

LEADERSHIP IS ALWAYS SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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As a tribute to the College of Baptist Ministers, I thought I would include part of a lecture I gave to a post-graduate seminar at Laidlaw College, Auckland, New Zealand in March 2020.

My theme is servant leadership, which surely is the essence of Christian Ministry. As a result I requested that on the cover of my latest book, *Fifty Lessons in Ministry: Reflections on Fifty Years of Ministry*,¹ there be a picture of a jug, a bowl, and a towel, which point to the Upper Room, where Jesus washed his disciples' feet and said "I have set you an example" (John 13.15). Jesus calls us to 'the ministry of the towel'. What is more, there never comes a stage when we put down the towel. For service, in the words of Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York, is "the heart and the heartbeat of all ministry. Christ is one who serves – the one who serves us, who are his servants – and we best follow him and emulate him by serving others ourselves."²



On a number of occasions Jesus emphasised the necessity of the servant role if a person would be a leader. Thus, when James and John asked if they might sit at his right and left hand in glory, Jesus replied: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10.42; Matt 20.25-27; see also Luke 22.24-26).

Jesus defined leadership in terms of service, and in doing so turned upside down all previous preconceptions of leadership. As James Edwards commented: "At no place do the ethics of the kingdom of God clash more vigorously with the ethics of the world than in the matters of power and service. The ideas that Jesus presents regarding rule and service are combined in a way that finds no obvious precedent in either the Old Testament or Jewish tradition. In a decisive reversal of values, Jesus speaks of greatness in service rather than greatness of power, prestige and authority.... The preeminent virtue of God's kingdom is not power,

¹ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Fifty Years in Ministry: Reflections on Fifty Years of Ministry* (DLT, London 2020).

² Stephen Cottrell, *On Priesthood: Servants, Shepherds, Messengers, Sentinels and Stewards* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 2020) 43.

not even freedom, but service.... The pre-eminence of service in the kingdom of God grows out of Jesus' teaching on love for one's neighbour, for service is love made tangible." ³

Jesus went on: "Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10.44; similarly Mark 9.35 & Luke 9.48). From the perspective of Jesus' hearers this was a preposterous idea. To quote Edwards again: "The idea of a slave being first is as absurdly paradoxical as a camel going through the eye of a needle (v25) – and it probably induced smiles and shaking heads from Jesus' audience. The desire for power and dominance focuses attention on self and this is love, for love by nature is focussed on others." ⁴

Frederick Bruner in his commentary on the parallel passage in Matt 20. 27 drew attention to the question of Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*, 491E: 'How can anyone be happy when he is the slave of all?', and went on: "Jesus turns this aristocratic ideal on its head, and in one of cultural history's dramatic reversals he asks, in effect, 'How can anyone be happy unless one is the slave of everyone else?' Because culture so ceaselessly directs us in exactly the opposite direction, *up*, believers must pray almost daily for the wisdom and courage to go culturally *down*. But seeking to be a great 'downer' in all imaginative service and with all created and charismatic ambition is so right that it comes close to being Jesus' definition of a happy life." ⁵

If we turn to Luke's account of the dispute that occurred between the disciples at the Last Supper, we find that Jesus has some very uncomfortable things to say about the love of power and place which still 'infects' many who lead Christ's church today. ⁶

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." (Luke 22.24-27)

This desire for power and place is found in the very term that Luke uses here for the "dispute" (v24) that broke out between the disciples. The Greek word *philoneikia* appears only here in the New Testament and literally it means 'love of victory, desire for glory'. That sums up what was going on that evening. James Edwards commented: "There is perhaps no subject on which Scripture is less tolerant than on that of self-adulation. 'The Lord Almighty has a day in store for

³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Apollos, Leicester 2002) 325.

⁴ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* 325.

⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 13-28* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, revised edition 1999) 333.

⁶ An adaptation of a comment by Fred Craddock who likened the love of power and place to an "infectious disease" (*Luke*, Interpretation, Westminster John Knox, Louisville) 257.

all the proud and loft, for all that is exalted' (Isaiah 2.12 NIV)."⁷ Or as the GNB translates: "On that day the Lord Almighty will humble everyone who is powerful, everyone who is proud and conceited".

Jesus interrupted the disciples' vanity with a warning not to be like the world's powerbrokers, who like to style themselves as 'benefactors' but are not. According to James Edwards, the term 'benefactor' (*euergetes*) is among the half-dozen most common epithets used of rulers and leaders occurring in monumental Greek inscriptions in the eastern half of the Roman Empire from the New Testament period to late antiquity. These 'benefactors' were "a widespread class of individuals of power, position, and means who celebrated themselves and were celebrated by others in public spaces".⁸ They were the celebrity 'do-gooders' of the ancient world. According to Luke, they "are called" (*kalountai* – passive mood) or "call themselves" (*kalountai* – middle mood) benefactors.

