

The Suffering Servant

In the last few issues of *Vision*, Mr Hulme has been addressing the aspect of messiahs: people who have sought to be messiahs, or to take on a messianic mantle.

A common view of people who take on such a mantle, with very few exceptions (it doesn't matter whether they are Jewish, Christian or other), is that of being of an all-conquering hero who will rid the people of their enemies and their problems. They think they have a solution to all the ills that people face.

We may think that this is an arcane idea. But various politicians on the world scene in the recent past, and even at this point in time, have been driven by messianic views of their own as to what they can do to change this world and to solve this world's problems.

People in the time of Jesus Christ some 2,000 years ago, looked with eagerness for such a messiah. They continued to look for a messiah of such a nature for the next 100 years after Jesus Christ, until the Romans destroyed the forces of Simon bar Kokhba in 135 C.E.

The result of the destruction of Simon and his forces was the end of a Jewish state. "Jerusalem" no longer existed. It had a new, Latin name. Jerusalem was ploughed. Jews were banned from entering the city. Jewish aspirations for a messiah disappeared after Simon bar Kokhba. Whether Simon's name was his name from birth or whether it was given to him, it literally meant "son of the star." It was taken that the star was a reference to Numbers 24:17 where Balaam, in his prophecy about Israel commented about a star rising.

***Numbers 24:17 ... A Star shall come out of Jacob;
A Scepter shall rise out of Israel ...***

For a long time that has been understood in Jewish circles as being a Messianic prophecy. This man had a name that matched his Messianic pretensions.

One of the leading rabbis of that time, Rabbi Aqiba actually proclaimed Simon to be the Messiah. Simon's approach was very similar to that which Gamaliel warned against in Acts 5. He talked about the way in which people would take matters into their own hands to try to bring about change within the world.

In Acts 5, we see the apostles Peter, James and John had been arraigned before the Sanhedrin. They were about to be sentenced or punished. They had, in fact, given a very stout witness to their calling, to their position and to their relationship to Jesus Christ. The end result of that was a certain hostile audience from the Sanhedrin:

Acts 5:33 When they heard this (the witness of the apostles), they were furious and plotted to kill them.

They took counsel to kill them. "We can't justify having these men around the place."

34 Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while.

35 And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men.

"Stop and give some consideration to what you are doing here."

36 "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing.

We aren't told that Theudas had messianic pretensions, but that is clearly what he had in mind. He was going to set himself against the Romans, and against the powers that be. As a result of that he came to nothing himself.

37 "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.

He said, "That's the batting average for these guys. They end up getting destroyed." In this day, we might say, "They lose power. They get voted out. There is a conspiracy against them and they lose their position. They are no longer the leader."

**38 "And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing;
39 "but if it is of God ...**

Jews with messianic expectations based their messianic expectations within God's Word. He said, "If it is of God ..."

39 ... you cannot overthrow it - lest you even be found to fight against God."

One wonders where Gamaliel was a few months prior to this when Jesus Christ was arraigned before the Sanhedrin.

The vision of a messiah that humanity has, and that humanity has continued to have since that period of time, the vision of a messiah that Simon bar Kokhba, that Theudas, that Judas of Galilee had, was not the image of a Messiah that the Father and the Word had in mind when planning to send Jesus AS the Messiah!

Over the years, scholars have looked at the gospel. They see Jesus' Messianic claims and some have come to the conclusion that He failed in His attempt. "He was an outright failure."

They say that the end result was that the disciples, to try to put a good face on it, then tried to find some other Scriptures that would justify a new Messianic approach, and rescue Jesus' "abortive attempt." Taking Scriptures from Isaiah, they created a model of a "Suffering Servant" to replace the all conquering hero. So there is a "two-Messiah" approach.

