

# **28 March, 2004: Rev Pressley Sutherland**

## **Feet on the Mountains - Our Walk With Christ**

### **Preparing for Passion**

#### **Isaiah 52.7-15**

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'...."

Just as there were many who were astonished at him - "so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals - so this one shall startle many nations...."

I do not have feet that I am especially willing to show off to people. When I was preparing for this sermon, I briefly considered doing a demonstrative sermon where I took my shoes off as an illustration. Thankfully good sense prevailed and I realised my work as a preacher is to turn people on to the gospel not put them off!

But I imagine how beautiful any feet are that come into our lives and open our hearts to the Spiritual reality of the heart of God for us. I recently saw Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ." And in the midst of this very violent meditation, which no doubt the crucifixion was, there was a moment when Mary Magdalene remembered the first time she saw Jesus. She first saw not his face, but his feet--his dusty sandals, his soles worn from walking many miles in his itinerant ministry. In this version, she was the woman accused of adultery - battered, bruised, lying in the dirt, pushed by an angry mob preparing to bludgeon her with stones. I imagine how beautiful the Nazarean's feet must have looked to her as she heard him stand up to the mob - proclaiming the good news that none of us are so free from sin that we can judge another and take retribution in God's name.

Yet there he was suffering in front of an even larger mob. Those feet that had brought peace and proclaimed true godly justice were nailed to wood. How were his followers then as well as today to make sense of this?

The earliest Christians, and indeed Christ himself, found meaning for the Passion through the prophesy and poetry found in later Isaiah. In what have been called the Suffering Servant passages, a suffering figure brings peace, justice and insight into God's heart for God's people. Many scholars think this figure represented the nation of Israel, despised & suffering, in exile in Babylon. In this understanding, the prophet exhorts Israel that even in their suffering faith will not be forgotten, for this faith will be answered with the promise that upon their restoration, they will become a light to nations and kings & queens as they see and understand the awesome power and love of God glorified through them.

Jesus saw himself as the fulfillment of this prophesy. He faced his suffering and persecution with honesty, great faith, and great strength on behalf of the God he loved and the people he loved, in order that nothing would mar his witness and life's work. Through the final events of his life, as sin and destruction did its worst to him, he showed a victorious Spirit and faith in our Creator. And just as God remembered Israel in both Egypt and Babylon, God remembered Christ in the tomb, bringing resurrection to bring us out of Spiritual bondage as surely as God brought the Hebrews out of physical bondage.

Jesus' life is an exemplary life - almost as if Christ were a mirror. Within his life's story, those of us who pray for the eyes to see can see ourselves completely. We see our violence, our redemption, our compassion, our healing, our strength, our glory as a child of the living God. It is as if Christ's life is the pool of Siloam - a deep pool in which we look to see ourselves reflected truthfully - and a place where we can become immersed in real Spiritual healing even when our bodies and minds suffer.

Christ's suffering was to bring the end of atonement (a sense of a God needing flesh sacrifices in religious practice). He told his followers that this was the redeeming act to which he dedicated to God his suffering on all our behalf, and to never feel the need to do so again. Make no mistake, friends, his suffering was not caused by God but by this world's propensity toward violence and religious self-righteousness. I believe that God didn't cause the crucifixion, but God did answer the prayer of her Child's heart to make his suffering, death and overcoming such a powerful witness to faith in God's grace that the world would be awakened and saved, once and for all, if we too will only dedicate our lives to complete faith in God's love and manifest purpose in our lives.

I am not glad that Jesus suffered, but I am glad that we have a Saviour who is understanding and strengthening in our suffering. We know that Jesus went all the way for us, and will still be able to walk all the way with us. He has proclaimed himself as the final Passover Lamb and for us to have faith in God's heart for us.

The celebration of Jewish Passover was a season of sacrificing the best lamb at the temple in order to remember that lamb's sacrificed blood over the doorways had once signified the passing over of the angel of death from the dwellings of the covenant people in Egypt. We can imagine the thousands of little lambs laid on the altars, sacrificed and burnt, the smoke rising from the Temple visible for miles, all to ensure God's continuing grace for Israel.

But Christ celebrated Passover with his disciples in a different way. In fulfillment of John the Baptist's prophesy, he took the symbols of Passover and in effect said, 'Understand my coming trials and suffering as my becoming the final Paschal Lamb for you and for all. Remember me and what I endure in this understanding, and let faith in the truth of God's promise to be with you in all things be your future sacrifice. Believe my covenant that I will always be with you and will send my Spirit upon you - only ask and have faith.'

By Christ's death, a lot of little lambs have been saved rather than sacrificed! In the new covenant, symbolised in Christ's naming of his crucifixion as the final blood sacrifice, the site of sacrifice moves to our hearts. We are simply asked to bring our faith in Christ's promise to us as our offering - in good times and bad - in contentment and suffering - in understanding and confusion.

And the God of Christ will be faithful to us. We are met with grace when we need grace... forgiveness when we need forgiveness... divine healing when we need divine healing... strength when we grow weary... and new life when we need new life.

Part of the mystery of choosing to have faith is the way that God's Spirit can then penetrate our heart if we will let her - touching, teaching, correcting, loving, strengthening and empowering us in all things and at all times - so that we too may tread the mountains of this world as ones who bring genuine peace and a timely Word.

To be such a disciple, we are asked, 'Can we sacrifice all that consumes us but Love?' When we are consumed by anything but the love that flows from God's heart, we create a distorted understanding that in the end only compounds suffering.

Are we consumed with feelings of anger, entitlement, vindication from the past? Then we need to offer this up and come to Christ in faith for healing. Don't be ashamed - we are all angry and feel entitled.

Are we consumed with feelings of fear, doubting, and despair? Then we need to offer this up and come to Christ in faith for healing. Don't be ashamed - we are all afraid and plagued with doubt.

Are we apathetic, cynical, judgemental of the Spirit and spiritual people? Then we need to offer this up and come to Christ in faith for healing. Don't be ashamed - we are all apathetic and judgemental.

In the era of the New Covenant, Christ's promise is that he will always be with us. Through the presence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, through your decision to have Faith in God's love as revealed through Christ - you can be filled and sent forth as one who walks the mountains with faith and inner resources that will be a powerful blessing to all.

How beautiful are our feet - no matter what they look like! Christ is waiting to meet you, bless you, and send you forth. To him, they are beautiful, and he will take every step up the mountain with you as you proclaim together the promise of peace, good news, freedom from bondage, and the enduring power and goodness of our Creator.

Yours in Christ,

Rev Pressley Sutherland