

*THE WASHING OF THE DISCIPLES' FEET.*

JOHN XIII. 1-17.

THERE were two sacramental acts performed that night, when Jesus gathered His disciples in "the upper chamber" at Jerusalem; for the washing of their feet was, as truly as the breaking of bread, "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace." But the one has fallen out of use, while the other remains, and will, doubtless, continue to refresh and comfort the Church, "until He come." There is, indeed, a faint shadow of the first of these sacramental rites still, I believe, to be witnessed in Rome during "Holy Week," when the Pope sprinkles a little water on the feet of certain chosen persons, and touches them daintily with a towel. It is only a shadow of the beautiful reality, yet so far it bears witness to the law of God's kingdom, that he is the greatest there who consents to the humblest service. Perhaps, too, it has not been without its influence in helping to maintain, throughout that branch of the Church, the tradition of lowly, self-denying ministry, which is one of its strongest claims to be esteemed among men. Let us see, then, how this service arose, and what was intended by it. It will be worth our while to devote a little serious thought to it; for I venture to think that he who puts from him "the basin and the towel" is very ill prepared to take the bread, and "the cup of blessing."

We know, from other incidents recorded in the gospels, that Jesus and His disciples were not very careful about those constant ablutions on which the Pharisees insisted so strongly. Life was too earnest for them to occupy themselves with conventional niceties. But this was a great occasion when a little ceremony was not unfitting, and when, moreover, a precious lesson was to be read. Before

the Passover, then,—not when the supper was ended, nor yet while it was going on, but when it had been served, *i.e.* when all the preparation for it had been completed—Jesus, we are told, “rose from the table and took a basin and towel, and began to wash the feet of the disciples.” We are not left in any doubt as to what moved Him to do this. Some, indeed, will have it that the apostles had been quarrelling, “which of them was to be greatest in the kingdom,” and that their Lord meant tacitly to rebuke them by performing a task which was commonly left to one of the meanest slaves of a household. Certainly, they had pretty often unworthy contentions of this kind, and it is likely enough that something of the sort had been lately going on; nor can it be denied that the lesson which Christ reads them here is a warning against the indulgence of any such worldly ambitions. But John makes no allusion to any outbreak of this temper at this time, neither is there any tone of rebuke in our Lord’s words here; and, besides, the whole matter is lifted up into a higher and serener atmosphere by the statement of Christ’s motive which the apostle actually gives.

“Jesus,” he says, “knowing that his hour was come, that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.” That was what moved Him to do what He now did. It was a solemn moment. The shadow of death was on Him. He had come from the Father, because He loved them. He was going back to the Father for the same reason, because that “was expedient for them.” He was fain, therefore, to make this quite clear to them, that nothing which had happened had any wise changed His mind, but that, on the contrary, “having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.” Many people begin life, full of a beautiful enthusiasm, with generous instincts and glowing hopes, con-

fidest that men only need to be rightly handled in order to make the world as good and happy as they would like to see it. But ere long this illusion fades away. They meet with disappointments, with ingratitude, with repeated failures; and by-and-by all their fine enthusiasm is changed into a cynical contempt that has no faith in man at all. Jesus never cherished any such illusions. He always "knew what was in man," and nevertheless he loved us. Therefore, though He had met with as much ingratitude and selfishness as any one, though he had been despised and rejected of men to whom He was always doing good, and though even His own chosen disciples understood so little the mind of their Master, and grieved His very heart so often, yet His hope never failed Him, and His Spirit never changed. He was the same at the end as at the beginning. He never wearied of His service, or despaired of His cause. "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." It did not make any difference even that one of His disciples was about to betray Him. He knew it, but He did not except Judas from the service he was about to render to them all. Nothing, not even the utmost baseness, could any wise change His heart, or cause its faithfulness to fail.