The particulars Scriptures in Isaiah that you can refer to are:

- Isaiah 42:1-4
- Isaiah 49:1-6
- Isaiah 50:4-11
- Isaiah 52:13-15
- Isaiah 53:1-12

If you start reading in Isaiah 42, when you get to the end of chapter 53 you will have encompassed all of the material. Scholars say that the disciples latched onto these Scriptures and they made a "new scenario" for Jesus as the "Suffering Servant."

The disciples clearly looked upon Jesus as the Messiah.

Matthew 16:13 When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"

14 So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Peter understood Christ's position - in part. The disciples looked upon Jesus as the Messiah. The Messiah was an Anointed One - the Deliverer from the problems that people faced in the servitude of other nations. Commonly messiahs" were priests or kings, or in some unique instances, they sought to fulfil both roles as had the Hasmonean kings, the kings who preceded Herod a couple of centuries before Christ.

Yet they had all gone and relief was never in sight. Jesus, at least, was a son of David, so He had a right to be considered to be a Messiah. It's instructive to see the perspective of the disciples to the Messiah.

Luke records an outlook of the disciples towards the Messiah. Jesus Christ had now been resurrected for 40 days. He had spent much of that time with the disciples, talking to them. Now He is on the Mount of Olives, about to ascend to His Father for the last time of that period.

Acts 1:4 And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me;

5 "for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

6 Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

They had gotten their minds around His death and His resurrection at this point in time, but they still had this Messianic notion of the kingdom being restored to Israel. "That's the duty of a Messiah!"

They hadn't been able to come to the recognition that there were two comings of the Messiah. The Bible spoke to two separate comings of the Messiah: not two separate Messiahs, but two events - the one where He would come as a "Suffering Servant" and the other when He would come as an all-conquering King.

For them, even though they were starting to understand the "Suffering Servant" aspect, it was still all collapsed into one event in their minds. Here they are asking, "When is it going to happen? Are You going to do it now?"

7 And He (Jesus Christ) said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.

It's the Father's authority! Jesus Christ does not have control over that. But He commissioned them:

8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

The disciples came to understand that the "physical kingdom" aspect of the Messiah was not just yet.

Subsequent messiahs, whether it was Simon bar Kokhba or others in the Jewish domain or in the world of Christendom, have constantly gravitated to the same ideas. Eusebius, the 4th century historian, saw the Emperor Constantine as such a messiah: a king and a priest combined, ruling over the "Kingdom of God" on earth.

When we talk of messiahs, the immediate concept is of power - unlimited power.

Passover is rapidly approaching. As we prepare for the Passover, we will hear numerous times in sermons and Bible studies about the instructions of Jesus to His disciples, especially as He instructed them to love one another as He loved them.

What is involved in the loving of your neighbour as yourself, to the point of giving your own life for them? Is there an element to this that is easily overlooked? The model of the Messiah that I've outlined, that people seek for, was not the role that Jesus came to fulfil in His first coming.

As we approach the Passover we are reminded all too quickly of the other role of the Messiah as Servant - yet a Servant with power!

In a recent Bible study I mentioned that the books of the Bible are in appropriate places. The books of the Bible aren't in a random order with no sense whatsoever to them. I believe that in a very distinct way. It is true of what we call the Old Testament, and it is true of the New Testament.

That is a fact that was so very easily overlooked by people who used to fellowship with us in years gone by. If they understand that, they wouldn't have gravitated to the book of Galatians as being the foremost of Paul's teaching. If it was the foremost of Paul's teaching, why was it not the first book? When all is said and done, it was POSSIBLY the first of the epistles that Paul wrote that we still have - and therefore should be first in our way of ordering things. Yet the Eternal didn't put the book of Galatians first.

It may be that the book of 1st Thessalonians was the first epistle that Paul wrote. If that was the case, the situation is even worse for Thessalonians because it is almost amongst the last of Paul's epistles.

