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The Feet of Those Who Preach Good News Romans 10:14-21

Fr. William Klock

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What do your feet look like? Do you ever take your shoes and socks off, look at your feet, and say, “Those are beautiful?” Do other people see your bare feet and exclaim, “Wow! Those are some beautiful feet!” Maybe that’s happened to you, but it hasn’t happened to me. In fact, just Friday when I was at the pool, someone pointed down to my left big toe and said, “Ouch! That’s ugly. Does it hurt?” You see, last week I was trying to navigate a bunch of boxes, got my toe stuck in one, fell, and wrenched my toe. I sprained it pretty badly, but I also cut it pretty badly and the nail is now black and purple. It’s ugly. It’s better now, but it did *really* hurt at the time. I’ve never thought my feet were particularly beautiful, but my accident last week hasn’t made any improvements. On the other hand, I’ve occasionally heard of people spending lots of money to make their feet beautiful. There are whole businesses out there that cater to your feet. I won’t say that it’s a waste of money, but this morning I want to point you to how St. Paul tells us—anyone, even if you’ve got black and blue toenails or a bunion that looks like a sixth toe—*anyone*, how to have beautiful feet. You know how? Quoting Isaiah, Paul says, “Beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news.”

Now, here’s how he gets there. Paul’s spent the last two chapters—Romans 9 and 10—working his way through Israel’s history. He’s done this for two reasons. First, he’s done it to show what God’s original plan was for his people. Paul’s fellow Jews had a

very clear idea of what it meant to be God’s people, what their mission was, and what God’s plan for them was. Their problem was that they were wrong. And so, second, Paul’s been working through their own scriptures to show them what God’s plan really has been all along and that’s it’s been there, right in front of them, all this time. To sum it up: They understood God’s plan to be exclusive. The God of Israel would one day return to set this world to rights and they—his people marked out by circumcision, diet, and Sabbath—would be vindicated and set back on top, while the godless and unclean Gentiles would fall under his wrath. But as Paul is showing, God’s plan was actually inclusive. In the end, it would be the Gentiles who would be welcomed into God’s family, while the Jews would—mostly—choose to reject it.

In our passage last week, 10:5-13, Paul went back to the promises of Deuteronomy 30, which speaks of Israel’s salvation and shows how it is being fulfilled as *both Jews and Gentiles* are welcomed into the family, into the people of God. There is no distinction between Jew and Greek. All who call on the name of the Lord in faith—Paul now quotes the prophet Joel—all are welcomed into Israel’s salvation. This has been the plan all along.

Paul now changes gears a bit at verse 14 as he looks at his own ministry and the ministry of the apostles. Where do they stand in this big story? Look at verses 14-15.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

The passage about beautiful feet and preachers of good news is from Isaiah 52:7. This is part of the lead-in to Isaiah’s song about the Lord’s suffering servant. Paul understood the servant of Isaiah’s song to be Jesus and so he saw himself and his fellow apostles as part of the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy. The imagery Isaiah uses is the imagery of a messenger running from a far-off battlefield to deliver the good news that the enemy has been defeated and the battle won. Think of the king. The fate of his kingdom is hanging on the outcome of the battle. Think of the wives and children waiting to hear whether their husbands and fathers are alive or dead. The messenger could have the dirtiest, ugliest feet in the world, but the news he brings is so good that many people might be inclined to kiss his feet out of joy for the news he brings. This is what Isaiah prophesied about the heralds who would go out to proclaim the good news of God’s salvation of Israel. And from personal experience, Paul is saying that this is what he—and the other apostles—have seen and experienced as they’ve gone out from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and—in Paul’s case—to the Greco-Roman world with the news that this Jesus who was crucified and risen, is the world’s true Lord. Paul went out to proclaim that in Jesus, Israel’s God has brought a salvation that includes, not only Jews, but Gentiles as well, bringing the Gentiles into Israel’s story and into Israel’s family through Jesus, and seeing the prophecies about the kingdom—bringing forgiveness and healing and reconciliation and love for God—finally fulfilled.

But that’s not the only passage Paul quotes from Isaiah’s prophecy. As I said last week, this whole section of Romans is one quote after another from the Old Testament as Paul shows that what has happened in Jesus is precisely where God was headed with things all along. Paul begins his section quoting Isaiah 53:1. The suffering servant asks himself there, “Who has believed what he has heard

from us?” Here’s what Paul says in verse 16:

But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?”

