

The knowing servant

II Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-11

In the world of fiction and drama, the role of the servant is a long-established one. Where would *Upstairs, Downstairs* have been without Hudson and Mrs Bridges and Rose? Or *Downton Abbey* without Carson and Mrs Hughes and Mrs Patmore and Daisy? *Blackadder* had Baldrick. *Robinson Crusoe* had Friday. *Don Quixote* and Sancha Panza. *Phileas Fogg* and *Passepartout*. Frodo and Samwise Gamgee. Then there is the sinister Mrs Danvers in *Rebecca*. And where would Bertie Wooster have been without that doyenne of servants, Jeeves? Maybe you can think of others.

In the Bible servants are to be found throughout the Old Testament, looking after Abraham and Sarah. The boy Samuel is a servant in the time before the Jerusalem Temple. In the New Testament servants are found in the parables of Jesus, faithful and unfaithful, and Paul meets servants on several occasions in the Acts of the Apostles.

The idea of being a servant is also fundamental to our understanding of the ministry of Jesus. From the prophecies of Isaiah, "Behold My servant...My chosen, in whom My soul delights..."ⁱ Who then goes on to suffer in His service. And on to Paul's description of Jesus, "...taking the form of a servant..."ⁱⁱ. Or in John's Gospel where, at the time of the Last Supper, before the bread and wine are shared, Jesus, "...rose from supper, laid aside His garments, and girded Himself with a towel. Then He poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded."ⁱⁱⁱ

One servant that had passed me by is tucked away in our reading from *II Kings*, the little Israelite servant girl who has no name. She'd been captured on a raid by Naaman, a great general amongst the Aramean people. The little girl became the maid to Naaman's wife.

A slave-girl – the ancient world's consummate non-person. No name. No age. In our 21st parlance you would say that she was a victim of human trafficking – which maybe puts a whole number of things into perspective.

But she is a person. She is a child of God. She is a believer. And through her anonymous life God speaks a word of extraordinary power and comfort. She is the one who delivers the good news

of hope. It is another Bible instance of those to whom society attributes little intrinsic value serving as effective heralds of the power and presence of God.^{iv} The little girl told about a mighty prophet from her land, Elisha, who would have the power through God to bring a cure for Naaman's leprosy. What makes her witness, her service, so effective is that she knows about the Elisha and the reliability of the God in Whose name he prophesies. The maid is one of God's chosen people, a participant in God's bold and risk-laden social project.^v

Naaman has an encounter with Elisha, who tells him to go and wash in the river Jordan. It's not much of a river compared to some of the greater rivers in area, Naaman initially resists, but this time is persuaded by other servants, goes and washes in the Jordan and is cured.

This little story is characterized by irony. The great and the good who should have known better, appear clueless about what to do in the face of difficult situations. It is the knowing servants including the little Israelite maid, marginalized in society, who perceive accurately what God is able to do. The little Israelite maid knows about God, and Naaman's servants show their general the weakness of his own reasoning and coax him into taking the treatment the prophet Elisha recommends. Even the message that Elisha sends to Naaman is carried to the general by another servant, a messenger. The weak, the worthless, the powerless perceive where and how God is at work and are the ones who not only know the good news but are willing to carry it to others.

Of course the focus of the story is on Naaman, his leprosy, his powerfulness, his arrogance, and then his coming to follow what God wants and his ultimate healing.

But I am struck by all of these servants, none of them named, none of them of high status, but without whom, the sick man would not have been made well, and God's purpose for the world would not have been effected.

In the reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus, who would normally send out His Twelve Disciples (emblematic of the Twelve Tribes of Israel), sends out seventy people to carry God's good news to every town and village. The number seventy implies all of the human race, as Genesis 10, recounting the families of the sons of Noah, provides a list of all the nations of the world, numbering seventy.^{vi} Ordinary people sharing God's story.

The good news of hope is for everyone. It is carried out to all the world by people with no names, who are servants of God.

I wonder how often it is the 'little people', the ones well down the lists of who is powerful and mighty, who are in reality the people who do so much more to pass on the message of hope, and life, and healing, and love and salvation.

The grandmother whose little gifts of love stay in the memory as an example of what goodness looks like. The teacher whose patience and perseverance helps a pupil get the necessary results in an exam. The home-help whose cheery smile and laughter is sometimes the only human contact a housebound older person has all week. The person making and serving coffee in the church hall who enables the warmth of friendship to be felt. The delivery man who doesn't simply drop off an order on your doorstep but carries it into your home. The friend who notices you are not your usual self and takes the time to ask you if you are all right and if there is anything they can do to help. The colleague who is aware that you are struggling with a huge workload and quietly takes some of it on without having to be asked.

The knowing servant. Not doing simply what they have to do, but realising that there is a hurt, or a sadness, or a fear, or a frustration, and recognising that there is something that they might be able to do to help, and then offers it. They are not always the source of the help, but they are the one who brings it, or points to it.

Not the grand gesture, but the simple action of being a help.

Servanthood is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. We are all called to be helpful and to be useful. There are always things that we can do to make a difference that may not change a situation forever, but in some way may make a connection, even if only for a moment, and reassure someone, somewhere, that they are not on their own, and that help might come. We are not the ones who will always work the miracle, but we can be the ones through whom God enables miracles to happen.

In Naaman's story, healing happens because a maidservant is strong enough to embrace and make use of the faith traditions of her nation, even when she was enslaved in a foreign land in which she is a cultural and religious outsider. Naaman shows willingness to seek help from a

theology and culture that are strange to him and go and immerse himself, at Elisha's suggestion, in the river Jordan.

But the most important factor in all of this is God. God works through the servant, the prophet, and the river Jordan for the good of Naaman.

God works inside and outside our culture and tradition, using extraordinary but more often than not ordinary people who are willing to be His servants, and tell His story of good news and healing and hope. I think that's a wake-up call for us who seem to be caught up in looking for the God of the Bible in the same old places, or in no place at all.^{vii} I think that's a wake-up call for those who do not value the opportunities and insights a multi-cultural world has to offer.

It also leaves us today with this faith question: What kind of servant are you, am I? Will we, at some point this week, directly or indirectly, be a help to someone in need or point them in the right direction?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Isaiah 42:1

ⁱⁱ Philippians 2:7

ⁱⁱⁱ John 13:4-5

^{iv} Trevor Eppheimer, Feasting on the Word, Year C vol 3, p196

^v Ibid p198

^{vi} Elaine A Heath, ibid p214

^{vii} Eppheimer, p200