

Jesus: He Stoops to Conquer

Wednesday @ First

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Bible Text: John 13:1-20

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For those of you who are regulars here on Wednesday at lunch know who chose that hymn. How many of you knew that hymn? Some of you. I didn't hear you singing. Well, if you don't know that hymn, do take the hymn sheet home with you and learn that hymn. It was written by Richard Frank Houghton who was a bishop of the Church of England and he served in Africa and became the Director of what used to be the China Inland Mission and the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. He was a wonderful, godly Christian minister and I had one or two of his books that had been given to me when I was a young teenager and I saw that he was speaking at an episcopalian church on the other side of town when I was a boy, I suppose, about 15-16. I remember getting on a bus one Friday night and going from one end of the town to the other end of the town to hear the very elderly Frank Houghton. I'll never forget his words to me as he shook hands with me at the door, just a few words he spoke to me as he shook my hand about encouraging me to go on in the Christian life. He didn't know me from the man in the moon and his words have lived with me every since, I suppose, 15 seconds in his presence. They have remained with me the rest of my life. To me, such an illustration of what 15 seconds of your life could mean in somebody else's life if you live as Bishop Houghton did, wonderfully in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We're beginning a new series today and for those of you who are not members or attenders at First Presbyterian, perhaps I ought to put you in the picture that between the beginning of the year and Easter Sunday, we are immersing ourselves in First Presbyterian Church in the gospel of John and we're doing it in a very subtle way in the sense that Sunday mornings I'm preaching from John 1 through to the end of John 12 which brings Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and then in holy week, we're going to look at the Passover, the Lord's Supper, the betrayal of Jesus, crucifixion of Jesus, Good Friday, the resurrection of Jesus in John's gospel on Easter Sunday. There's this section in John's gospel, so we're fast forwarding a little in Wednesdays, there is a section in John's gospel that, to me, is just one of the most amazing sections in the whole of Scripture in which Jesus gathers his disciples, eventually dismisses Judas Iscariot from the room and spends what was obviously several hours, teaching his disciples as they gathered together for the Passover meal. So, of all places in the gospels, this is the place where we meet Jesus surrounded by his very best friends. We're going to work our way through these chapters, John 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 on Wednesdays as we move towards Easter.

Let's read our passage today. It's very familiar to us, John 13. The text in the order of service is the English Standard Version.

“1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

That's really an introduction to this new section in John's gospel. I take this to be the Passover meal,

“2 During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?' 7 Jesus answered him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.’”

Incidentally, how often the Lord Jesus needs to say that to us, doesn't he? “You don't understand now what I'm doing in your life but afterwards, you will understand.”

“8 Peter said to him, 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.' 9 Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!’”

Typical Peter.

“10 Jesus said to him, 'The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.' 11 For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, 'Not all of you are clean.' 12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, 'Do you understand what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, 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 also should do just as I have done to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. 18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, “He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.” 19 I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I

am he. 20 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”

The gospel of John which is such a rich and deep gospel, appears to divide into two very different halves and sometimes those two halves are described in the following way: chapters 1-12 are sometimes described as “the book of the signs,” and you remember how, throughout that part of John's gospel, Jesus does mighty works, he does many signs. Indeed, as John says towards the end of the gospel that if all the signs that he had done had been written down in a book, the whole world wouldn't be able to contain them. But John has selected a number of those signs in order to put on display the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, at the end of the turning of the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, John says, “This was the first sign that Jesus did in which he manifested his glory.” He showed his glory through the signs but you remember how John begins his gospel, “He came to his own people and his own people refused to receive him.”

So, right at the end of chapter 12, we find these verses, John 12:36-37, “When Jesus had said these things,” I wonder who ever noticed this verse, “When Jesus had said these things, he left and hid himself from them. Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.” So, he'd done all these signs, displayed his glory as the Son of God but they refused to believe in him and so he withdrew and he did no more public signs.