It was this unwearying, unvarying love, then, which constrained Him to take the basin, and gird Himself with the towel that night, as one whose heart yearned in Him not only to serve them, but to serve them in some peculiarly lowly fashion, to which nothing but love would have condescended. We are not told that He began this task with Peter, but from the way in which that apostle acted on this occasion, I make no doubt, for my part, that he was the first. For if he said to his Lord, "Thou shalt never wash my feet," you may be very sure he would not have stood by silent, and seen Him do it to any of the others. He would have been quite as positive in their case as in his own, that it was an un-

seemly proceeding, that it would become them better to wash the Master's feet, and that they ought to be ashamed to let Him do so mean a service to them. I cannot imagine him looking on without a vehement protest. Of course, his rejection of this service in his own case was wrong, for it meant that he knew better than Jesus Himself did what it became his Lord to do. Yet there was also a right element in it, for it implied that it would have been more seemly for him and the other disciples to do it for their Lord. Therefore Jesus found no fault with his hasty, but on the whole right-hearted, follower; but only gently replied, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me." That saying points to something higher than the immediate work He had in hand. Hence, Jesus had said, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." There was a deeper and more inward cleansing than this, of which the washing of their feet was but a symbol. Truly we have no part in Christ if we do not submit ourselves to Him to have all our spiritual defilements removed, and to be "washed white as snow." When Peter heard this saying, though he did not yet know all it meant, and was only to learn it rather slowly hereafter, yet because it was all in all to him to have his part in Christ, he swung now from the one extreme of reluctance to the other extreme of over-readiness, saying, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." If that be a condition of fellowship with Thee, wash me all over; do with me as Thou wilt; I will consent to anything sooner than part with Thee. All through the scene, Peter shows the same impetuous, but honest and affectionate heart. All through also there is a want of that simple submission to a higher wisdom, and a deeper love than his own, whose claim on all men is that they should learn to say, "Not as we will, but as Thou wilt." Therefore Jesus had to restrain his impetuosity now by saying, "He that is bathed needeth

not save to wash his feet only, but is clean every whit."

They had just come from the bath, probably a public one, whither they had all gone to prepare for the feast. It may have been near, or it may have been at some distance; but in any case they had walked some way in their sandals along the streets of Jerusalem. It is not a very cleanly city; no Eastern town is. One could not go far along its streets without being smirched by its mire more or less, or at the very least being soiled by its dust. They had come clean from the bath, then, but their feet had suffered in their walk from it to the upper chamber. Apparently they had not felt any discomfort from this. It was not so bad as to cause any inconvenience to them. But still the mire or the dust was there, and Jesus was fain to have them clean every whit. He did not spy out their defilement, nor did He seek to point it out, but He was anxious to cleanse it away. All they needed for this was that their feet should be washed, and that service He was now fain to do them, lowly as it was.

I have said that this act of Christ's pointed to a deeper, even an inward, spiritual cleansing; and beautiful as it was in itself, it is this spiritual aspect of it which is of most importance to us. In this higher province, too, I wish to note that the *bath* is one thing, and the *basin* is another. There is a whole-washing, which is of chief moment, and there is a feet-washing, which has also to be seen to. The first is "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost," of which we may truly say that he who has not received it "hath no part with Christ." "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." That is the bath which makes him clean every whit, "for he is washed, for he is justified, for he is sanctified," and his sins which were as scarlet are now white as snow. But we do not go

very far along the world's miry ways before our white garments begin to be spotted, and our feet to be soiled. We do not walk there long undefiled. Ere many days pass we need another cleansing. It is not the whole washing of regeneration. That does not require to be done over again. Too often, I think, we forget this, and pray in such ways as if it had been so imperfect a work that it needed to be often repeated. Is there not something unreal in such requests? If we have reason to believe that we have received the Holy Ghost, and been born again "not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible," are we quite acting as we should, if we go on praying like Peter, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head"? Yet even if we do not a second time need that washing of the whole man, we do require our feet to be cleansed, and that again and again, for we often slip, we often err, we often stumble into miry ways, we often sorrowfully defile ourselves. Not once in a way, but constantly, we need to be forgiven, and to get a new start with a fresh sense of the grace of Christ Jesus. Therefore is He always waiting with the basin and the towel to cleanse us, because He loved us from the beginning, and loves us to the end. O His wonderful patience! O His tender mercy! He never wearies of this task; He never changes to us; if we will only let Him, He is ever ready to "heal our backslidings." And this also is specially to be noted. When God's people, who have been washed in the laver of regeneration, fail, as they too often do, to "keep themselves from the pollution that is in the world through lust," they find many "candid friends" who are ready enough to point this out, and plenty of others who are not friends at all, but who are keen to spy out their blemishes. That is the world's way. It has a sharp eye for the infirmities of the righteous, and that may be so far good for the righteous, though it is not over creditable to the others who indulge in it. But God's way is not like