Yet when we come to the gospels, people like to make a lot of to-do about which gospel was written first. To a certain extent, that should be of no consequence to us whatsoever. The gospels are in the order they are in because that's the way God inspired them to be! To help you appreciate that, let's turn to the end of the gospel of Matthew. Jesus, speaking to His disciples just before the ascension, made a statement to them:

Matthew 28:18 (King James Version) And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

"All power is given to Me." Obviously there are some exceptions. The Father still has control over the time of Christ's second coming. Matthew records this statement from Jesus bringing us back to the very beginning of Christ's ministry in Matthew 4 with the temptation by Satan.

I believe it is placed there because in reality, Matthew 28:18 provides an insight into what Mark is going to write about within his gospel!

Mark writes nothing about Jesus Christ's first 30 years. Jesus Christ suddenly appears in Mark at 30 years of age. We know nothing of His birth or of His upbringing. We learn a little bit about John the Baptist and John's ministry. We learn about John baptising Jesus, and then we move straight into "the temptation."

***Mark 1:12 Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness.
13 And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him.***

He was tempted by Satan. It doesn't tell us what the outcome was. We know the outcome because we have read Matthew. We know all the details, but I ask myself, why did Mark not record more details of this? Is Mark setting us up for something? I believe he is. Mark is using a literary device to create some tension here of, "What happened? What went on?" He wants us to read on, or, for the people in the first century, to listen attentively to find out what really did happen.

Let me make another general comment about the gospels. We have four gospels. We think they are all the same. We all probably all have a harmony of the gospels tucked away somewhere on the bookshelf. We think that if we have read one gospel, we have read all of them. No, not at all!

The material that each gospel writer, whether it was Matthew, Mark (under the direction of Peter), Luke (under the direction of Paul), or John, chose to write about was carefully chosen - to a particular end. The miracles that they record are chosen carefully to address the main aspect of the WITNESS they are giving about Jesus Christ.

The same is true in terms of Mark. A lesson is being conveyed. As a result, it doesn't take us very long to find out about the outcome of the temptation.

**14 Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,
15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."**

Having provided a summary statement of the message, Mark goes on to record the very first aspect of the power that Jesus Christ had. He had the power to call people.

16 And as He walked by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.

17 Then Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."

18 They immediately left their nets and followed Him.

19 When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets.

20 And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him.

Notice what happens next:

21 Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught.

22 And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority (power) ...

... exactly the same word that is used in Matthew 28:18! So Jesus not only has the power to call people, He has the ability to TEACH with POWER - and the people were amazed. He taught with power (or authority, as it is translated in the New King James Version).

What else does He have power over? It answer the question about the temptation.

23 Now there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit. And he cried out,

24 saying, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are - the Holy One of God!"

25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!"

What is the answer to the question from the temptation? Who has the power? Jesus Christ is able to command evil spirits to be quiet and to come out of people.

26 And when the unclean spirit had convulsed him and cried out with a loud voice, he came out of him.

... and as a consequence ...

27 Then they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."

28 And immediately His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee.

Over the next few chapters of Mark, we find that Jesus' authority is established in numerous areas of life. Having cast out a demon, He is able to heal people, to remove sicknesses. Simon Peter's mother was healed. As a result of that ...

32 At evening, when the sun had set, they brought to Him all who were sick and those who were demon-possessed.

33 And the whole city was gathered together at the door.

This Man had power over ALL the spiritual and physical ailments that people faced.

When Matthew recorded Jesus' words that, "All power is given unto Me in heaven and earth," Mark wants us to appreciate very, very clearly that Jesus Christ did have that power. It was a reality of His ministry.

The next few chapters show in what manner Jesus had power: the healing of sickness and diseases. Chapter two shows that He has the power to forgive sins (verse 5). That really turned up the heat on those who thought that they had authority or power. The healing of sickness and diseases, the forgiving of sins, all fall within the range of Jesus' power. In fact, nothing falls outside it! The wind and the sea can be stilled (chapter 4). People can be resurrected to life (chapter 5). Food can be multiplied to feed multitudes (chapter 6). Power can be delegated to the disciples to do likewise (chapters 3 and 6). Nothing was really outside His control.

