

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

SERVICE
Year C - Trinity 10 - Luke 22: 24-30

“Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is 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. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’”

“A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Luke 22:24). Perhaps this strikes us as rather an odd place to start a Gospel reading, but it certainly grabs our attention.

It was only a short while ago that Jesus had been on his knees washing the feet of His disciples before sharing the Last Supper with them...

“Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ 20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.[d] 21 But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table’”. (Lk.22:19-21)

The atmosphere in the room must have been tense; the disciples are alarmed and astonished. Certainly they will have been astonished that Jesus had washed their feet like a lowly servant. And yet they still don't seem to have realised that in doing this He is showing them that serving others is *central* to what He has taught them all along. Yet suddenly they descend into an argument about who amongst them is the greatest. Shaken by the news that one who will betray their Lord and friend is amongst them, and in their deep desire to be His disciples, they succumb to that terrible temptation to crave power and status.

We might have expected Jesus to be cross. Instead Jesus explains that in the eyes of God, greatness bears no resemblance to what they see in the world around them. Greatness is not about status, not about being like a king lording over others, not about being seen as a benefactor to whom others must be grateful. And so He tells them, *“You are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves”*.

Greatness, He tells them bluntly, is rooted in humble service. How foreign this must have sounded to their ears. That greatness is defined by lowly service, will have been as difficult for the disciples to hear as it is for us over two thousand years later. So we are bound to ask, have we *truly* grasped the fact that Jesus overturned the meaning of power by coming as a servant, the ‘Suffering Servant’? (Is. 52-3)

"I am among you as one who serves". This is the pattern of His life. He came to serve, to heal the sick, to welcome the outcast, and finally to lay down His life. R.S. Thomas' poem *'The Coming'* surely captures this divine generosity; the compassion of God the Son, who came not because we are deserving but because God is generous; lavishly so.

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

"I am among you as one who serves". How shall we respond? Jesus makes it very clear that the way to follow Him, the only way to greatness, is to imitate His life of service, humility and generosity.

Luke makes a point of telling us that even after spending years with Jesus the disciples are still not able to shake off the desire to compete, to crave status. More than that, even after Jesus has modelled service and shared with them the Last Supper, they are not able to resist this temptation.

And so it is with us. Like the apostles we hear Jesus' words, we are to be *'like the youngest...like the one who serves'*. And yet daily we do battle with our pride. Increasingly, it seems, we are told that we should be *self-reliant* and have pride in our achievements. Yet as Christians, we do know that *"[we] are not to be like that"*. As Christians we have a sense of our weakness and our *reliance*, not on our own wisdom, but on the wisdom and generosity of God, who came among us to teach us how to be *'like the one who serves'*. How to be like Him.

When we succumb to the temptation to puff ourselves up, we may turn to the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector...

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Lk.18:9-14)

The pattern of Jesus' life, to be *'like the one who serves'* is to be the pattern of our lives, for it is by imitating His life that we are able, by the grace of God, to participate in the life of God, because this, as Rowan Williams explains, is what God wants for us...

"The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this; so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God". (Rowan Williams – The Body's Grace)

Rowan Williams describes how God wants a close relationship with us. We were created to be part of that deep divine love that exists within the Trinity - this is what God wants for us.

What Jesus makes clear, is that to grow in that love has to mean loving like God, humbly *'like the one who serves'*. Jesus leaves us in no doubt that generous, humble service matters if we are to grow in the love of God. We must be *'like the youngest...like the one who serves'*.

Assuredly, just like the apostles that night, we all struggle with humility. Yet we can take heart from the fact that discipleship is a journey of faithfulness and that perseverance will be rewarded...

"You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

We are not called to serve in order to receive earthly rewards for our treasure is Heaven; not because we have earned it but because the One who came among us to serve is unfathomably generous and has prepared a place for us in His kingdom.