theirs. He is not eager to spy out faults; He does not delight in pointing them out. It is no pleasure to Him to shame His people. But He is ever ready to wash them. Of course, that implies that He sees our errors, and more or less also that He brings us to see them, for He does not take away the evils which we are not desirous to put away. Still, His main concern is not to draw attention to our failures, but to correct them; not to point out how our feet are smirched, but to wash them, even when we ourselves hardly know how much they need to be cleansed.

For it abides true for ever, that "if He wash us not we have no part with Him." He loved us indeed "while we were yet sinners": that is the very glory of His love, that it made its great sacrifice on our behalf, "while we were without strength and ungodly." In that sense, there is no soul living, however defiled by sin, that has not a part in Him if it will only believe, and claim its portion in His grace. But we must be cleansed by Him, we must be "born again," and the whole spirit of our life changed and purified ere we can enter into His kingdom, and enjoy its hallowed peace, and its eternal hope. Therefore Jesus said, "if I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me"; our portion is only a possibility, not a present reality, till we are made new creatures in Him. But now, in addition to this, we are reminded that even after this great change has been wrought in us we may defile our ways, and lose the sweetness of His fellowship for a season. He that hath been bathed may well need his feet still to be washed. For if we walk in the world's miry paths, if we yield to the pride and selfishness of the carnal heart, which has to be crucified and not indulged, it will be vain for us to look for the spiritual peace and gladness which we at one time knew. The salvation may still be ours, but the joy of it will be gone. Christ will not company with us in those our evil

ways. The smile that once cheered us, the light that once shone about our feet, the counsel that once so lovingly directed us, will be with us no more, till in true contrition of heart we "forsake our evil ways and our unrighteous thoughts, and turn to the Lord," to be made clean every whit." Which of us has not known such times of sad forsaking? Who has not felt the dulness, the depression, the loneliness of such hours? And the cause of them is, not that He is fickle and inconstant, but that we have not been careful to walk undefiled in the way. Happily "He does not even then utterly turn away His lovingkindness from us," but waits with the basin and the towel to wash the feet of His disciples.

Having finished His task, then, Jesus said unto them, "Know ye what I have done unto you?" Do ye understand what this service means? "Ye call Me Lord and Master, and ye say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye ought also to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye also should do as I have done to you. The servant is not greater than his Lord, neither is one that is sent greater than he that sent him." If the Apostles had been lately disputing which of them was to be greatest, as they too often did, this was His rebuke of their poor ambition. And no doubt they felt it. This lowly service would impress on them the word He had once before spoken, "He that would be great among you, let him be your minister." But I am not sure that He intended any rebuke at this time. The whole scene appears rather to breathe a spirit of tenderness and love, and though there may be a glance at their vain and foolish thoughts, the main idea it suggests to me is, that it was the consecration of that kind of lowly, self-denying service, that personal ministry of love, which is the surest way of having communion with Christ. It was not a pleasant task, that of washing the