But he gathered his intimate disciples with him and in chapter 13, to the end of the book, that whole section is sometimes, I think, well described as “the book of glory.” We've been told in John's gospel that Jesus is going to be glorified and now he gathers his disciples and he begins to reveal to them his glory and at least in my own view, there is nowhere in the Bible you could possibly go, not even in John's gospel, where the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ is more beautifully, clearly, magnificently and intimately revealed. This is Jesus with his friends and it's so clear in what we read earlier on in John's gospel that when people don't come to believe in Jesus, Jesus doesn't entrust himself to them but when people do come to believe in Jesus as these disciples with all their sins and faults, warts and all, had genuinely come to believe in Jesus, Jesus begins to entrust himself. So, the more we trust ourselves to him as Savior and Lord, the more of himself he entrusts to us and this is what he was doing here. He was showing them things that the world could never see because the world that had rejected him, wouldn't have had the capacity to take in the marvelous things he was going to say to them and the glorious things that he was going to show to them.

He begins as we see here in chapter 13, although he does no more signs in public, he begins by doing a sign in private. And the way John recounts this, the story of Jesus in the middle of the meal getting up and going and getting the basin of water and taking out his outer clothes and putting the slave's towel around him and then as they sat at table, systematically going round each of the disciples and then saying to them, “Do you understand what I've done?” It's obvious that although this is the book of glory, Jesus is wanting to show them his glory in a way they ought to have been able to understand in

this sign. Of course, in this single sign, Jesus is giving them a kind of dramatic representation of all that he has come to do.

So, I want us to notice today very quickly, I want us to notice five things about this familiar passage that will draw us in to see the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, help us to trust ourselves more to him as Savior and Lord and begin to discover that as we do that, he entrusts more and more of himself and knowledge of himself to us by his Holy Spirit..

First of all, I want you to notice Jesus' sense of occasion. You know how some people have that and some people clearly lack it. You know, people do things on certain occasions and you say, "He had no sense whatsoever of the occasion." John tells us what the occasion was in verse 3, Jesus knew that "the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going back to God." In other words, in a deep consciousness of his own eternal, most glorious, divine identity, he had come from God and he was going back to God. It was in the consciousness as John says at the beginning of his gospel that Jesus' place was in the bosom of the Father. That's so interesting because you remember one of the things that seemed to mean so much to Peter and John when they were in the Upper Room was that John was reclining on the bosom of Jesus. It was the way that they sat and John was so near to Jesus, could hear everything Jesus said and it's the picture of our Lord Jesus living in the bosom of the Father so that nothing is hidden between them, so that every secret, every whisper is revealed. This is who he really is. This is where he really belongs. He is, as Paul says, "the Lord of glory." He is the King of kings. He is, himself, the Son of God. He is from all eternity. He is the Creator of the universe, the sustainer of all things and he has this extraordinary sense of occasion that, though he is the Lord of glory, he knows that the devil has put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him.

In other words, he's not only conscious of his own identity, he's conscious of a very important thing about his ministry. I wonder if you remember those words that God spoke in the Garden of Eden when the man and the woman had sinned and he said, "I'm going to put enmity between you and the serpent, between his seed and your seed. There will come a day when your seed will bruise or crush the head of the serpent." God was saying, "The way in which I'm going to bring restoration and salvation to this broken and lost world is going to be in a night of intense darkness and in a moment of extraordinary conflict." So, Jesus is not only, as it were, conscious that he has come from all eternity, he's conscious that he's right at the most significant point of all history when this great battle is going to be fought and he's conscious that the enemy is already in the room seeking to attack him. He knew who was going to betray him.

It's in that context that we read in verse 1 that, "When the time had come for him to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own," that's the disciples, "he loved them to the end." Now, John loves double entendres, saying things that you think, "Does he mean this or is there more to it?" He doesn't just mean that Jesus loved them to the end of his days, he means, I think, that Jesus loved them to the end that God had for them. Some of you had me cite the other day the marvelous words of John Dunn when he says, "Whom God loves," let me put Jesus' name in there, "whom Jesus loves, he loves to

their end,” and not to their end and to their death but to his end and his end is that he might love them more. That's what his end is.

