

**Behold my servant**

*Isaiah 49:1-7; John 2:29-43*

Several years ago at a Kirk Session meeting we were discussing the duties of the elder. One elder asked: "What should I do if somebody asks me to pray with them?" There was a bit of a panicky silence. One brave and honest soul spoke out: Margaret said: "I'd rather get down on my knees and scrub the person's floor for them than say a prayer with them." I remember thinking, "Interesting, for many people to scrub a floor you have to be on your knees, and to say a prayer many people often get on their knees too."

Outside the north door of the church there is a flowering cherry tree, planted in memory of one of our elders who died many years ago, another Margaret. She was the epitome of service, having worked overseas as well as in this country, often at the beck and call of others in her own home as well as at Church. At Church, apart from in her pew, she was always to be found with a tea towel in her hand. Ready for service. She was a short lady, and I remember remarking at her packed funeral, "How can so small a coffin contain so great a soul?"

I regularly remember and give thanks for Bill Scott Reid, the associate minister I worked with when I came to this Church. Days after my induction I went to see him, and after lunch he took out his notebook and said, "Reid, reporting for orders." He had that most unusual of abilities – he made goodness appear attractive; not ingratiating or sanctimonious, but warm and attractive and genuine, and that's a rare quality indeed.

Bill, like the two Margarets, and like many others who have sat in this Church and sit here today, embody what it means to be a servant of God.

Our notion of 'servant' is probably caught up with Downton Abbey, or some other image. I wonder if we live in a world that today rather looks down on the concept of 'service', whereas in fact 'service', being looked after, being helped, being cared for, being noticed, being attended to, being treated with courtesy and respect, is largely what makes our world a better place.

The service we receive in shops, or on a bus, or in a restaurant. The service children and older people and others receive from Social Services. The service we receive in clinics and hospitals and GP practices as part of the National Health Service. The worship service we receive and participate in here on Sunday, as we are enabled to come closer to God, or allow God to come closer to us.

The service we receive from volunteers afterwards, who bring to us tea and coffee.

Though service may be offered humbly, there is nothing, in truth, humiliating about it. Somewhere deep within the heart of God, in both Old and New Testament manifestations, this powerful and sometimes unsettling reality of the serving is to be found. In the prophet Isaiah, the servant songs are seen as a prophecy of Jesus, coming into the world to serve God and to serve the people of God. People were often on the look-out for who this might be, and what they might do, and where they might be found.

What might this servant, talked about in the Bible, look like?

Isaiah has the interesting image of the servant being exhausted in their service, and not always seeing the fruit of their labours. We have somehow thought of God, in Jesus, as being endlessly invincible, nothing impossible to Him. Yet Isaiah has a picture of the servant struggling to get results, though consistently persevering.

Is there something in that image that helps you today? In those causes and principles and beliefs that you hold dear, for which you have worked for weeks, months, years, yet not seeing them flourish. Yet. I think many of us need to hear this word from God. However hard we endeavour,

life and our work and the things we believe to be right will not always have a smooth path. And of course, we only need to look at the experience of Jesus, the supreme servant, to see how true that was. But it was not a reason to give up. We keep working away, we keep scrubbing the floors, we keep taking up the tea cloth of service, we keep turning up for duty. Because in the end, through that kind of service, society shifts. Civilisation grows. Even if we never see the fruits of it. It's a bit like that old Greek proverb: "a society grows when old men (and women) plant trees." For their beauty. For their shade. For their fruit. For their symbolism of a life rooted and useful. Like that one outside the north door for little Margaret. We need to remember not simply who it stands for, but what she stood for.

I don't know what John the Baptist on the banks of the River Jordan saw in Jesus. They were cousins, but how well did they know each other? John knew he wasn't even worthy enough to undo Jesus' sandals, but he could point to Him. "Behold the Lamb of God." God's great servant, come to take away the sins of the world, come to bring healing and hope, come to fail, and triumph, on a cross. This weak man, Who would scarcely bruise a reed, to quote other words from Isaiah. Who would, to use the later words of Paul, "not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant..."

Behold my servant! Behold the Lamb of God. Look at the kind of person God chose to change the world, and encourage us to be like; in our perseverance and kindness, our graciousness towards others and our willingness to help whenever we can.

One commentator writes: "To me, one of the mysteries of the faith is how (Jesus) is going to manage to do much of anything while being this gentle. To move so slowly and carefully that you don't even generate enough wind to puff out a guttering candle? How could you possibly affect any change at all, to anything, if you have so little effect on the world around you? ...Maybe they

can take the strongest down a few notches while being careful of the weakest... Or maybe I'm thinking about the wrong kind of justice. Maybe it's not about swift punishment, but a careful distribution of what the world needs. Maybe God's justice isn't the kind that pushes and pulls and extinguishes and knocks things around. Maybe God's justice doesn't break bruised reeds not because it's weak, but because its strength lies elsewhere than in force: in healing, in growth, in repair. Maybe it doesn't extinguish guttering lights because it's not blowing around the room, but welling up from within. Maybe it doesn't knock the powerful from their thrones so much as it convinces them to climb down on their own."<sup>i</sup>

The power of the servant, the work of the servant, in healing, in growth, in repair. How much power is there in healing, and growing, and repairing? What energy lies there, in the hands of the servant who is a healer, a grower, a repairer. There's real service. To sick bodies and minds; to people stunted by grief and prejudice; to women and men broken by cruelty and relentless work. What if our leaders, politicians, church people, business-people, teachers, medical researchers, musicians, writers, scientists, children, pensioners and all ages between, set as their *priorities* a servanthood that was based on healing, growing and repairing?

My God, what a world this would be! What a city this would be! What a Church this would be!

Through the voice of the servant, and not just Jesus of Nazareth but all who seek to do something and be something that is brighter and better in what they offer in their lives. You! Me! Through the voice and actions of the servant, God will catch the ear of the world and claim our attention. We are in that company. For we are in the company of Jesus if we call ourselves Christians, whether our faith is weak or strong.

Teresa of Avila was a 16th Spanish mystic who wrote a letter to her fellow nuns towards the end of her life. It encapsulates what some call 'incarnational theology', the idea that we are to be Jesus

Christ in the world, and through our service, embody fully God's. We, God's servants, are to love and serve as Jesus did. What, do you think, might these words mean for you?

*Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours.*

*Yours are the eyes with which He looks compassionately on this world.*

*Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.*

*Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.<sup>ii</sup>*

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

**Amen**

---

<sup>i</sup> Quinn G Caldwell, Daily Devotional UCC, 12/1/23

<sup>ii</sup> Attributed to St Teresa of Avila