

JOHN 13.1-17: LET'S SERVE OTHERS

[Chelmsford, Sunday morning 6 March 20112]

The story is told of three children who were making a dreadful din in the other room – for some reason they were shouting and screaming at one another at the top of their voices.

Their mother went in and asked what they were quarreling about. ‘*We’re not quarreling*’, said the eldest, ‘*we’re just playing Mummy and Daddy*’.

John in his Gospel records that Jesus, on the night before he died, said: **“I have set you an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you”** (13.15). Or as Peterson puts it: *“I’ve laid down a pattern for you”* – a pattern that is of serving.

From the other Gospels we know that the disciples of Jesus were often much pre-occupied with questions of status. Indeed, Luke tells us that the Last Supper was one of those occasions.

“An argument broke out among the disciples as to which one of them should be thought of as the greatest” (22.24). Even at this late stage in Jesus’ ministry the disciples were still blinded by visions of thrones & crowns.

It was at this point that Jesus silently **“rose from the table, took off his outer garment and tied a towel round his waist. Then he poured some water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel round his waist”** (13.4,5).

The washing of feet was a servant task.

In an age when streets were not paved, feet could get very dirty. *“The roads were often inches deep in dry weather, & turned to liquid mud in wet weather”* (Bridger)

The custom in those days was that when guests arrived, they had their feet washed by a slave.

This task of washing feet was regarded as particularly menial. In a Jewish household it was a task reserved for Gentile slaves - Jewish slaves were exempted from washing feet. Interestingly Jewish wives & children, who came even lower on the pecking order, were sometimes expected to share in this task!

But Jesus washed his disciples’ feet.

In washing their feet, he did what no other Jewish man would ever have done.

But then Jesus was ordinary Jewish man. Jesus was the Son of God.

Indeed, John specifically tells us that **“Jesus knew that he had come from God”** (13.3) - he knew that **“the Father had given him complete power”** (13.3).

And yet he washed his disciples feet. What amazing action! What amazing humility!

What’s more, prior to washing their feet, **“he took off his outer garment and tied a towel round himself”** (13.4). A Jewish commentary on Gen 21.14 states that when Abraham sent Hagar away, he gave her a divorce note and took her shawl and wrapped it around her hips *“that people should know that she was a slave”*.

Jesus, in removing his coat and tying a towel around himself, was adopting the uniform of a servant.

These simple actions must have spoken volumes

The disciples must have felt intensely embarrassed, let alone deeply rebuked.

It scarcely needed Jesus to say when he got back to his seat: **“Do you understand what I have just done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and it is right that you do so, because that is what I am. I your Lord and Teacher, have just washed your feet. You then should wash one another’s feet. I have set an example for you, so that you will do what I have done for you”** (13.12b-15).

Jesus set before them an example of service, and in so doing began a revolution - a revolution of service.

We have to remember that in Jesus’ day service toward others was not a commonly admired virtue. The culture of the ancient world was very different from ours, in that leadership was never viewed in terms of service.

The reason for this difference is that our culture has been ‘Christianised’ - even although we now live in a post-Christian society, our language still reflects Christian values.

We speak, for instance, of ‘civil servants’ - our most prominent politicians are called ‘ministers’ i.e. ‘servants’ - indeed, the most powerful man in the land is called the ‘prime minister’, i.e., the ‘first servant’.

Such language would have sounded strange in the world of Jesus day.

- As far as the Greeks were concerned, serving others was felt to be undignified and not worthy of any man with real spunk. Rather one should simply serve one’s own desires *“How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?”*, asked one Greek philosopher. For the ancient Greeks the goal of all human life was the perfect development of an individual personality.
- In spite of the OT teaching to love one’s neighbour as oneself, the Jews of Jesus’ day were scarcely much more positive about serving others - for them serving others was simply a way of gaining ‘Brownie points’ from God - and even so, it was felt to be wrong to serve one’s inferiors!

It was in this context that Jesus, by washing his disciples’ feet, reversed all human ideas of greatness and rank. **“The greatest one among you must be like the youngest, and the leader must be like the servant”** (Lk 22.26).

Do note that Jesus was not saying that before one could become a leader one had to prove oneself through faithful service. Rather faithful service was for Jesus the place of true greatness. In the words of one NT scholar: *“In the Kingdom of God service is not a stepping-stone to nobility: it is nobility, the only kind of nobility that is recognised”* (T.W. Manson).

Jesus, however, sets an example not just to leaders.

He sets an example to all of us - to all would be disciples.

If we are honest, many of us are like the disciples of old - we prefer to be served than to serve. We like our egos to be stroked. Although we may not want to be set on a pedestal, we do appreciate a certain amount of respect.

As we grow older, perhaps, we feel that certain things are beneath us.

If so, then we need to heed the example of Jesus.

Jesus, who said to his disciples, “**I am among you as one who serves**” (Lk 22.27).

Jesus who said: “**I have set an example for you**” (13.15).

Incidentally, do note that the example relates not to the action ‘per se’, but to the underlying attitude. Jesus was not saying that we should literally wash one another’s feet.

In today’s society such an action makes little sense. No, Jesus is concerned for the underlying principle, that his disciples should serve others.

Or rather that they should serve others “**just as I have done**” (13.15).

Just as we are called to love as Jesus loved us (13.34), so we are serve as Jesus loved us.

In preparing for this sermon I came across this description of the church: “*the brotherhood of the towel*”. Unfortunately in today’s PC world the term ‘brotherhood’ is sexist - perhaps we should speak of ‘the community of the towel’.