Sometimes it seems that the word goes out and none believe. Even Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles had to ask: Why do some people hear and believe and others don’t? It wasn’t just the Jews who rejected Jesus. As much as the Gentiles were streaming into the Church, most of the Gentiles to whom Paul preached rejected Jesus too. Why? Paul leaves that to the wisdom of God. What he *does* know—and he knows it for certain—is that the word about Jesus is the word through which God works to create faith in the hearts of the people who hear it. This is what he’s saying to sum things up in verse 17:

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

And that’s Paul’s key point here. Faith in Jesus that produces love for God in the heart is the goal and this can *only* happen when men and women *hear* the word about the Messiah. How are people to believe if they haven’t heard? And how are they to hear unless someone proclaims the word to them? But, further, how are the preachers to go out and preach if they are not sent? This is where Paul sees himself, the other apostles, and everyone else sent out to proclaim the good news about Jesus: God has sent them and that sending is a fulfilment of the promises he made long before through Isaiah and others.

It’s also, I think, worth noting the way Paul writes about how people respond to the good news about Jesus. In verse 16 he describes it in terms of *obedience*. This goes back to what he wrote in Chapter 1 about the “obedience of faith”. But it highlights

how we’ve watered down our proclamation of the good news in our own day. More often than not, I’ve noticed that when we think of evangelism, we think in terms of “sharing” the good news. I did some research last year and found that this sort of thinking about the gospel has only been around for about 70-80 years. We *know* the gospel is the truth. We know that Jesus is *the* way and the *only* way, and yet we’ve often adopted means of presenting the good news as if it’s merely good *advice*. “Let me tell you about Jesus. Try him out for yourself and see if the Jesus experience is right for you.” We may not intend to be preaching this way, but this is what we’re often doing without thinking about it. Part of our problems is that we’ve turned the gospel into an answer to our felt needs: Need forgiveness? Try Jesus. Is your life a mess? Try Jesus. Are you lonely? Try Jesus. These may be related to the gospel, but they are not the gospel itself. First and foremost, the gospel is the message that Jesus is Lord—the true lord, the one of whom all the world’s kings and emperors are but cheap imitations. With that in mind, imagine the imperial heralds of Rome going out to the far-flung reaches of the empire and “sharing” with people about Caesar and inviting them to try the “Caesar experience”—as if there were any other real options or as if Caesar’s rule was a take it or leave it sort of thing. No. The good news about Jesus, Brothers and Sisters, is the royal summons to submit in faith to Jesus the King. It’s a summons that calls for obedience and a summons that calls for our full allegiance to him, to his kingdom, to his agenda.

Back to verse 18, Paul notes that not everyone believes. And this is despite everyone having heard. It’s not clear exactly what he means, but it helps to know that he’s quoting from Psalm 19—a psalm all about the way in which all of creation proclaims the

glory of God. Here’s what Paul writes:

But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.”

In Colossians 1:23, Paul writes about the way in which the resurrection of Jesus changed the world, as if a silent shockwave went out. The world was definitively changed that first Easter morning, but that doesn’t mean everyone has *understood* what has happened. The world has never been the same since, but to understand it and to understand why, requires the actual preaching of the good news. This is why the Gentiles are now streaming in. God’s promises have been fulfilled. But this makes it all the more troubling for Paul that his own people, the Jews, are refusing the message. The Gentiles who had no interest in the covenant family are now part of it, while the Jews, who saw their whole identity tied up in the covenant family, now find themselves on the outside. And, of course, the more Gentiles they see joining this Jesus movement, the less they want to have to do with it, because—of course—if it’s got unclean, uncircumcised Gentiles in it, then it can’t really be the covenant family.

And so Paul goes back to Deuteronomy 32 and Isaiah 65. He asks:

But I ask, did Israel not understand? [And here he quotes Deuteronomy 32:21] **First Moses says, “I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.”**

Israel is fuming at this idea that her Messiah would fulfil God’s promises for covenant renewal by bringing in

the Gentiles. Paul had the bruises and scars to prove it. And yet, he looks back to Deuteronomy 32:21 and says, “But Israel should have known all along that this is what God was planning.” Moses warned the Israelites, that as they had made the Lord jealous with their worship of idols, so he would one day make them jealous by making his people “those who are not a people”—by handing over Israel’s covenant privileges to Gentiles. This idea will be key in Romans 11.

Again, the problem is that while God made promises to Israel that he would work *through* her in order to bring the rest of the world to God, Israel had twisted those promises and claimed them as her exclusive inheritance. Watching Paul and watching the Gentiles, Israel has now become the older brother in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son. You remember the story. The younger brother claimed his inheritance early and then went off to spend it all on loose and ungodly living. When the money was gone, he returned home and was welcomed back by his father, but just as the welcome-home party was getting up to speed, the older brother was outside fuming in jealousy. How dare his father take what belonged to him and share it with that jerk! The Gentiles are like the younger brother. They’re outsiders to the covenant—they’re “not a people”. And they’re foolish in that they’ve never lived with the benefit of God’s wisdom the way Israel had. And yet, God will call just this people of foolish outsiders into the household of faith to arouse jealousy in Israel. That might seem bad if Paul left it at that, but he won’t.