"But not so with you" said Jesus. Literally, "not so you". There is no verb present in the underlying Greek, with the result that Jesus' words could be translated as an imperative ('you are not to be like that') or an indicative ('you are not like that'). To quote Edwards again: "The rebuttal, in other words, identifies not simply a behaviour to be avoided, but an alternative way of life to be embraced".⁹

Jesus went on to question the very concept of greatness. From the world's perspective, honoured guests at banquets are 'great'. Indeed, we have the custom at weddings and at formal dinners of a 'top' table. But in the Kingdom of God the world's values are reversed: "I am among you as one who serves". Is it significant that here Luke does not use a noun (*diakonos* – deacon/servant) but a verb (*diakoneo*)? Are we to infer that Jesus did not assume the title of a servant, but rather played the role of a servant? Francois Bovon commented that Luke "knows that there are inactive and incompetent servants: see Luke 12.45-46".¹⁰ Service is to be the hallmark of Christian leadership. As T.W. Manson memorably put it, "In the Kingdom of God service is not a stepping-stone to nobility: it is nobility, the only kind of nobility that is to be recognised".¹¹

Finally, John Nolland drew attention to the context in which this dispute took place; "In the first instance the text is about how the members of the Apostolic band should relate to one another, and not about how they as the great ones and leaders should relate to the Christian community they are to lead".¹² Here are perhaps uncomfortable words for ministers who are part of a multi-staff church and who can get into such a tizzy about status and title: assistant minister or associate minister or as much a minister as the 'team leader'!

⁷ James Edwards, *Luke 633*.

⁸ Edwards, *Luke 633*.

⁹ Edwards, *Luke 634*.

¹⁰ Francois Bovon, *Hermeneia: Luke 3: A commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19.28-24.53* (Fortress, Minneapolis 2012) 74.

¹¹ T.W. Manson *The Church's Ministry* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1948) 27.

¹² John Nolland, *Luke 18.35-24.53* (Word, Waco, Texas 1993) 1065.

By contrast for Jesus service was the hallmark of his mission. As he said to his disciples “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10.45: see Matt 20.28). Again the comments of James Edwards are most insightful: “The life to which the gospel calls believers is not an ethical system but ‘the way of the Lord’ (1.3) of which Jesus is the pattern and incarnation. This model of ministry cannot come from the secular order, but only from the unique way of Jesus, which defies the logic of this world and its fascination with dominance, control, yields, results and outcomes. The key to the model both incarnated and commanded by Jesus is in the verbs ‘to serve’ and ‘to give’. The reason why a servant is the most preeminent position in the kingdom of God is that the sole function of a servant is to give, and giving is the essence of God.”¹³

Nowhere more clearly do we see Jesus as the Servant than when he washed his disciples' feet in the upper room (John 13.1-20). It is impossible to overemphasize the menial nature of this act. For the rabbis it was a task which could not be required of a Jewish male slave (Mekh.Exod 21.2.82a, based on Lev 25.39). Washing the feet of another person was seen as an undignified action, a job reserved for Gentile slaves, wives and children.

“The action of Jesus in removing his outer garment and tying a towel around him underscores the humiliation of his action; the Midrash on Gen 21.14 states that when Abraham sent Hagar away he gave her a bill of divorce and took her shawl and girded it around her loins, that people should know that she was a slave.”¹⁴

We are so familiar with this incident that we do not always sense the degradation of the scene. Jesus, “knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God” (John 13.3), humbled himself beyond measure by taking upon himself the role of a slave as he washed his disciples' feet. In a very real sense this was a “scandalous” act.¹⁵ Today's leaders would do well to heed Jesus' words: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13.15).

It may well be that the Apostle Peter had the incident of the footwashing in mind when, after giving instructions to the elders, he said to the church as a whole: “All of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another” (1 Pet 5.5). The Greek verb translated ‘clothe’ (*egkoomboimai*) is derived from the word *egkomboma*, which denoted the ‘apron’ or ‘overall’ which slaves fastened in front of their sleeveless vest to keep it clean. Some commentators believe that Peter may be hinting that they should imitate Jesus, who tied a towel around himself in order to wash his disciples feet.¹⁶ As a result the GNB

¹³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 326, 327.

¹⁴ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Word, Waco, Texas 1987) 233.

¹⁵ So Rodney A. Whitacre, *John* (IVP, Leicester 1999) 329.

¹⁶ So, for instance, J.N.D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (A.C. Black, London 1969) 206. J. Ramsey Michaels (*1 Peter*, Word, Waco, Texas 1988) was not convinced and pointed out that in John 15.3 another Greek word (*lention*) is used, but to my mind this does not rule out an allusion to the foot-washing.

translates this verse: “All of you must put on the apron of humility, to serve one another”. This call to serve others includes leaders, who must also put others first; for the ‘humility’ of which Peter speaks is “an attitude which... thinks of the desires, needs, and ideas of others as more worthy than one’s own”.¹⁷

