

Sermon 2023 99 99 Text

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Companion on the Journey. Amen.

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I think we all have varying standards of physical, moral and spiritual cleanness.

So, for example, some people shower when they get up in the morning and that is enough for the day. For others they shower in the morning before changing into their day clothes and they shower in the evening before changing into their night clothes. And they may shower a third time if they have been doing something particularly sweaty or grimy.

Other people, depending on their occupation, may change several times a day.

Some people change both the sheets on their bed every week. Others move the top sheet to the bottom and just put on a fresh top sheet.

All these options affect the amount of laundry we have, but are also reflections of our own expectations of ourselves and of others.

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For example, if I had been mowing on a particularly hot day, changed from my gardening clothes straight into my clerical gear, I think the people being married would rightly object to my sweat stained face, oily hands, and a heavy aroma of sweat.

Similarly we might take issue with a surgeon moving from one patient to another without changing their surgical gloves or any other material contaminated by someone else's blood.

So our personal standards of cleanness are important to us, but may also have an aspect of self protection about them.

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Can anyone tell me the correct names for these liturgical items?

[Lavabo jug]
[Lavabo bowl]
[Lavabo towel]

In pre-covid times these were essential items used by the priest as they prepared the altar, the elements and the vessels for holy communion.

They did not have a practical purpose – they served a symbolic purpose of the priest washing and cleaning their hands before they prepared items on the altar for holy communion.

Their use was accompanied by a silent prayer by the priest. "Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin."

Or an older, much longer version based on Psalm 26:

I will wash my hands in innocency, O LORD; and so will I go to thine altar;
That I may show the voice of thanksgiving, and tell of all thy wondrous works.
LORD, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth.

O shut not up my soul with the sinners, nor my life with the blood-thirsty;
In whose hands is wickedness, and their right hand is full of gifts.
But as for me, I will walk innocently: O deliver me, and be merciful unto me.
My foot standeth right: I will praise the LORD in the congregations.

So the lavabo equipment was an outward sign that despite the cleanliness of their hands, there was a ritual – an outward and visible sign for the congregation and an inward prayer by the priest that they would be in a state of particular spiritual cleanness as they prepared the altar, celebrated the eucharist and distributed the elements of holy communion.

And there was a ritual washing after holy communion to ensure that no amount of the consecrated elements should remain on the priest's hands to be spread about in some profane way.

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We consider the sacramental event of baptism has a component of washing. In the best instances and with a co-operative child water is poured over the child. Or in more extreme versions, the child or the adult is fully immersed in the water and completely washed.

There are some denominations that insist that this act must be delayed until the person themselves is able to answer for themselves about their repentance.

But infant baptism is sign and symbol that Christ has already died for the sins of the child; the child is redeemed from birth. And although we all commit sin subsequent to our baptism as children or adults , the power of the Christ in the act of

redemption, embracing us, cleaning us, time and again when we for a fraction of a moment or a longer period of time create pain for ourselves, for another or for God. Redemption is a constant in our bodies – the important part is for us to recognise that, and hold that as a constant fact as we walk through life.

We do something we know is wrong and we spend hours in agony and self punishment when the solution is so simple. We admit the fault to ourselves and to God. And what is God's response – "Go! You are already forgiven."

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So how does John offer his baptism to Jesus.

First we know that baptism by John, while a cleansing from sin, is not a once for all time event. He recognises that the power that comes through him is insufficient to sustain our lives in purity until that time we are taken into God's perpetual embrace.

John is reluctant to exercise his tiny capacity in the presence of this discernibly greater capacity.

John is not just reluctant, his attempt to completely avoid baptising Jesus, because for him there is no point. How can the imperfect add to the already perfect without diminishing it in some way?

But John becomes obedient to the call of Jesus. All who minister in God's name are imperfect. But when we mesh our imperfection with our obedience God can act through us. And that is true for all of us!

For each of us, when we mesh our imperfection with our obedience God can act through us.

John is not expecting God to act through him in ministering to Jesus – but he does! And if you think really carefully about it, there are numerous times in the Scriptures when imperfect, fallen, and redeemed humanity ministers to the Christ who is perfection.

John’s ministry in the river is to provide that symbol of perfect cleanliness to the redeeming Christ, and in that to provide a mechanism where God may speak to his people, and physically demonstrate to his people that he is amongst them in the form of Jesus.

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Cleanliness, physical, moral, and spiritual cleanness is a constant in our world. It is a constant because, despite knowing our constant falling, we expect that God will ask us to stand, accept that we are washed clean (yet again), and share that gift with the rest of humanity.

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