feet. A sensitive person naturally shrank from it, and it commonly fell to some old domestic, little fit for anything else. No one cared much to handle the dusty, miry feet of the pilgrim, not seldom covered, too, with sores. Yet, on the other hand, if there were few tasks more unpleasant to those who did them, there were also few more grateful to those who received such a service. What our Lord, then, specially meant to teach His disciples was, that if there was anything by which they could aid and comfort their fellow-pilgrims on earth, no matter how displeasing, even how revolting it might be to their natural sensibilities, they must gird themselves to do it, even as he had done. Nothing must be too humble for their love, nothing so distasteful that they would not put their hand to it, if thereby they might anywise lessen the miseries of men. Are there diseases that have to be nursed and tended? Are there wounds that have to be cleansed and bound up? Are there impurities in the homes of the poor that are sapping the health of the people? And do you somehow shrink from coming in contact with such things? Does not our Lord's example here tell us that love must overcome that distaste, and that if in any way we can help to heal or comfort our brethren, we must take the basin and towel and do the humblest service that is needed? Do we call Him Lord and Master, and yet shrink from doing what He did? Are we above the tasks which were not beneath Him? And is there anything, any argument of reason, any splendour of eloquence—which has so commended the gospel to the human heart as the tender ministrations of the sister of mercy or the hospital nurse, who for the love of Christ denies herself that she may bring healing and comfort to the affected? I do not say that every one is to take up exactly that *burden*. But in some form or other, every one will readily find, in his own home, or in that of his neighbour, some service of this kind needing to be done

—some task which may be very lowly, and not very pleasant perhaps, but in which he can show himself to be a true follower of Him who washed the feet of His disciples. “The servant is not greater than his Lord. I have given you an example that ye should do to others as I have done to you.” Believe me there are few ways in which you can better serve Christ, and further His cause, than by thus taking His yoke upon you, who was meek and lowly in heart.

That, I reckon, was the prime lesson of this sacramental rite. But surely it also meant to teach us that we too, like our Lord, must not be anxious to spy out, or to point out, the frailties and errors of His people, but always to wash them out. God’s people unhappily do not steadfastly walk undefiled in the way. Their hearts may be right, yet too often they err and go astray. And when they do, there are many who are fain to draw attention to their failures, and very few who come with help to set them right. That is not the spirit of Christ, though it is only too common among Christians. Does it give you a kind of pleasure, then, to see them going wrong? Are you ready to draw attention to their weak points? Do their sins never escape your notice? and do you never think of covering them with the cloak of charity, or lovingly plead with the erring ones to amend their ways? Do you never feel that their conduct may have given you an opportunity to take the basin, and follow the example of Jesus? It would be better for you as well as for them, if you read the lesson of your Master in that sense. It would make a more beautiful Christian world if, instead of the fault-finding and evil-speaking which abound in it, we were all only careful to heal our neighbour’s backslidings—to wash the feet of the disciples. It is somewhat curious that the rite of Baptism which Jesus never practised, but left it to be done by His disciples, has maintained its place in the

Church along with the other sacrament of Communion, while this of washing the feet, which He not only did Himself, but expressly enjoined them also to practise, has practically disappeared except as a kind of show-function, or a counsel of perfection in one branch of His Church. Possibly it had been used by some as a platform for the display of a false and pretentious humility, and thus fell into discredit. At any rate, it has vanished as a sacramental Act from the common worship of the Church : and on that very account it seems desirable that it should get all the more prominence in our teaching, lest the spirit which it was meant to cherish should be allowed to die out also. That would be a fatal mistake. The loss of a form of ritual may be no great matter, but the loss of the spirit which it embodied would be greatly to be deplored. Happily of late years there has been a revival of it, at least on one side of its ministry. The tender hand of loving service is now readily tending the sick and the poor, and is not withheld even from the humblest task, neither does it shrink from that which is most trying to our natural sensibilities. Very beautiful it is to me to see so much of the youth and hope of Christendom consecrating itself to this lowly ministry, taking the basin and towel, as it were, from the hand of the Master to wash His soiled and foot-sore pilgrims. But the other side of this symbol—the charity that is not eager to spy out, or to point out the disciples' faults and shortcomings, but seeks only to remove these blemishes, that is not so common, though it be quite as beautiful in its way. Certainly the Christian life is lived under the blaze of a very searching light to-day, and I do not object to that if it were only a friendly light. We are apt enough to soil our feet, and take no thought, and even feel no great discomfort from it. It is well, then, to be reminded of our high calling to a walk of holiness and truth and love, and

well to be arrested if at any time we are not "undefiled in the way." But surely it is the part of a Christian not to be keen to detect a brother's failures, still less to blazon them abroad, but with loving tenderness to "restore his soul," and lead him back into the way of God. "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."

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