This is a marvelous picture, therefore, of Jesus' sense of occasion and it's a holy privilege, I think, to feel, almost to sense, you could almost be there and listen to him speak. But if he has a sense of the occasion, he now engages in an act of profound humiliation. He knows that all things are under his authority and John means all things. Not just the menu, not just the evening but absolutely everything. Remember the beginning of the gospel, “Without him was not anything made that was made.” He is the Lord of everything and he engages in this amazing display of humiliation. He rises from supper. He leaves the head of the table where he belongs and he goes and gets the basin and he takes off his outer clothes and he puts on the servant's towel and then he systematically goes round each of these disciples including, incidentally, Judas Iscariot, including Judas Iscariot and he is prepared to wash their feet.

Actually, what's so interesting about this is that John uses here a verb he had used in translating Jesus' presumably Aramaic words when Jesus had said, “I have the power to lay down my life.” I think the reason John uses this verb when he says Jesus lays aside his outer garment is to say to us as we read through John's gospel, “Do you see the connection between these two things?” This is what he's portraying here. Again, it's so interesting if you read through those verses, I think you'll notice as I sometimes say, that the action certainly seems to go into slow motion and every last detail of what Jesus did is recorded and John is saying, “I want you to see this played out in slow motion.” If you've got time sometime, get two Bibles and turn one Bible to John 13 and turn the other Bible to Philippians 2:5-11 and notice the similarities between the steps that Jesus physically took in the Upper Room and the description the Apostle Paul gives of what Jesus has done for our salvation. Though he was in the form of God, he didn't count equality with God something that would give him special privileges but he emptied himself, made himself of no reputation, took on the form of a servant, humbled himself even unto death, death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him a name that is above every name, that every knee should bow to him and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and you'll notice that the same rhythm is present here in John's gospel as Jesus stoops down and down and down and then eventually resumes his place at the table as Lord and Master. He's setting before them, it must have been to any of them who were sensitive, almost excruciating to them, that he was doing this. It was clearly in the most literal sense, in a way excruciating because he was showing them what he was going to do for them on the cross, why he'd come into the world, how he would be stripped in order to save.

He comes to Peter and typically because Peter was always doing this, whenever Jesus sent him a message about what he was going to do, Peter resisted. That gives us the third thing that we find here: Jesus' sense of occasion; Jesus' act of humiliation; thirdly, Jesus' dramatization of his work of salvation. Laying aside the manifestation of his glory, becoming the servant. I wonder if they remembered how he had said about himself that the Son of man came not to be deaconed to, not to have table servants but to become a table servant. It was actually being worked out before their eyes that Jesus was the

servant and do you know what Peter says quite literally? When Jesus says to him, “Peter, I want to wash your feet.” Peter says, “Not to eternity.” I guess the way we would say it would be, “Not in a million years. You will never wash my feet in a million years.” I think one of the most significant things, think about what I said a few minutes ago about Bishop Houghton, 15 seconds, touching me for the whole of my history. Peter says, “You will not do this in a million years.” Jesus so ministers to him, teaches him, subdues him, draws him to understand and to believe that what Peter said would never take place in a million years had actually happened within five minutes. I'll come back to that in a moment.

So, his sense of occasion, his profound humiliation, his dramatization of the work of salvation and a kind of acted parable or prophecy of his coming exaltation. The language in verse 12 here, “When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place.” It's also reminiscent of those words Jesus had spoken that's recorded in John 10 when he said, “I have power to lay down my life and I have power to take it up again.” So, he puts on his clothes and goes to the table and now he sits as the host. If only they had eyes to see which, of course, they didn't. “You don't understand what I'm doing but afterwards you will understand.” They understood when he rose again. They must have thought, “That's what he was trying to say to me and I never saw it. He was speaking to me about his glorious exaltation.”