Mark is eager for us to see this in perspective. He assembles all of these instances where Jesus is able to exercise power over every situation in a supernatural manner. It comes to a climax. Jesus has been able to exercise this power that He has in such a magnificent way that it is de-stabilising to the powers that be. It is a challenge to their power:

Mark 11:27 Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him.

The scene is set:

28 And they said to Him, "By what authority (by what power) are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority (this power) to do these things?"

What power? We know because Matthew has already told us. All power in heaven and earth was given to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was exercising that power. These people came, asking, "What authority gave Him this power to be able to do these marvellous things?"

29 But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things:

Very smart!

30 "The baptism of John - was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me."

31 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?'

32 "But if we say, 'From men' - they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed.

33 So they answered and said to Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus answered and said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

But it didn't really take much to work it out when you look at what Jesus was doing, the way in which He was able to take care of both physical circumstances and spiritual circumstances! He had control over demons. For the apostle Peter, on whose behalf Mark wrote, Jesus' ministry was a re-ordering of power, a changing of the power structure.

But what is UNIQUE about Jesus' reordering of power? I put it to you that Jesus used His power never for His OWN benefit! He used it for the benefit of others. Look at the way in which Mark has recorded these events and the way in which these events were played out. For whose benefit was it? Was it for Jesus' own ego? No. It was the benefit of the people. Jesus was literally fulfilling what He had inspired Isaiah to record in what is also considered to be part of the "Suffering Servant" prophecies. This is an aspect that is found in:

***Isaiah 61:1 "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me,
Because the LORD has anointed Me
To preach good tidings to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,***

***And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,***

The whole focus is upon those who suffer! We could expand on this. Why do they suffer? As we see from other places, they suffer because this is Satan's world. The sufferings exist because this is Satan's world and he is the god of this world at this point in time.

But Jesus came to show that His Father had given Him the power to be able to change all of those circumstances:

***1 ... To preach good tidings to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,***

Jesus Christ, as a Suffering Servant, was a Messiah. But unlike Simon bar Kokhba, unlike Constantine, unlike anyone else who sought to be a messiah thereafter, He had REAL power. He was able to use His power to accomplish things. The catalogue that Mark provides of the exercising of power by Jesus Christ is unequalled in human history. Who else has been able to do this, to be able to perform these miracles, to change physical circumstances?

This aspect of power being exercised for the benefit of others, is also picked up by John in his gospel account. As we approach the Passover, we look at the aspect of foot washing. Let's put this in its context of the servant. Let's put this in the context of power. Let's put this in terms of the context of the Messiah. John 13, as the entirety of the Old Testament and the New Testament was, was written in a very different environment.

Let's take a moment to consider our situation in the Western world. We come to the Passover prepared for the foot washing. Many will have washed their feet before they come and trimmed their toe nails, put on clean hose or stockings. We wash one another's soft plump feet. We seek to put our "best foot" forward!

At the end of the evening, we have a barrel of water which has been used to wash other people's feet. The only way you can probably know it has been used is because there is an occasional hair or a bit of lint floating in it.

But that's not the way it is for everybody. That's not the way it is in other parts of the world. That's not the way it was for the disciples. It is a very different experience for us. It's not the sort of thing we do to one another on a regular basis.

God wants us to learn a very deep lesson from it, not a superficial lesson. In other parts of the world, your fellow brethren arrive at Passover in a very different circumstance. No matter what they did at home, their feet got dirty just getting to the Passover.

In the 1970s there was a craze for "platform shoes" with two-inch deep soles and suitably sized heels. I thought they were crazy. "How could a person really walk in them?" But they weren't just a fashion statement. The first time I went to Lagos, they were the only sensible form of footwear one could have! It was the only way of keeping your feet out of the muck, the water and the mud that was everywhere.

