess our want of love, shewing his humility that we may renounce our hardness and our pride. He is the Lord of all because He is the Minister of all; our Lord because our Minister: and shall not our Minister serve us, give us of his best, and adapt his service to our need? Is it not reasonable to conclude that He who laid down his life to take away our sins *will* take away our sins now that He is risen from the dead? If then He has come, and come to us, we should daily draw near to Him who has thrown open "the laver of regeneration" to us, and beseech Him to cleanse the whole round of our affections, our activities, our aims, that in and through Him we may become every whit clean.

III. "Draw near to Him?" it may be asked; "but *how* may we draw near to Him? What tempers and emotions must we cherish in ourselves in order to be assured of the Divine Forgiveness we daily need?"

The answer is plain: it lies on the very face of the narrative before us. *It is by humility and charity that we draw near to Christ.* It is as we cherish a lowly and kindly temper that we win the assurance of pardon and

grace to match our need—as He Himself teaches us. For when He had washed their feet and had taken his garments, and was set down again, He said to his disciples: “Perceive ye what I have done unto you? Do ye yet understand the real meaning of this act of mine? Ye call me Master and Lord, and ye say well; for so I am. But if I, your Lord and Master, washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another’s feet; for what I have just been doing is this—I have given you an example, *that ye also should do as I have done to you.*” He had rendered them a service which they held to be too mean and base for them to render to each other. He had taught them, and through them He has taught us, that it is by loving and serving one another that we copy his example, draw near to Him, and grow like to Him. When, therefore, we are conscious of sin and defect, and long for the forgiveness which alone can cleanse us from our sins, what we ought to set ourselves to do is to cherish a humble and charitable temper toward all men; to think gently of them and lowly of ourselves. For if we forgive them their trespasses against us, God will forgive us our trespasses against Him. And, surely, when we are burdened with a sense of our own guilt and weakness, it should not be hard for us either to humble ourselves before God, or to make allowance for that very weakness in a neighbour which we ourselves have shewn. But, hard or easy, this is the rule of the Divine kingdom: the peace of forgiveness is vouchsafed only to the humble and kindly heart. He who thinks with humility of himself and with charity of his neighbour has the proof in himself both that he has bathed in the laver of regeneration, has been renewed in the spirit of his mind, and that he will be cleansed from the sins of daily conduct which he confesses and laments.

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