That's so important to remember, isn't it? That we don't have a dead Christ. That we aren't mourners looking back to Jesus and saying, “He was a wonderful teacher,” and, “O, if only he could still be with us but, of course, no he's dead and gone.” You know, there is a religion that's like that but it's not Christianity. No, the heart of being a Christian is that what you didn't understand, the risen Lord Jesus and his power and his grace, opened your eyes and understand and so, we've got this picture not only of his humiliation, we've got this picture of his exaltation.

His sense of occasion, his amazing humiliation, his picture of his work of salvation, the prophecy of his coming exaltation and, of course, his very practical application. “You see what I've done to you. The mark that you understand what I've done to you and for you is that you will do this to and for others. I have given you an example, now go and do the same.” You know, if you fast forward, let's say, 30 years, 40 years, you find Peter who was there in the Upper Room giving little indications in his first letter towards the end of the New Testament that these moments had made an indelible impression on him and helped him to understand the gospel because I wonder if you remember how he says to leaders in 1 Peter, he says, “Clothe yourselves with humility,” and he uses language that's deliberately reflective of this incident when Jesus clothed himself in servant's garb. He says, “Clothe yourselves in humility.”

Then he says something else, he says, “Now Jesus died for us in order to bring us pardon but he also died for us in order to leave us an example that we should follow in his footsteps.” The word he uses is very interesting. It's the word that was used in the classical world of the handwriting that a teacher would do on a slate and then say to the child, “Now you copy what I've done.” Actually, that was how I was taught to write.

Some of you remember those books where there was a space for the teacher to write and then there was a space for you to write and I was actually taught a light stroke up and a heavy stroke down and don't blot the page. Peter is saying, "I think at last I've got it, that when I understand that he has died to bring me forgiveness, out of my love for him, I want to become like him and so, in my life, I begin by God's grace to imitate the handwriting of the Lord Jesus Christ himself."

Now, back to that point I said I would pick up: Peter said, "Never to eternity." Never to eternity. Let me ask you a question: is there anything in your life about which the Lord Jesus speaks to you, perhaps even just coming to trust in him and at least in your heart, you're saying, "Never to eternity. Not in a million years"? I wouldn't be surprised that some of us in this room having tried to share our Christian faith with somebody else, has actually heard somebody say to us, "Never in a million years." You know, if you live long enough as a Christian, by God's grace, you sometimes see people eating those words and what they say will never take place in a million years can be transacted in 20 minutes. Actually, that might kind of ring a special bell in your mind today because when you came into this room, perhaps invited by a friend or perhaps just because you came in, at the back of your mind, deep down in your heart, the truth about your life was you, your intention was that never in a million years would you be drawn to a living faith in Jesus Christ and within 20 minutes, it's actually begun to happen and you're at the very point where you think, "He really is a living Savior. I sense that he's here. I actually feel that this passage is really all about me. He is teaching me and he's saying to me, Don't you see what I came to do for you? Don't you see how by my power I can not only forgive you but transform you?"

Let's get rid of those words, "Never in a million years," and let's hear you say, perhaps the Lord Jesus is saying to us, "Lord Jesus, how about today? Could it begin for me today?" But if you're already a Christian, it's not unusual for Christians to be saying in their heart of hearts to the Lord Jesus, "Everything else but don't touch that in a million years," and he's saying to you, "That's the very thing I've come to touch," and you say, "Then, Lord Jesus, touch it. I'm all yours." Jesus and his best friends and to think that we can be his best friends too.

Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, how we thank you today for your wonderful word, for the way in which uniquely John recorded this period in our Lord Jesus' life when he poured himself into his very best friends. Pour yourself, by your Spirit, into us we pray that we may love you and trust you and yield everything to you. But especially that we may understand now what it is that you were doing when you laid aside the garments of your glory and girded yourself with the servant's towel and on the cross shed your precious blood, that our whole lives might be cleansed from sin and in the future, we might live in the glorious knowledge of your risen presence with us. We thank you for all that you have done for us and we thank you with all our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.