Most people didn't wear platform shoes. Our brethren's feet in those parts of the world can be dirty. Their feet often feel like hard, weathered leather, which is really all they are because they haven't been cosseted in well made shoes. Much of their lives have been spent barefooted, working in fields. Their feet are gnarled and calloused.

Unlike the water discarded in the Western world, when you've finished washing feet in those parts of the world, you don't see the bottom of the basin. It is red or yellow or whatever the colour of the dirt is that is indigenous to that area. It is dirty. Their circumstances are probably more like those experienced in the day of Jesus and the disciples.

I am not advocating that we introduce a mud bath into the Passover service and the foot washing so that we get a little more experience. I'm not suggesting that at all. We obviously have to learn the lesson in the environment in which we live. But notice what happens. Supper was ready (not "ended" as the King James Version states) and Jesus ...

John 13:4 rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.

In Jewish writings, the very fact of girding Himself with a towel is considered to be the sign of being a servant. A servant was identified by being girded with a towel. He then washes the feet of the twelve.

5 After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

14 "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

I've mentioned what I've said about other parts of the world because in the times of Jesus Christ, washing a person's feet was not a pleasant job. It was considered to be the most debased job that a servant could do. In fact, one of the Jewish commentators, Rabbi Ishmael, writing in the century after Christ, said that a Hebrew slave was not to wash the feet of a master. Only a Gentile slave could do this. Ishmael based his reasoning on the instructions about having a Hebrew slave in Exodus 21.

Exodus 21:1 "Now these are the judgments which you shall set before them:

2 "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing.

3 "If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.

Rabbi Ishmael assembled a set of exegesis based on these verses. The first four and a half pages are taken up with the first verse: "these are the judgments which you shall set before them." Then he talks about buying a Hebrew slave, and eventually he gets down to the fact that, "He shall serve six years."

Let me read to you an English translation of it. Ishmael said:

"I might understand this to mean in any kind of service ..."

You have a slave. He can serve you in any way you want.

"... but Scripture says: Thou shalt not make him serve as a bondservant (Leviticus 25.39). Hence the sages said ..."

Ishmael is recording what has been said over the centuries ...

"... the sages said: 'A Hebrew slave must not wash the feet of his master, nor put his shoes on him, nor carry his things before him when going to the bathhouse, nor support him by the hips when ascending steps, nor carry him in a litter or a chair or a sedan chair as slaves do. For it is said: "But over your brethren the children of Israel ye shall not rule, one over another, with rigour"' ...

The things that Ishmael mentions here that sages have touched upon were considered to be the demeaning aspects of life. If you weren't to rule over your fellow person with rigour, then you should not ask them to do demeaning things. This person is your servant only for six years. After that, he needs to be able to go out with respect, with dignity, to carry on his life.

To have a Hebrew slave to wash a master's feet was "ruling over him with rigour." It was considered demeaning, the most base of jobs. Yet Jesus undertook the task that He could not require of them as His disciples! It could only be required of a Gentile servant.

Yet notice what Jesus did: He then bound them as brethren, to wash each other's feet. This really is meddling! Now we have got to be prepared to do the most base of jobs for one another.

12 *So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"*

You have read it. You know the altercation that went on between Jesus and Peter. They were all very much aware of what had happened. Why did Peter get so upset about Jesus Christ washing his feet? Because no one had ever heard of a master washing his disciples' feet before. "That was something for a Gentile to do - not my master."

13 *"You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am.*

14 *"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.*

15 *"For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.*

16 *"Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.*

17 *"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*

Jesus presented this situation of foot-washing in a master-servant relationship. I think we can understand why Peter got so upset, because "this isn't the way it is done." This was the Being with all the power that Mark speaks of, now undertaking not just the exercise of power for the well-being of others, but actually lowering Himself to the most base job in Jewish society - of washing another Jew's feet.