Whatever the term, we are called to serve.

As one commentator put it: “*The Gospel is a life to be lived and not just an ideal to be contemplated*” (Rodney Whitacre).

Or to quote John Wesley: “*Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can*”.

This morning we reach the end of our series on the mission and vision of our church.

- We began with our mission statement: *We exist to go Christ’s way and make disciples.*
- We went on to look at our vision statement: “*We want to be a strong and vibrant town-centre church, where every members is: passionate for God, passionate for one another, passionate for others, passionate to grow in the faith, and – this morning – passionate to serve Jesus*”.

The question is: How passionate are we to serve?

How passionate are we to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty?

How passionate are we to follow the example of Jesus and serve others?

Can we say with integrity the BB camp grace: “*Dear Lord, do not make us like porridge, which is difficult to stir and slow to serve. But more like corn flakes, crisp, fresh and ready to serve*”.

At this point I want to get down to the nitty gritty.

Like my sermon on evangelism, and my sermon on prayer, I am going to get down to the basics. It will be yet another simple sermon. But if it ensures results, then that is what matters.

So, to return to our mission statement: We want to be a church where EVERY member is passionate to serve. Note the word every: not just some members, not just the retired members, not just the members who don’t have demanding jobs, but EVERY member.

Wow! What a vision! Does it sweep you off your feet? It should do.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if as a church we were just overwhelmed by offers to serve – so much so, that we had to set up rotas.

As it is, in many spheres of church service, we just have enough people.

- We have four people who come in at 7 o'clock in the morning to clean the church – but if for any reason one or two of those people fall sick or go on holiday, we are stretched beyond.
- At the moment we have sufficient receptionists to staff the welcome desk every week – but if one or other is sick or on holiday, we are in difficulty.
- At the moment we have just enough people to count the money on a Monday morning – but what a difference it would make if we could free the church treasurer from having to come down and help with the count. Frankly, he has got far too much to do to be involved in this mundane form of service.

My friends, where is the passion to serve.

OK, these are all jobs which take place during the day when many of you are working.

- Well, what about helping with sitting on the reception desk on a Sunday evening: as it is, half the time we are having to use retired people like Ursula Franklin and Dorothy Aristides to do this job, retired people who are already serving the church in many other ways during the week. OK, they are deacons – but frankly we need to share out some of the deacons duties.
- Is it fair that we expect David Spurling, our senior deacon, and Geoff Rowlands, our church treasurer to man the reception desk Sunday mornings, when they are already giving many hours of their time to church work.

Where is the passion to serve?

Needless to say, there are some areas of church life where we do not have enough volunteers. Last Monday, for instance, we could not find anybody willing to cook for Alpha. So we had to buy in pizzas from Dominoes. Much as I like pizza, it isn't a patch on home cooking. Here we are trying to welcome to our church people searching for faith – but in a church with 365 members we could not find anybody free and willing to make a meal for 18 people. I recognize that Monday evening at 7 pm is not the most convenient of times – but it is not an impossible time for most of us.

Friends, if we are really eager to serve, surely we could find ten people willing to take responsibility for one meal per Alpha course.

Another area where we just do not have enough volunteers is in shifting chairs on a Sunday. This morning, for instance, I will be appealing for people to help clear the Meeting Place of chairs for Outrageous tonight – friends, I find it embarrassing having to appeal for help. What a difference it would make if there were a team of men committed to doing this job. And even more, what a difference it would make if there were a team of men willing to come down after Outrageous and help put the chairs back.

This time last month the putting back of the chairs was done by Martin (who has a bad back), his wife Carita, and his son Joshua. Martin & Carita were already exhausted from having run Outrageous – then to have to clear up; frankly, it just isn't fair. Where is the passion to serve?

Or what about delivering the church flowers? Do you know that there are some Sundays when I cannot send out flowers because I have nobody who is willing to make the time to deliver them? People pay for the flowers, people arrange the flowers, but sometimes there are no people to deliver the flowers of an evening.

The result is that very often we have no flowers in the evening service:

- Last week I asked care group leaders who met in the afternoon to take the flowers out
- Today I have no confidence that there will be anybody present this evening who will be willing to deliver flowers, and so I shall press-gang (and that is the word) people to help wrap up the flowers and deliver the flowers after this morning's service.

Where is the passion to serve?

Then there are areas of church life where there is no formal job opportunity – and yet for anybody with eyes to see there is room for service.

For instance, wouldn't it be marvelous if there were two people willing to make it their responsibility to welcome people to church – not by standing at the door, but by standing on the front forecourt of the church, from 9.30 to 10.05 every Sunday morning, come rain or shine, opening the doors of cars, giving directions to visitors. That would be a real service.

If two people were willing to do that, then I would persuade the church treasurer to give us money to buy to custom-made Central Baptist Church umbrellas.

Come on friends, where is the passion to serve?

And so I could go on, listing one opportunity for service after another.

I recognize that many of the examples I have given may seem comparatively trivial to some of you. And yet, the reality is that they are important if we are to serve God as a church.

Albert Schweitzer, the great polymath who gave of himself to the service of Africa wrote:

“Always keep your eyes open for the little task, because it is the little task that is important to Jesus Christ. The future of the kingdom of God does not depend on the enthusiasm of this or that powerful person; those great ones are necessary too, but it is equally necessary to have a great number of little people who will do a little thing in the service of Christ”

My brother and sister, there are plenty of opportunities for those who are passionate to service.

The question is: do you have the passion to serve?

Jesus said: **“I have set you an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you”** (13.15)