

St James' Church, Weybridge

Trinity 21 - Yr B – Proper 24

Introduction and Call to Worship

When James and John approached Jesus to request the best places in heaven, Jesus told them they did not know what they were asking. As we approach our God today, let us ask God to make clear to us the implications of all our requests.

Today's Readings

First Reading Isaiah 53:4-end

Isaiah describes a suffering and wounded servant, later identified with the person of Jesus.

Gospel Mark 10:35-45

To the annoyance of the other disciples, James and John approach Jesus to request the best places in heaven for themselves.

HOMILY “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” (Mark 10:45)

One of the mantras of our new government has been about returning to values of ‘service,’ which seems a laudable aim. So, I have been questioning, what do we mean when we talk about service? Jesus talked about coming to serve, not to be served, indeed our Lord’s whole ministry is centred in service. Jesus emphasises service as

central to his leadership which is ministry in action, and he communicates that his obedience to God the Father will lead him to the cross of sacrifice, not for his own sake, or God's, but for the benefit of humanity for all time. In other words, to serve is not self-seeking, but about meeting others and their need.

So, serving is also about relationship, Jesus – the Son of God who came to bring all people, for all time into a covenantal relationship with the creator, who achieves this by serving and expects us, his followers to exhibit that same characteristic of service toward others in all our relationships.

In today's Gospel, James and John's request is somewhat disturbing, because they misunderstand Jesus' mission, which is all about relationship, lived out in service. Yet our all-knowing Lord doesn't refuse to answer their question, instead he warns James and John about the implications of it.

For God's Kingdom is not all about glory, but rather suffering, including the fate of the Cross in which they would have to share. Unsurprisingly, when the other disciples learn of James and John's request, they are not impressed. What right had those two brothers to demand the best places in heaven?

Jesus uses this occasion to teach the disciples that his mission was unlike anything they had previously imagined. For he would never be wealthy, or live in a palace, or be covered in glory. No, the Lord of life and love started life surrounded by the wood of the manger throne and was later nailed to a tree - enthroned upon the wood of the Cross. This is not the kind of glory any disciple is looking for, surely. Jesus turns the ways of the world upside down. He explains what service really means and it is not about self. To be great in God's kingdom one must first become a servant.

It was not the sort of message the disciples wanted to hear, and it is not the sort of message we really want to hear today either. In our world, excellence is rewarded by money and honour. On the steps of Downing Street after winning the general election in July, our new Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer promised to build a "government of service." And my heart was full of hope. What did he really mean? There is talk of putting people first, not systems. Of prioritising growth in the economy. Of making those with deeper pockets pay more. We will see and hear more when the budget is revealed in less than two week time.

Is service not about others needs before our own? I suspect there are very few political leaders, even in parties which claim to represent 'working people' who don't own their own property (or even properties) or other lovely things, which I am sure they feel they have earned through hard work and

dedication, or even a few nice gifts along the way! So, what then does service mean?

What I am saying is not intended to be a criticism of left or right politics – take communism as an example, which started with the high ideals of equality for everybody, but soon degenerated into brutal regimes where the leaders were extremely wealthy, and the people whom they were meant to serve, ended up as peasants with nothing.

Jesus view of service integrates words and actions. A good illustration of servanthood is found in John 13:1-4, when our Lord washed his disciples feet. Describing that occasion, the Evangelist John tells us that Jesus knew what time it was, that his hour had come to die upon the Cross, and that he loved his own to the very end. Jesus knew his strength and authority, that he was from God and that his destiny was to open the gates of heave to all – not for his sake but

for ours. So, knowing all of this, he is able to serve. In response some of the disciples were offended. Washing the feet of others, we're told, was not only the work of the lowliest household servant, but preferably someone not Jewish. And here was the Lord himself doing this humiliating task. Why? Could we? Hence in today's Gospel Jesus says, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. This is tough stuff.

The work of service is hard and sometimes thankless. Jesus lives as the chief servant, the one who gave up everything that he had, who lived a life serving those that came to him by healing their diseases and changing their lives. As we approach service in the Church, we should prioritise our serving others after the example of our Lord. This way of living stands in contrast to the entitlement and individualism of the "I" of popular culture today. I find Jesus

challenging view of service inspiring, self-giving and inclusive. In that way, Christian service is to do something, not because of personal gain, praise or adulation, but for the good of others first. And we do it because it is right, good, holy and builds relationships – and Christian service leads to heaven.

To follow in the way of Christ means we do not seek recognition, but at the same time, we must be quick to show appreciation and a spirit of thankfulness. We should work not for our own glory but for the good of others, the building up of the community of faith, always seeking to serve rather than be served. We work to build relationships that will far outlast our individual efforts, for the glory that is to come. Amen.

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, October 2024