



## Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# The way of Christian service

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### Mark 10:35–45

<sup>35</sup> Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask.’ <sup>36</sup> ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked. <sup>37</sup> They replied, ‘Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.’ <sup>38</sup> ‘You don’t know what you are asking,’ Jesus said. ‘Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?’ <sup>39</sup> ‘We can,’ they answered. Jesus said to them, ‘You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, <sup>40</sup> but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.’ <sup>41</sup> When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. <sup>42</sup> Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

This evening in the Wesley Theatre, we have thanked the Lord for one who served God throughout her long life. Our remembrance of Shirley Dunbar has caused me to look again at the nature of Christian service and I want to explore some of those thoughts with you.

It has been said that some people live from one year’s end to another and never do an hour of unpaid service for anyone. They will protest that they don’t do anyone any harm, and that may be true, but neither do they do anybody any particular good.

I suspect, if we went onto the streets of Sydney and asked folks what the Christian life was all about, even some of those who have no real connection with the Christian community would say that it is ‘something to do with serving others, isn’t it?’

The concept of service is acknowledged by the majority of Christian people. I joined the service club Rotary eighteen years ago and have always been attracted by the maxim ‘Service Before Self’. The words of Leo Tolstoy will resonate in the hearts of many people both within and outside the Christian world: ‘The simplest and shortest ethical precept is to be served as little as possible ... and to serve others as much as possible.’

Christian service is an important theme for all of us. If asked to designate one thing that characterises the mood of our recent generation, I would agree with Maxie Dunnam, who suggested that ‘this has been a time of aggressive self-expression’.

People even go on courses, attend seminars and workshops on learning how to be assertive. I understand the thought behind that and have occasionally encouraged individuals to explore appropriate self-assertiveness. But all these ideas sit in stark contrast to the way of Jesus we read of in the gospels.

Text: Mark 10:45

'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Our own Judith Durham will always be identified by the song 'The Colours of My Life'. If I were to look at the life of Jesus and seek to discover the primary colours of his life and ministry, it would not be long before I came to the conclusion that 'service' lies at the heart of everything.

For Jesus, it wasn't merely something he taught others about ... he displayed it! Hidden in all our conversation about service is the paradox of the Christian gospel ... that the last become first, the humble are exalted, and the poor in spirit embrace the riches of God's presence.

We could consider the Beatitudes of Jesus which are a very healthy catalogue of the way values are turned on their head in the economy of God's kingdom. We see it in the life of Jesus.

Allow me this evening to make three succinct points about service that I hope enable all of us to reflect upon how we express our own Christian lives in the context of others, particularly those in need.

There used to be a slogan years ago that said, 'Saved to Serve!' It still has validity. We are not saved by our service, but we are saved to it. Will Sangster was very direct when he said, 'Indeed, it may be doubted whether we are saved at all if we have no impulse to serve.'

- service flows from the deep parts of our life
- service demands no reward, save to do God's will
- service brings huge, unsought satisfaction.

A Christian view of life can be discerned in the words, 'The immediate payment for service may not be great, but the retirement plan is out of this world!'

### **Service is the measure of a person's life**

'... whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave...' (Matthew 20:26–27)

These words need to be handled very carefully; in fact there is a danger of modelling servanthood in relation to calling others to account. Jesus' instruction to the disciples strikes a marked difference between the way many of the disciples understood their leadership and Jesus' understanding.

The passage comes from a mother's request of Jesus concerning her twin sons, when she asks a favour of Jesus. Her request is that they be given special seating in the kingdom.

James and John come with their mother. Perhaps Tom Wright is correct in suggesting it might have been their idea all along. The request opens a window on the whole sordid business of power, but Jesus' curious answer slides open another window which will forever define the nature of service.

A book that always sits on my desk is *The Imitation of Christ*, attributed to Thomas à Kempis. I find it a constant inspiration and can understand why and how it had such an influence upon John Wesley's journey. It is without doubt a religious classic and, though written in Latin in the fifteenth century, it still has much to say to us today.

Its main characteristic and emphasis is upon the interior life. But the result of such a journey is profound beyond measure.

What is clear is that when we focus upon Jesus Christ, it becomes not only a journey of self-examination, but also the cause and impetus towards a life of sacrifice and service.

It does not surprise me that one of the most endearing outcomes of any life touched by the presence of Christ is the awakening of a desire to serve him in every area of life.

Albert Schweitzer said, 'I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know, that the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found a way to service.'

Consider how you measure the importance of a person's life:

- Is it by the length of a person's days and years?
- Is it by an accumulated record of achievements?
- Is it in the recognition by peers or friends?

