

I am among you as one who serves.

Service is hardly a popular occupation, even in these recessionary times. We still have what is referred to as a ‘service industry’, albeit a somewhat straightened one but this is not populated by people whom one might describe as ‘servants’; Job Centres do not advertise vacancies for such posts. To be a servant is seen as shameful and demeaning. Servants, it is supposed, belong to a dreadful Victorian upstairs-downstairs world. They are people who have no real freedom but, rather, languish in the ‘station in life’ into which they were born, in the scullery by day, in the attic by night.

I don’t suppose that being a servant was ever terribly fashionable but it is despised in our society. How extraordinary, then, that this most unglamorous role of the servant Jesus has, for all time, made his own. In today’s reading from the heart of St Luke’s gospel we read one of the great “I am” sayings of Jesus. “I am among you” Jesus says, “as one who serves.” This saying is only recorded in Luke, but it is uttered in the tone of John. Here in Luke’s Gospel ‘the beloved physician’ and ‘the beloved disciple’ speak as one. When we hear these words, we are taken in heart and mind to the Upper Room where John describes how Jesus rose from the table to wash his disciples’ feet.

Apologies to Lynne Truss, author of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, but perhaps we only get the full import of Jesus’s momentous saying if we alter the emphasis by adding an imaginary comma so that it becomes: ‘I am, among you as one who serves.’ ‘I am’, the words the Living God used to identify himself at the beginning of our scriptures, I am, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, I am, the Alpha and Omega, I am, among you as one who serves.

Jesus did once for all on the stage of human history what God is doing all the time. ‘To have seen me is to have seen the Father. I and the Father are one’, he tells Philip. We, as Ministers of the gospel, are called to be Jesus for people by serving them and, in so doing, share in what God is doing for them. It doesn’t scan but the next line of Brother, Sister let, me serve you

should say something like: ‘Let me share in what God is doing for you, what God has been doing for you since before the foundation of the world and what God will do for you into all eternity.’ We are made in the image of God and reflect that image in so far as we serve, we become as God in so far as we serve. What higher vocation could there be?

It is said that there is low morale among clergy. That they are uncertain about their role. I have found this to be true of some. And I think that it is partly because we no longer have status in society on a par with the Squire. We’re not local celebrities any more – no more salutations in the market place. But I also see clergy – and lay people – on fire with the love of Jesus, making a real difference to the communities in which they minister by quietly, unobtrusively serving them and in so doing offering a godly model of leadership, reflecting that ‘I am’ saying of Jesus: I am, among you as one who serves’ even when people don’t much want to be served or, more often, don’t even notice that they are being served.

One of the reasons why service is so unfashionable is the emphasis on individual human fulfilment in our society. Being other people’s servant is not the way to achieve that, surely? It is easy, too, to associate the sort of selfless service associated with the saints with what is sometimes termed ‘doormat spirituality’, just letting other people tread us into the ground. But this misses that truth that lies at the heart of our faith – it is no selfless ethic that Jesus is articulating here. Having bidden them serve, in the next breath he promises his disciples a kingdom and thrones. And that promise holds true for you and me not just at the end time but now. It is in giving ourselves to others, and in that alone, that shall find the fulfilment we crave. We shall, if we will, sit on thrones of lives fulfilled.

This God who is among us as one who serves is not one weighed down by drudgery but, rather, a God of joy and gladness. That is the truth that has been discovered by those to whom I referred earlier – those who find joy and gladness creeping up on them in their commitment to serving the people to whom they minister. That’s surely the point: seek joy and you won’t find it, give yourselves to others and *it* will find *you*. Lose your life in the service of others and you will find your life – new and abundant life. For the measure

you give will be the measure you get back, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.

What you won't get is public acclaim and celebrity status. A good servant is not noticed. The disciples *notice* what Jesus does only because he assumed the role of someone normally *unnoticed*. The household slave goes about his work and, for the rest of the house, it is as if he does not exist. To serve is to hide. I preached at Sandringham in January and, for the first (and probably last) time in my life, I had a valet. He looked after me for a few hours in a highly efficient but largely invisible fashion and took a pride in doing so. Invisibility, traditionally, is the mark of a good servant.

If our lives, given in Christian service, are hidden in God, let us not lose heart but rejoice in the part he has given us in his great plan to restore the creation to himself in Christ and the abundance of life that is offered to us in so doing. Even the secular world, occasionally, glimpses the worth of lives given in service. George Eliot was no believer but, in the well known concluding words of *Middlemarch* she states a great truth: "For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs"

Rest in unvisited tombs we probably shall but it is our calling, yours and mine, to sit on thrones of abundant life, now and into all eternity. Thrones of service. Amen.

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