The metaphor Peter employs here may well have yet even further significance for church leadership. For in the ancient world what people wore was a sign of their social position: “one’s garment announces what one is for another, not what one is in and for oneself”.¹⁸ In the light of this, wrote Joel Green, “Peter’s directive to everyone counters the possibility of blind submission to authority just as it sabotages all attempts to exercise authority on the basis of status”. That Peter would instruct everyone one (*pantes*), leaders included, “to wear the same garment, irrespective of its colour or quality or texture, is itself a startling negation of the social distinctions that among people in Roman antiquity would have been worn like uniforms in a parade”.¹⁹ Green noted that the word for ‘humility’ (*tapeinophrosune*) is related to the Greek word ‘to think’ (*phroneo*) and draws from this conclusion that “Peter thus concerns himself, and his audience, with a frame of mind or pattern of thinking that belongs to persons who have done with positioning themselves in the world’s social hierarchy in order to ensure that they are treated with appropriate esteem by their social underlings”.²⁰ Here we see again that leadership in the church has nothing to do with status, but everything to do with service.

Although the Apostle Paul does not refer to the incident in which Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, as Phil 2.1-11 shows so clearly, he was very much aware of the model of humble service which Jesus set us all. With regard to his understanding of servant leadership this comes to particular expression in 2 Cor 4.5: “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves (*douloi*) for Jesus’ sake” (NRSV). Strangely most other English versions (e.g. GNB, NIV, REB & RSV) tone down Paul’s language by translating the phrase as “your servants for Jesus’ sake”. But Paul does not use the Greek word *diakonos*, servant, but *doulos*, slave. Elsewhere he speaks of himself being a ‘slave’ of Christ (Rom 1.1; Gal 1.10; Phil 1.1; see Titus 1.1 ‘slave of God’), but here he speaks of being a ‘slave’ of the church! A slave by definition has no rights; slaves belong totally to their masters, to whom they owe absolute obedience. In the context here, for Paul to describe himself and his fellow-workers as ‘slaves’ means, in the words of Arndt & Gingrich’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* they are “unconditionally obligated to serve them”;²¹ or as Murray Harris put it, Paul envisaged his relationship to his fellow Christians “as

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem *1 Peter* (IVP, Leicester 1988) 194. The term ‘humility’ (*tapeinophrosune*) is defined in Paul’s introduction to the great Christ hymn of Philippians 2: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility (*tapeinophrosune*) regard others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil 2.3-4).

¹⁸ Klaus Berger, *Identity and Experience in the New Testament* (Fortress, Minneapolis 2003) 41.

¹⁹ Joel B. Green, *1 Peter* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2007) 170.

²⁰ Joel B. Green, *1 Peter* 170.

²¹ William Arndt & Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 4th edition 1952).

unquestioning service for the benefit of the other, as the result of unconditional but voluntary surrender of all personal rights”.²² Earlier in his letter, Paul had said: “We do not lord it (*kuriomen*) over your faith”, but instead are “workers with you” (2 Cor 1.24). But here in 2 Cor 4.5 Paul goes much further, and anticipates his declaration: “I will most gladly spend and be [utterly] spent for you” (2 Cor 12.15), where Paul effectively says that he is happy to give all that he has and is to his fellow Christians at Corinth.

This is amazingly extravagant language. As Ernest Best noted: “It is relatively easy to say ‘I am God’s slave’, but something in us rebels when we have to say ‘I am their slave’”.²³ It is not only in 2 Cor 4.5 that Paul uses the metaphor of slavery for ministry. The metaphor is also found in 1 Cor 9.19: “For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them”. But here the emphasis is perhaps a little different: it is more a matter of a giving up of rights (such as not being paid for ministry or being willing to adapt to different environments) than of total commitment. Where does this language come? Surely it can only come from Paul’s understanding of Jesus, who for our sakes “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (*doulos*).

This teaching on the importance of being a servant must not lead us to underplay the importance of leadership itself. Leadership, rightly understood, does not stand in opposition to service. Leadership can be an expression of service. If leadership is undertaken for the sake of others, rather than for the sake of personal ego, then such leadership is service in the cause of Christ.

The key to Christian leadership is servant-leadership. Servant-leadership focuses on the people to be cared for rather than just the job to be done. There is therefore a very real difference between servant-leaders and some high-powered executives. Servant-leaders cannot trample on people even in pursuit of the kingdom. Leaders may not be doormats - but neither may they use others as doormats. But for all these necessary caveats, servant leadership must still lead – it must not become an excuse for no leadership.²⁴ For that reason the suggestion has been made that we should speak of ‘leading servants’ rather than ‘servant-leaders’.²⁵

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²² Murray Harris *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005) 333.

²³ Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*, (John Knox, Atlanta 1987) 39.

²⁴ John Drane, *After McDonaldization: Ministry and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty* (Darton, Longman, Todd, London 2008) 106 commented: “‘Servant leadership’ often leads to a situation in which there is no effective leadership at all”.

²⁵ John Ortberg, formerly an associate pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, quoted by Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (British edition: IVP, Leicester 2001) 106. Gibbs and Coffey suggested that the emphasis on ‘servant leadership’ espoused by some pastors has more to do with their insecurity rather than with their humility.