However important these things may appear, it is much more related to our response to God in faithfulness and our willingness to serve.

Jesus Christ demonstrates service.

'Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.' (John 13:14–15)

In Jesus' discipleship encounters, nowhere was the gospel more clearly demonstrated than when he washed the disciples' travel-soiled feet. This was a demonstration, through example, of the life of service.

There is a powerful message within the life of such service and all of us can be recipients ... and share in this ministry.

In 1996, Harper Business published a story of a room waiter at a Marriot hotel who learned that one of the guests had just heard that her sister had died. The waiter, named Charles, bought a sympathy card, had hotel staff members sign it and gave it to the distraught guest with a piece of hot apple pie.

'Mr Marriot,' the guest later wrote to the President of Marriot Hotels, 'I'll never meet you. And I don't need to meet you. Because I met Charles. I know what you stand for ... I want to assure you that as long as I live, I will stay at your hotels. And I will tell my friends to stay at your hotels.'

The outcome of service is not only powerful, but infectious. Christian service, in a very similar way, is a message and a mission to the world.

What Jesus did in that Upper Room, when he washed the disciples' feet, will always be considered the starting point of our understanding of Christian service.

In the coming weeks, as we move towards Holy Week and Easter, we will see the outworking of the life of service in the ministry of Jesus—and it comes to a climax in the events of the cross. He lays down his life for us all and, in doing so, offers the way to eternal life.

## Christian service turns values upside-down

'... the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is the greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.' (Luke 22:26–27)

The context in Luke's gospel is most interesting for it comes after the institution of the Lord's Supper, where Jesus has taken bread and wine and made them forever of huge significance for his people. We are told a dispute arose amongst them as to which of them considered themselves to be the greatest.

It is most interesting that in the ministry of Jesus there is little by way of extended teaching on the themes of humility and service ... it is by way of demonstration that we learn the best lessons.

- He told stories ... upside-down stories
- He invited people to a new way.

Eduard Schweizer, the great Swiss New Testament scholar, observed, 'Nothing is said of humility in the abstract; Jesus exhibits the attitude required of the disciples in active service. He does not talk of a virtue but points to something that he does.'

Those who live in the way of Jesus Christ automatically enter the orbit of service ... for this, in huge measure, helps to define how we see the world and how we understand the contribution that God calls us to:

- Christ lives in the heart by faith (Galatians 2:20)
- Christ gives us a vision of 'all things' (Phil. 4:13)

Christian commitment does not make us automatically perfect any more than it makes us geniuses, but it quickens every aspect of our life. We view the world uncluttered by self-interest and can offer our lives in service to Christ. The contribution of each person matters.

Sir Michael Costa, the celebrated conductor, was holding a rehearsal. As the wonderful sound rang out, accompanied by scores of instruments, the piccolo player, a little pint-sized flute, thinking that perhaps his contribution would not be missed so much, stopped playing. Suddenly the great leader stopped, tapped his baton and cried out, 'Where is the piccolo?'

The sound of that one small instrument was necessary to the harmony and Costa missed it when it dropped out. I hope the point is straight forward. To the Conductor, there are no insignificant instruments in an orchestra. Sometimes the smallest and seemingly least important one can make the greatest contribution and even if it doesn't seem to make a big difference to the audience at large, the Conductor knows it right away!

If in our Christian service players and instruments are of diverse size, shape, note and character, then there is a lesson from the piccolo player in Sir Michael's orchestra. In our own sovereignty, we often decide that our contribution is insignificant. We may even think our contribution couldn't possibly make a difference—so we quit playing!

We stop doing the thing that we have been given to do. We drop out. But the Conductor immediately notices. From our perspective, our contribution may be small, but from God's perspective it is crucial.

It may well be that I am talking to some piccolo players this evening, who have dropped out of the orchestra for whatever reason: pain, exhaustion, insecurity, criticism, laziness, or whatever. Convinced that your contribution ... to use an Americanism ... doesn't mean a hill of beans in the bigger scheme of things, we have buried our talent in the ground.

Richard Love in *Blowing Your Horn*, concludes, 'For those who won't play, or at least aren't playing, Jesus has something to say.'

This evening, we have considered something of the nature of servanthood and I hope you have journeyed with me sufficiently to know that it really does matter as a response to God—and as a witness in the world in which we live.

Perhaps some words I noted many years ago will offer a challenge to each of us: 'There are two great divisions among religious people: those who serve God legally, and those who serve him lovingly.'

There is no greater privilege in all the world than serving God!