There's another aspect of washing the feet. To do this willingly for another person represented a sign of RESPECT for the other. When a visitor arrived, his feet were washed as a matter of respect.

In Genesis the aspect of foot-washing was a matter of hospitality. Abraham washed the feet of the Eternal and the angels at Mamre:

Genesis 18:4 "Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.

The angels go into Sodom and Gomorrah and meet Lot. Lot, as a matter of respect for these people, washes their feet. So it is in a number of circumstances throughout the Old Testament where we have this aspect of hospitality and respect.

The same held true in the days of Jesus. Simon (not Simon Peter) failed to provide water to wash his guests feet (Luke 7:36-50). You have to ask, "What is going through this man's mind?" He may have said, "I don't have a Gentile to wash these Hebrew feet." That's beside the point.

Jesus Christ was able to get to the heart of the problem. This man had no respect for Jesus Christ as his guest. This was the occasion when a woman came in, wept over His feet, dried His feet with her hair and then anointed them with ointment. Simon was a little irate about this. He was a protagonist. He was a Pharisee. Jesus Christ, sensing Simon's attitude towards Him:

Luke 7:44 ... turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet ...

"You didn't even put a basin out there for Me to put My feet in." He wore open shoes, sandals. There were no paved streets such as we might expect today.

44 ... you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head.

45 "You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in.

46 "You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil.

47 "Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."

They didn't see the great value in forgiveness. That's another story. What we are looking at here is the lack of respect. No water, no kiss, no oil: all were signs of respect for another.

But it goes further. If we read a little more in Jewish literature, we find that the idea of voluntary washing of another's feet was an act of love. You had better believe it was if that was the way in which the Jews looked at it. But you, as their master, couldn't have a Hebrew slave wash your feet. You had to have a Gentile do it.

If someone voluntarily did it for you, that was clearly an indication of their respect and admiration - and their love for you as an individual.

Another work that was written about a century after the time of Jesus Christ is *Joseph and Asenath*. You don't have to go out and read it. You won't be benefited by reading it, but it is one of those little novellas that were written at that period of time about Biblical characters. They love to expand on what the Bible gave them. Joseph and Asenath refer to the son of Jacob and his wife in Egypt. It talks about Asenath and how she sought to woo Joseph - nothing that is in the Bible! One of the things that she did, one of the things that people look at, is that she was prepared to wash his feet; a willingness to show her love for this man. I mention that because this is the environment in which John frames Jesus Christ's actions.

John 13 has already talked about the master-servant relationship. That is clearly included there. But John also brings in this matter of respect and love as well.

John 13:1 Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

John makes a point of love being part and parcel of this equation.

3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God,

4 rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.

... and went about the process of washing feet. Having completed it and Judas having now gone, He said:

34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

35 "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

... if you are prepared to debase yourself for another person. Jesus' actions are very, very telling. Peter's protest at Jesus' actions are perhaps more understandable in the light of the role that Jesus was playing. Peter, probably at best thought that he should be doing it for Christ. "Things are upside down here!" Notice Jesus' answer to his protestations:

John 13:8 Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet ...

"There is no way You are going to do this!"

8 ... Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

The word that is translated as "part" is normally and frequently used in terms of geographical territory. If we go to the Old Testament, and look at the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we find that the same word is used, for instance, in terms of the inheritance or the possessions of the tribes, what they were to have.

The Levites, for instance, had no part in the land as it was divided among the tribes (Numbers 18:20). What was their part?

Numbers 18:20 (New Revised Standard Version) Then the LORD said to Aaron: You shall have no allotment in their land, nor shall you have any share among them ...

The word "share" is translated in other English language translations as "portions." "You are not going to have any portion among them." In reality we are talking about exactly the same thing that Jesus Christ was talking to Peter about in John 13:8 (the word that has been translated "part").

John 13:8 ... Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

The Eternal went on to Aaron and said:

Numbers 18:20 ... I am your share ...

