

## **Humility and servanthood: Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison, 23<sup>rd</sup>**

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I wonder what the disciples were really like. With a few exceptions, we don't have very many clues, because there isn't actually that much about their various personal qualities in the gospels. We see the different ways in which St Peter found discipleship a challenge, when his faith is shown to be weak, when he makes mistakes, when he even disowns Jesus. We also see how he overcomes these setbacks, and how Jesus entrusts him with the leadership of the Church when he left them to return to heaven. But we really don't know anything like as much about most if not all of the other disciples. There are, however, a few incidents in which we get a glimpse of how Jesus and the disciples related to one another, which are quite revealing, and which show the disciples to be very human, and just ordinary people just like you and me.

Today's gospel reading, from Mark chapter 9, does not portray the disciples in a very good light. Jesus has just told them that he will have to go to Jerusalem and will be betrayed, and then killed. But the disciples, as they walk to Capernaum, on Lake Galilee, argue amongst themselves. They had been arguing about who among them was the greatest, but were ashamed to tell Jesus this. Could it be that, having been told by Jesus that he wouldn't be with them much longer, they were arguing about who would take his place as leader? Isn't it incredible, that after the jolt of Jesus telling them about his likely fate, all they can think about is who would take over from him?

This conversation is similar to the one described in the gospel of St Matthew in which the mother of James and John, sons of Zebedee, asks Jesus if her sons can sit at his right hand in the kingdom of heaven. Both of these episodes show that there were those amongst Jesus' followers who had a very different understanding of what it meant to be great, to be important, from that of Jesus. Imagine their astonishment when his response was – first – to tell them that in order to be first, you must be last, and indeed to be the servant of all. Or indeed slave. The lowest of the low. And then he shows them a child, telling them that if they welcome a child they are in fact welcoming Christ. Children were also at the bottom of

the social pecking order – so by doing this Jesus was in fact telling them that he himself – Jesus – was setting himself alongside the lowest in society.

Jesus was therefore saying two related things: that to be a follower of his you must be a servant of others, including, by implication, the humble and lowly; and also that he, Jesus, had deliberately chosen to be alongside such people in his earthly life. This of course is entirely consistent with other moments in Jesus' ministry, as we recall from examples such as the following:

- At the heart of his ministry lay caring for and healing the blind, the disabled, the lepers, the chronically sick, and others on the edges of society;
- At the last supper, by acting as a servant, or slave, in washing the disciples' feet, Jesus showed a pattern for his disciples to follow;
- Remember also Jesus' famous saying, 'The one who would save his life will lose it; the one who would lose his life for my sake and the gospel will save it'.
- The servanthood of Jesus relates to the very nature of the 'incarnation', in that Jesus, in spite of being Son of God, took human form with all its limitations, frustrations, and constraints. In doing this he showed that God is with us, God is not remote and distant, but will go as far as is necessary to reach out to a lost and alienated world, a world which is too often consumed by selfishness, self-absorption, and striving for the wrong kind of status, and bring its people back to him.

But all this of course has implications for us as Christians as well. For it shows us that servanthood lies at the very heart of our discipleship. It's an uncomfortable fact, but servanthood – putting oneself at the disposal of others – isn't always straightforward or easy. It means giving up time which we could be devoting to ourselves; it may mean using money which could otherwise have been spent on ourselves. It may mean drawing back from what St James, in the first reading, refers to as 'selfish ambition'. Making a conscious decision to step back from having power over other people, in spite of the fact that having power over others may make us feel good, but instead making a priority of activities which are to do with the well being of others. We should also remember that it's not necessarily for us to say what the best interests of others may involve, but instead serving others may

mean leaving it to them to say what they think their best interests are – even though we may disagree with them. This is one of the ways in which love and servanthood can be truly costly.

But how, by doing this kind of thing, by putting ourselves at the service of others, do we then find our life through losing it? How, by becoming last, do we become first? It is, I believe, through the blessings which come from this kind of discipleship. For by being increasingly open to the needs, hopes, yearnings, sadness and joys of those around us, we become more blessed; but in a way which does not depend on material riches or social status. There's something about being connected in love and service to others which brings a deep-down sense of well being and inner peace – a conviction that somehow this is what life should be all about. Our lives become enhanced by our being, in a small way, part of the lives of others (while of course remaining non-intrusive and respecting personal boundaries). The island mentality which would otherwise leave our hearts and our souls frozen and unbending becomes increasingly remote as we learn to see everyone as a person of infinite value. And this is the case even when we take all the risks involved in becoming close to people whom we might ordinarily keep away from – the homeless, the drug addicts, those whose habits we might naturally find rather repellent. For God is found in them too; when Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor', he was saying that there's no-one who has got nothing to give to the rest of us; but it's up to us to open our hearts and let what they have to offer us enter into them. Of course this can be a demanding, even draining, road to follow; but when we are tempted to lose heart, let's remember the words of Jesus telling us save our lives by losing them for the sake of others.

Servanthood; humility; being alongside the lowest of the low; finding blessedness and spiritual riches where we might least expect it; that is what Jesus was trying to communicate to those disciples, who seemed only able to argue about who of them was the greatest. But eventually they changed, and many of them ultimately devoted their lives to making the lives of others better, and to bringing the love of God to others through a servant Church which had been founded by the servant king. Amen.