

Romans 10:14-21

How beautiful are the feet

Do you have beautiful feet? Most people do not have especially beautiful feet! So what does it mean, *How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news* (Romans 10:15)? Some have thought that it is the feet, and therefore the evangelist, who does the dirty work, compared for example to the eye or the ear. But this is not right. The feet are beautiful because it is a beautiful message. But more tellingly, the feet are beautiful because of the walk, or Christ-like character of those who bear this good news.

In its original context I believe Romans 10:14-21 is about Israel: *how then can they (Israel) call on one they have not believed in* (Romans 10:14). Paul mentions Israel by name in 10:19. He is arguing that Israel has heard the gospel. There is a clear witness in creation (Romans 10v18); and now in Paul's day there is a clear witness among Gentiles (a foolish nation) who are turning to Christ (Romans 10:19-20). Paul concludes, *But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary nation"* (Romans 10:21). But we should not use verses in the Bible like this to stereotype the Jewish people, not least because it seems that God is doing something new in our day. Furthermore this verse is a pretty good description of our own nation!

Yes, these verses can be equally applied to us: *Everyone (e.g. in Girton) who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*. But, how can they call on one they have not believed in, or heard about from a preacher? No, people must be sent, and it is these who are described as having beautiful feet (Romans 10:14-15).

To be Christian means that we have *heard* the gospel from someone else's lips. This is not just a physical hearing, but hearing God's voice in the gospel, and responding to it (see John 10:16).

To illustrate the truths in this passage I will tell the story, at least briefly, of Johann Oncken. It was he who first coined the phrase which has shaped much modern Christian missiology, "Every member a missionary, every church a mission society."

Oncken was born in 1800 in North Germany, and was orphaned more or less from birth. He was brought up by his godly and praying grandmother. Although baptised as an infant and confirmed at 13 years old into the Lutheran church, his heart remained unconverted. That same year he had the opportunity to travel to Scotland with a Scottish merchant. The first question the merchant asked the young lad was, "Do you have a Bible?" He did not. So the merchant took him to a bookshop and bought one for him. *How are they to believe on him of whom they have not heard*. It is one thing to hear about the Bible, but quite another to read it for ourselves, and passing a Bible or other Christian literature on is something we can all do.

Johann read his Bible, and attended church with the Presbyterian family, yet his heart still remained unconverted, although seeds were being sown. 9 years later Johann moved to London and began to think seriously about his eternal destiny for the first time. There was good reason for this. On arriving in London he was thrown from the top of the coach and lay dazed on the floor with bleeding from his nose and mouth. It was at this moment that he realised that life is fleeting and he knew he wasn't ready to meet his Maker. What about you? Sometimes, unfortunately, it is those less pleasant experiences in life that can act as a wake-up call for us.

Oncken began to attend an independent Methodist Chapel in London where the gospel was clearly preached. On hearing a sermon on Romans 8:1 he surrendered his life to Christ. His grandmother

had prayed for him; his Presbyterian friends had sown many seeds; he had attended church for many years. But it was only God working by his Spirit – *faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ* (Romans 10:17) – that his heart was converted. Oncken said later, *The creation of my new life laid so rich a blessing for this testimony that I went home with an inexpressible blessing.* We all come to faith in different ways, but the important thing is that we get there!

It wasn't long before Oncken felt God's call to preach the good news. *How shall the hear without a preacher? And how shall the preach except they be sent?* (Romans 10:14-15). Oncken was accepted by the interdominational Continental Society which distributed Christian literature. In 1823 he was sent to Hamburg in Germany. It was in Hamburg that Oncken came to Baptist convictions and was baptised in the local river – is God challenging you to be baptised? Then he and a few others formed the first Baptist church on German soil.

Politically it was a time of instability; socially it was a time of great immorality, which may sound familiar! But this little Baptist church had evangelistic zeal, and in one year distributed 100,000 gospel tracts (Romans 10:15). They really believed, "Every member a missionary, every church a mission society."

However the secular and religious authorities in Hamburg didn't appreciate the mass distribution of tracts, and Oncken spent a short time in prison (Romans 10:16)! Nevertheless, the church grew, and in 1842 alone they baptised 380 converts. But who were these converts? By and large they were not the locals, but they were economic migrants (cf Matthew 13:57). We should note that the fastest growing churches in the UK are the black churches in London. The Catholic churches are often full, of Poles. And most Baptist churches have a good representation of ethnic minorities. But with the locals, it can be so hard!

But something changed in Hamburg. The church bought a bigger building, but the week they moved in to it the Great Fire of Hamburg broke out. Immediately the church offered their new premises to 80 homeless families and looked after them for 8 months. As a result the attitudes of the authorities' changed and instead of persecuting the Baptists they started to protect them. It's not just what we say but what we do that is important (cf Acts 1:1). People opened up to Jesus' message because he not only preached, but he also showed compassion to the poor and healed the sick: *how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.* By 1865 the Hamburg church numbered 719.

But the influence of this church began to spread beyond all expectations. Many new churches were planted across Germany, in neighbouring European countries (although notably not with success in France), and in Eastern European countries. This included Hungary, where the roots of the Baptist church can be traced back to this 19th century move of God which began in Hamburg under the ministry of Johann Oncken.

But how did this success happen? Migrant workers returned to their home countries and took the gospel with them. And they took the DNA of the Hamburg church with them: "Every member a missionary, every church a mission society."

Most are not sent by God to another country. But we are all in some sense 'sent' (John 20:21) and can play an important part in bringing others to Christ. May the Lord fill us with a new vision of hope through the gospel; may He help us to do as well as to tell; and may He help us to make the most of every opportunity.