First, though, in verses 20 and 21 he brings us back to Isaiah. Paul writes:

**Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,
“I have been found by those who
did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who
did not ask for me.”**

**But of Israel he says, “All day long I
have held out my hands to a
disobedient and contrary people.”**

The first quote is from Isaiah 65:1 and the second 65:2 and they hammer home Paul’s point. He’s made this point from the Law—going back to Moses—and now he makes it from the Prophets. Paul bring us back to the point he started at in Romans 9:30. The result of the good news about Jesus going out has been that the Gentiles who weren’t even looking for salvation from the God of Israel have encountered just that, while the Jews, who were eagerly longing for salvation have now found themselves on the outside looking in.

Think of another of Jesus’ parables. A son of a great king was getting married. Invitations went out to all of the king’s friends and the important people in his kingdom. But none of them would come. They snubbed the king. One had to look after his new oxen. Another had to look after some property he’d bought. Someone else had just got married and couldn’t make it. Instead, the king sent his men out to gather in whomever they could find. The Gentiles are like those men and women, brought in from the highways and hedges. They were no friends of the king, but he’s invited them anyway. And, as Paul found, the more Gentiles there were at the banquet, the more the Jews were hardened against even thinking of going. How could Jesus be the Messiah when he was welcoming the very people whom they believed the Messiah would smite in a rain of fire and brimstone when he arrived?

Paul understood. He was one of those Jews. He used to hunt down Jews who had sold out to this false Messiah and bring them before the Jewish authorities. He held the coats of the people who stoned Stephen. It’s hard to throw a heavy rock and hit your target when your arms get tangled up in your long robes. But then the risen

Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and that shockwave that went through the world that first Easter morning suddenly made sense to Paul. He’d felt it. But it in meeting Jesus and recognising that he was actually the Messiah...then everything suddenly made sense. I have to think he was thinking about this as he sat for those three days, completely blind, waiting for Ananias. He knew the Scriptures in and out and, in light of Jesus, it finally made sense. This is what Moses had said would happen. This is what Isaiah had said would happen. The word went out with power, but as that power turned Gentile hearts to Israel’s God, it also hardened the hearts of Israel. Again, this would be bad news if we left off here, but Paul’s point is that this isn’t the end. The good news about Jesus reveals the righteousness of God. He is faithful and he will do what he has said he will do. As he always has, he’s faithfully working through Israel to bring salvation to the whole world.

We’ll stop at that point today and ask: What does this mean for us? A couple of weeks ago Kathy told me about a global hymn-sing event happening today. The point is to get people and churches thinking about the importance of world missions by singing Isaac Watts’ hymn, “Jesus shall reign”. We’ll be joining in this event as we sing our last hymn today. But as I looked again at the words of this hymn it struck me. The hymn itself says nothing about mission. It speaks of Jesus reign:

*Jesus shall reign where’er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to
shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no
more.*

In the final verse we sing of all of creation praising Jesus the King:

*Let every creature rise and bring
Peculiar honours to our King;*

*Angels descend with songs again,
And earth repeat the loud Amen.*

Again, why sing a hymn that says nothing about evangelism and missions to encourage evangelism and missions? Brothers and Sisters, it's because the hymn proclaims the present and future reality of Jesus and his kingdom and in doing so, it exhorts us to go out and be part of it. It reminds us that the shockwave has gone out. Our part—as the people, like St. Paul, who are *sent*—is to proclaim the good news about our crucified and risen King so that the world will know his kingdom has come. Repent, for the gods and kings of the old age are finished. Give your faith-filled allegiance to the new King, to Jesus. Again, Jesus, in his resurrection, has set the forces in motion that are making all things new. That part is done. And we bear the word of God—the good news about Jesus. It's that word—God's own word—backed by his own Holy Spirit, that accomplishes the work of transforming hearts. Brothers and Sisters, all you and I have to do is proclaim it in our lives and in our words. And we can do so in confidence and in faith, just as Paul did. The power lies not with us, but with God himself. And we can be sure that it is no waste of time. Jesus came in fulfilment of God's promises and we can trust that when God promises that Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth its successive journey run, he will be just as true to that promise as he has been to all the others.

Let us pray: Father, in the Collect we acknowledged that we ourselves have no power to help ourselves. We rely solely on your grace. Remind us too that the message we have received and that you send us out to proclaim depends solely on your grace as well. Remind us that it is not our word that we preach, but yours and give us encouragement as we reflect on that. Give us confidence to proclaim to the

world—not just sharing good advice, but proclaiming good news—that Jesus is Lord. As we trust in your for everything, teach us to trust in your to make our proclamation of Jesus bear fruit. We ask this through him. Amen.