"I am your part!"

20 ... and your possession among the Israelites.

The priesthood, the Levites, those who served the Eternal had a share or a part in the Eternal because of their position. God had separated them to perform the work of the tabernacle.

Jesus was stating that involvement in this servant act was essential to inherit the Kingdom, to have a part in His Kingdom. To be "part" in the Kingdom of God, we need to learn to serve one another. That is an essential part of the loving the other, which involves seeking another's benefit.

Inheriting the Kingdom also means to have a relationship with the Father. The priesthood and the Levites serving in the tabernacle or the Temple, needed to do something before they performed their act of service. What did they have to do before they could serve within the tabernacle (and later the Temple)?

The Eternal detailed the dimensions and the construction, but also the procedures and the way in which it was to be operated.

Exodus 30:17 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

18 "You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base also of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. And you shall put water in it,

19 "for Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet in water from it.

20 "When they go into the tabernacle of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn an offering made by fire to the LORD, they shall wash with water, lest they die.

That's how important this washing was! Jesus Christ's words to Peter were just as emphatic. "If you don't accept the conditions that I lay down, you don't have an inheritance with Me. You don't have a part with Me."

21 "So they shall wash their hands and their feet, lest they die ...

I didn't repeat myself - nor did the book of Exodus repeat itself. It is being emphasised. Here is something not to be forgotten: if you want to serve before the Eternal, do it according to His standards, which includes washing your feet.

Was it a type of baptism? No. Aaron and his sons had already been through a type of baptism in the Red Sea. Just as Jesus Christ pointed out to Simon Peter, washing feet wasn't a type of baptism. It was something else.

21 ... And it shall be a statute forever to them - to him and his descendants throughout their generations."

This was an essential act for the priests and the Levites to continue having the Eternal as their part. If they wanted an inheritance, do things God's way. If they wanted a part, they had to wash their feet every time they were serving in the tabernacle area. You might say, before you could come before God you have to have your feet clean.

I am glossing over washing the hands. Why didn't Christ wash their hands? Presumably they had done it themselves. The same lesson couldn't be taught of washing their hands. I know the leaders of the Jews complained that the disciples didn't follow the tradition of the elders in washing their hands. We don't necessarily know all the details of that. It's not necessarily a blanket statement saying that the disciples never washed their hands before they ate! I am sure that their mothers probably taught them something about that in their childhood.

But it was probably more the case of them not washing in the prescribed manner - almost like a "scrub up" for an operating theatre. They had to wash in a particular way and dry in a particular way. The disciples weren't complying with the perceived wisdom of that.

Jesus doesn't address the aspect of hands, but clearly there is a relationship here between the washing of the feet of the priesthood and the Levites, and the washing of feet to have a part with Jesus Christ. It operates on many levels.

The same element of life and death that applied to the priests and the Levites applies to a relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ. Unless WE are prepared to follow the example of Jesus Christ, we are not going to have a relationship with the Father. "We are dead!" We may not be dead at this moment, but that is all that awaits us. Peter had to come to an understanding that things were not quite the way he perceived them.

I wonder whether this perhaps provides a link to a statement by the apostle Paul in ...

***Hebrews 10:19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus,
20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh,
21 and having a High Priest over the house of God,
22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith ...***

Where is Paul setting this? He is setting it in the Temple. Jesus Christ is our High Priest. The tabernacle or the Temple was the High Priest's locus of operation. He was responsible for it. So in talking about Jesus Christ here as our High Priest, he is taking us into the tabernacle, into the Temple. He is putting us in there with Jesus Christ as our High Priest.

***22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.
23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.
24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,
25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.***

The word that has been translated "body" in this section is the word *soma*. It can apply to the body. It's very easy to think of the body being washed as a reference to baptism. But we are talking about the tabernacle here. The washing of the hands and the feet was an essential requirement to have a relationship with God as the writer was expressing.

