

# Fawcett: Lent is a time to clean ourselves up

What's the first thing you should do after slaying a wolf?

This is something the character of Peter learns in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. One of the themes of the book is Peter's journey into maturity, from being a child to being a knight and ultimately a king, and the lessons he needs to learn to get there.

At one key moment, he must save his sister from an evil wolf sent by the enemies of Aslan, the lion who represents Christ in the story. Overcoming his fear, he stabs the wolf to death with a sword given to him by Aslan. Aslan rewards Peter by knighting him – but first, he gently observes that Peter's sword is dirty, and before he can become a knight, he must clean his sword in the grass. The chapter ends with Aslan triumphantly announcing, "Rise up, Sir Peter Wolfsbane, and whatever happens, never forget to wipe your sword."

I used to wonder why the author, C.S. Lewis, chose to end the chapter with that line. It sounds odd, anticlimactic, with almost a note of bathos.

But then I taught this book to a Grade 3 class. Then, I understood.

One of the things students need to learn is to clean up after themselves. They might forget to do this if they're having a lot of fun, and, if you've given them a good, constructive project, then hopefully, while they are learning and growing, they will be having a lot of fun.

But, the fact is, as they learn and grow, they are making a mess around them. That's fine; that's the way the world is. But they still need to learn to clean up afterwards. Otherwise, the classroom will get more and more messy, until learning – the whole point of their activities – will become impossible. That's why it's such an important part of maturity. It's what distinguishes "big kids" from "babies": the big kids have the responsibility of cleaning up after themselves.

In the course of doing what we need to do – in the course of learning and growing – we make a mess. That's no one's fault; it's just what happens. Peter had to slay the wolf; it was an important part of learning and growing. But he had to wipe the blood off his sword. Otherwise, the blood would become attached to it. The blade would become dull and rusty. Soon, it would no longer be good for its purpose, and Peter wouldn't be the knight he was supposed to mature into. There's no shame in getting your sword dirty. But you need to wipe it off.

Reflecting on all this reminded me of another line that's always perplexed me,

this time from Scripture. At the Last Supper, when Jesus is about to wash the feet of another character named Peter, the Apostle protests: If you *must* wash me, wash my head and hands! Jesus replies enigmatically: "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean" ([John 13:6-11](#)).

Ever since childhood, this line baffled me. Then I heard St. Augustine's interpretation of it.

According to Augustine, the "bath" here is baptism: it washes a person completely clean, "and yet, while thereafter living in this human state, [s]he cannot fail to tread on the ground with his feet." For Augustine, the "feet" here represent "our human feelings", with which we are brought into sensible contact with this fallen world. Just as it is impossible to walk around on earth without getting your feet dirty, for Augustine, it is impossible to be involved with the world, as permeated with sin as it is, without getting a bit "dirty" from that sin.

But, Augustine notes, the paradox is that God has given us missions here on earth, and so "to get to Christ we are compelled to tread the earth." In other words, if we're Christians, we have no choice but to "walk around" on earth, carrying out His commandments, even though we'll get dirty in the process.

If you work hard, you might get a bit too used to coffee, or to looking at your phone. If you get tired from this work, you might get a bit too accustomed to alcohol or tasty food to the point where a mild dependency develops. If you're involved in cultural or political issues, you might develop a taste for outrage which goes beyond righteous indignation into uncharitable wrath. Without us noticing, the blood on our swords starts to stick, and the blade starts to dull.

It happens. Without special graces, it's impossible to carry out our mission on earth and grow into the people God wants us to be without getting our feet dirty. Just like students can't learn without making a mess. But it weighs us down from getting into heaven. (This is why C.S. Lewis compared purgatory to wiping our muddy boots off at the front door of paradise.)

This is a big part of what Lent is about. Lent is a time to clean ourselves up. When you clean your house, often you need to throw some things out (like how we fast in Lent) or give some things away (like how we give alms during Lent). This can be painful, but it helps your house be what it is supposed to be: a home.

The process of cleaning ourselves up during Lent can also be painful – it is meant to feel like suffering in the desert – but it is so that the classroom of our souls, which we have cluttered up in the process of learning what God wants from us, can be restored to its purpose: being a place where we can listen to our Teacher and Father and grow into the hero He has called us to be. We have to be disciplined if we want to be disciples. It is the way we grow up into the godly maturity we were meant for.

But even though I speak of this like it's *our* responsibility, part of *us* training ourselves in virtue, the fasting and abstinence is really so that Christ can shape and mould us into our true selves. The students only learn because the teacher structured their activity; Peter only slays the wolf because Aslan gave him both the sword and the courage; and St. Peter's feet are washed by Jesus, not by himself. All he needs to do is learn to sit still and let Jesus work. (This, by the way, is probably a lot of what the experience of purgatory will be like.)

This is the key part of Lent, and it is why fasting and almsgiving must be accompanied by prayer, or else they'll become nothing more than a glorified diet and self-help regimen. The messiness of our lives is really a condition of being unsettled. We clean up through fasting so that we can settle, so that we can sit still, not blown about restlessly by our knee-jerk compulsions for screen time or comfort food, but wait for "Christ to be all in all". The stronger, more disciplined, and more mature we are, the less of "we" there is, and the more that Christ is all-in-all.

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