

The precedence of service

Job 38:1-7; Mark 10:35-45

In the popular mind and in film, TV, and literature, the image of the 'servant' is very prominent. The superior manservant created by P G Wodehouse – Reginald Jeeves. Dobby the House Elf in the *Harry Potter* books. Samwise Gamgee, the gardener/companion in *Lord of the Rings*. Don Quixote's manservant, Sancho Panza. Jane Eyre is a kind of servant to Mr Rochester. Janet, who looked after Drs Finlay and Cameron at Tannochbrae. Hudson the butler in *Upstairs Downstairs*. Alfred, who was Batman's butler. Malvolio, the pompous steward in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The sinister housekeeper at Manderley, Mrs Danvers, in Daphne Du Maurier's, *Rebecca*. And of course, Mrs Hughes the housekeeper at Downton Abbey, and Carson the butler, and O'Brien, the evil lady's maid, and the inimitable cook Mrs Patmore.

Servants. People who paid to look after others; though sometimes you might think that they were the ones really in charge, but generally they are one step behind the principal characters. Helping, dressing, serving at table, picking up after, attending to needs, generally in the background.

The idea of being a servant is a fairly fundamental one in Christian faith. The precedence of service is a basic outlook on how you view the world, a set of values to live out. We see it in Jesus Who took the form of a servantⁱ. Jesus, Who could tell His lacking-in-understanding disciples that, '...the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve...'ⁱⁱ The precedence of service is fundamental. Service in the Church, service in the community, service with groups, service as an individual.

Yet for some it is not always an easy option. We fear our service might be taken advantage of; we fear we might become a doormat for others to walk over; we fear we will be taken for granted;

we fear that in some way, in the eyes of others, in our own eyes, our value, status, position will be diminished.

On February 4th, 1968, the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr preaches his last sermon. 'The Drum Major Instinct'. The sermon, based on this text from Mark, spoke powerfully and perceptively about the human desire to be out in front leading the parade. Few are immune to this 'drum major instinct',ⁱⁱⁱ even those who say, 'no, I could never be at the front, or push myself forward, but who quietly spend time in the background gently but firmly manipulating things, people, situations, meetings; making sure that they get exactly what they want and the way they want it without appearing to have done anything. The passive-aggressive drum majors. I remember years ago a senior churchman who would have the minutes of a meeting written before the meeting took place, and nearly everyone else was too busy speaking to notice what had been said at previous meetings to remember what had actually been decided. But the minute said...!

There was nothing passive-aggressive about James and John, the Sons of Thunder. 'Teacher, would it be possible for us to get the best seats, the seats of honour, in Your glorious Kingdom?'

One commentator reading this always saw the contrasting picture of Jesus hoisted high on a cross, with the criminals hanging to His left and right. That is what lies on the road ahead, not James' and John's rosy and presumptuous picture of sitting to right and left of King Jesus at the throne of glory.^{iv}

Notice Jesus doesn't criticize James and John. He calls all the disciples together. He doesn't say, 'Isn't it terrible the kind of things James and John are asking...?' rather He says, 'We'll sit down and talk this through as a community, face to face. When they do Jesus immediately takes the spotlight off James and John. There is no big showdown, no magisterial assertion that Jesus is the head of the community and everyone else had better remember it. Rather, 'whoever would be great

among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.' To make the point that this wasn't simply an expectation He had of everyone else but not Him, He concludes, 'For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve...'

Whether we say it out loud or not I suspect if we do not always expect to be in charge of life, we certainly feel we have a right to know all of the answers that life throws at us. We may not be like James and John demanding the best seats at the top table of heaven but we are sometimes like Job in our Old Testament reading demanding fully understandable answers to every question we might ever have, and judging God and our allegiance to God by how God responds. Because we deserve it. In both Old and New Testament readings there is an implicit and explicit belief that we are in control, somehow. That we have rights and that others owe us before we owe them anything. 'Explain to me everything; answer all my questions; and then I'll see if I will deign to follow You or believe in You.' I remember years ago gently arguing with someone who said to me, "Explain to me the existence of God; give me short answers about pain and suffering; and then I'll believe." I didn't, because I felt any answer, every answer, would never be enough. If you are coming to the place of faith with an idea that you are in control, or in a higher position, or have expectations that must be met, or answers that must satisfy, you are very likely to be disappointed. Not that we shouldn't ask or have a blind faith. But I believe that approach is starting from the wrong point.

Let me suggest this: do we find out more about the nature of God by serving and helping and loving the people around us in their time of need than we ever do by imperious questioning and demanding answers to every hard situation?

In our world the culture of success has access to power and status enjoyed through education, economic, political and military advantage. Is it the case that Jesus, here, is shaping an alternative

community in the world, forming disciples who will embody a different definition of 'greatness'; people who follow Jesus' exercise of power on behalf of others, not over against them?^v

Jesus asks James and John, 'What do you want Me to do for you?' They wanted power and position and status without responsibility, or disruption, or cost to themselves. What Jesus offered was the precedence of service, the life of a servant.

Some say servanthood is too often a platitude in faith communities, or maybe at best an attitude that is spasmodically lived out. It is the same in wider society. Most of us recognise the great needs in our community, country and world, yet our response, sometimes magnificent like what happened here for the Foodbank at Harvest Thanksgiving, or what will happen for the clothes drive for the Edinburgh Clothing Store next month, doesn't, for most of us, carry through. I don't say this as a condemnation, but as an observation. Compassion fatigue is a real thing: in giving financially or in kind; in praying and working for peace in the Middle East and other places; in responding to the needs of sick relatives; in being compassionate towards those living through long-term bereavement. We weary, we forget, we return to the primacy of our own needs. Yet the precedence of service calls us back to a consistency in our care and our response to the needs of others. Our realization that volunteering once may be good, special, wonderful even, but it is the long-haul commitment that will make the lasting difference. The 'form of a servant' embodied by Jesus wasn't an occasional practice, it was a fundamental attitude towards others, and to ourselves.

The precedence of service. Was it much mentioned during the July General Election? Is it grabbing headlines in the American presidential election. Have we heard it talked of by Israelis and Palestinians and Iranians? Is it spoken of in Ukraine and Russia? Has it featured in the Conservative leadership contest? Can we expect to see it first and foremost in the forthcoming Budget? Is it

heart-and-soul guiding our Church, every Church and faith community? Does it shape our daily living, not just when we are called to think about it, but because it is part of our DNA because it is who we are? What service will you be to the humans around you, the world around you, in the days that lie ahead? Will you perform it because you have to, or because you want to? Wonders Jesus, gently, with us.

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

Amen

ⁱ *Philippians 2:7*

ⁱⁱ *Mark 10:45*

ⁱⁱⁱ *William E Crowder Jr, Feasting on the Gospels, Mark, p326*

^{iv} *Leith Fisher, Will you follow Me?, pps146-147*

^v *Kimberly L Clayton, Feasting on the Gospels, Mark, p329*