The consequence of having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water was to be love - which is exactly what John was talking about in John 13. Jesus Christ washed their feet as an aspect of His love towards them. He wants us to love one another, to debase ourselves and wash one another's feet.

The washing of the hands and feet was an essential requirement to have a relationship with God. Above all else, the relationship with God is what Paul is driving at more than anything else. We have a High Priest. We have access to the Father. But we can short-change ourselves if we don't assemble ourselves together, if we don't relate to one another in the way we should. He said that we need to exhort one another, and so much more as we see the Day approaching.

Humanity loves to think of messiahs as rulers. But all those who have and will see themselves in that role have never learned to serve as a messiah should. Here was a Being with all the power in the world, yet He was prepared to debase Himself, not only to sacrifice His life, but even to wash the feet, to do the job that was reserved for a Gentile slave.

Jesus Christ came the first time to serve humanity in a profound way. He wants us to learn to serve by that example. The practice of foot-washing is a means by which we can start to learn that attitude. How do we see one another?

Let's read the first of the "Suffering Servant" sections from Isaiah. It says of the One we can very easily apply to Jesus Christ:

***Isaiah 42:1 "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold,
My Elect One in whom My soul delights!
I have put My Spirit upon Him ...***

The Eternal sees Him as a Servant, a Servant to all people. The Tanakh provides a few expressions that are more effective in this passage. It says,

1 This is My servant, whom I uphold, My chosen one, in whom I delight. I have put My spirit upon him, He shall teach the true way to the nations.

The Hebrew word for "the true way" is *mishpat*. The King James translations renders it:

1 ... He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.

People say, "What do you mean by justice?" It is "the true way." John the Baptist came preparing "the Way." The Church followed in "the Way." So, He will teach the TRUE WAY to the nations.

2 (Tanakh) He shall not cry out or shout aloud, or make his voice heard in the streets.

3 He shall not break even a bruised reed, or snuff out even a dim wick. He shall bring for the true way.

4. He shall not grow dim or be bruised till he has established the true way on earth; and the coastlands shall await his teaching

... obviously combining both roles of Jesus Christ: as the Servant on the one hand, and as the One who is going to come to change the entire world, together. He is the Suffering Servant yes, but having qualified as a servant, He is now able to come to be the Messiah that everybody expects! He is going to rule over all nations. He is going to accomplish that.

When verse 4 says all the coastlands await His teaching, that is as true today as it was in the time of Isaiah - even more so. As the years pass, it becomes even more urgent.

But for Jesus Christ to come as a Messiah, He had to come as a Servant, and show how He could exercise that power as a Servant for the benefit of others. What does it say about you and me as we look forward to our place in His Kingdom with Him?

I put it to you that we can't be entrusted to rule with the Messiah until we also have learned to serve others in the most profound way, to have learned to use the power of God, not for ourselves, but for the benefit of others.

The end result of the true servant of God ruling, is so dramatically different than anything this world ever looks for, because the power is used to the honour and the glory of God, not the self. In learning to serve, one learns to put the needs of others before one's self. We learn to love our neighbour as ourself - and in learning to love our neighbour as ourselves, we learn to love the Lord our God with all our strength, with all our might and with all our power.

Rulership doesn't exist for power or for control, but for the benefit of others. Each and every one of us needs to think, "How do I serve others?"

Do we have power in our lives? Yes, we have a limited amount of power. How do we use it? In what way is it used?

Jesus Christ set an example. He set an example of being a Suffering Servant. Today we haven't even touched upon His death and what He went through there. But I hope I have helped you appreciate that Jesus Christ, even as an all-powerful Being, was able to use that power, not for His own benefit, but for humanity's sake. In so doing, He taught us a lesson that we have to learn. He provides for us to learn that lesson as we partake and keep the Passover year after year.

... *Peter Nathan*
04 Mar 06

[Back to Top](#)

[Back to Sermon Summary List](#)