

Sunday 14 January 2018

Jesus is en-route. He is on the final route to Calvary. He has visited with Mary and Martha; raised Lazarus from the dead; Serious mischief is afoot when the chief priests and Pharisees call a meeting of the Sanhedrin (the powerful of the Jewish authorities) and plot to take his life; he stays in Bethany where he is lavishly anointed with nard ... and then he triumphantly comes into Jerusalem – that amazing procession of Palm Sunday with all the adulation ... and he's there...

at the beating heart of the Jewish faith... so now what?

John 12.20-28

I grew up in rural Shropshire, next door to my uncle's farm. In the driveway to the farm stood a tall, old, magnificent tree. Not just any tree, as this tree each year gave me great opportunity to take on my friends at school in combat – combat to the death.

I would collect the fallen fruit of the tree, cutting them open if the soft outer shells had not been broken in the fall – and out would come a gleaming, shiny, brown nut – ready for war.

Yes – horse chestnuts – conkers.

I'd take them home, pierce a hole through the middle, just wide enough to thread a piece of string through; a knot tied on one end and then I was ready for battle – swinging

them against one another, until one smashed to pieces – and there was a victor.

This is not, of course, what they were intended for. The intention of the horse chestnut is to be planted – to go into fertile ground – and then to germinate, to throw up shoots into a wee sapling – and then over time to grow into the big magnificent tree like the one that provided me with my weaponry each autumn.

... and it is this picture, of a seed doing it's rightful thing, that Jesus is painting here ... and we will get to the meaning of this strange conversation between Jesus and the disciples as some Greeks come to speak with him – but first a little Shakespeare

The words spoken by Prince Hamlet in the soliloquy of the opening of the third act of Hamlet are some of the most famous words he has written. In it, Hamlet is considering that death is nothing more than a little sleep and it wouldn't be so bad, but it is the opening words that grab me –

To be or not to be, that is the question?

... and Hamlet's question, "to be or not to be" is a pertinent one.

The sermon title this morning is 'Called **to be** a Servant.'

To BE is an expression of **existing**

To BE is an expression of **something occurring** or **taking place**

To BE is having a **state, quality, identity, nature or role.**

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When Hamlet says the words 'to be or not to be' it doesn't make sense - because **we cannot, not be. We must be something.**

The essence of Hamlets point – that should we exist or not is mute – we do exist and therefore we must be...

But be what?

My contention is that we must be servants – for that is our calling. That is our purpose – to serve.

Jesus came as a servant – not a superstar. His 3-year ministry was **one of service** – from the first miracle of changing water into the best vintage wine for a wedding feast that had run dry ... to his sacrificial death on the cross – where His blood flowed freely for the salvation of all who would believe in Him and receive God's graceful offer of forgiveness from sin – Jesus served!!!

He made two great statements about servanthood about His own life and sacrificial death.

He had spoken candidly with the disciples about His impending death – yet we read in the Gospels that they still

didn't truly understand. They only would only really get it after His death and resurrection.

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The first statement we heard this morning from John's gospel – when a group of Greek's were seeking a private audience with Jesus.

Andrew and Philip come tell Him there are a group of people, Greeks, most likely Hellenist Jews, who want to speak – want a private audience.

This is a moment in the gospels where we see the ministry of Jesus, reaching its climax in Jerusalem - and the outsiders, the Gentiles, the converts are seeking Him.

This is the first inkling that all is about to change **for everyone**, and not just the chosen people of God – **rather we are all chosen...**

And then a twist, Jesus doesn't invite them in, he responds with a **meditative comment about seeds and plants; life and death; and servants and masters – why?**

The fullest answer is found outside of this morning's reading in **verse 32**

“But I, when I am lifted-up from the earth, will draw all men to myself”

He is saying that if the Greeks want to FULLY benefit from Him, from His ministry – then His proper response is to

carry on the work the Father has given. It is not to engage them in conversation, but now he is in Jerusalem to continue the only path He can follow.

Only through this work will the non-Jewish world come to gain the truest and deepest access to Him.

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So, Jesus' words about dying seeds **is the** beginning of His answer to whether he will see the Greeks – what looks like a tragedy, a dying seed is, actually a triumph – it is love that looks death in the face and defeats it.

Jesus is making it clear – **by not** having a meeting that could be construed as political, a meeting that could end in planning a human-engineered coup – he makes it clear that he is not called to be the political King, so that people may experience a better earthly life.

He was called to die so that we may have eternal life – he was not seeking man-made systems and alliances in this world, but rather the ultimate act of ministry and servanthood – a sacrificial death.

Jesus goes on to say

Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

Jesus chose the servant role – which was also the Heavenly Father's role for Him. It is not something placed upon Jesus

by the Father, though the necessity of it for humanity's relationship with the Father is required. But this servant role is accepted, chosen by the Son. The Father and Son are together as one on the need, the absolute necessity of the servant role – the sacrificial role until death.

Jesus **chose** the servant role – which was also the Heavenly Father's role for Him though in a sense it is not **something placed upon** Jesus by the Father, despite the necessity of it for humanity's relationship with the Father.

This servant role is accepted, chosen by the Son. The Father and Son are together as one on the need, the absolute necessity of the servant role – the sacrificial role until death.

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But he then goes further – **he calls His follows to do likewise**

*Whoever serves me must follow me; and **where I am, my servant also will be.***

To be or not to be – that is the question?

We are as followers of Christ **to be first and foremost servants.**

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Jesus concludes

what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name!"

Jesus DID NOT back away from servanthood or the ultimate act of service.

He did not regard His crucifixion in any way to be demeaning – **but the very purpose of His life.**

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I said Jesus made two great statements about servanthood in relation to his life, the first which we've heard in our reading, ... but the other comes in John 4.14 when he is at the well in Samaria –

*whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a **spring of water welling up to eternal life.***

This is linked closely to the prophetic in Psalm 22 which contains the phrase

I am poured out like water,

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The very essence of Jesus life was poured out like water – during His life to those who were hungry and thirsty, to all those in need he gave himself freely.

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Now, I have concentrated on the sacrifice Jesus made in his servanthood, like the water poured out, and of the grain of wheat that dies – but **it is not** the sacrificial giving that is the purpose – **it is what follows** such service.

Such service brings great blessings and rewards.

The planted grain brings an abundant harvest.

In pouring Himself out Jesus intended that His own Spirit become a 'fountain of water springing up'.

Death or sacrifice is not the goal – **this is not a martyr complex – dying for dying sake.**

Rather in pouring ourselves out to others, others may experience greater, more abundant life, and we experience a more meaningful life.

The end result is mutually beneficial – not a moot death but an everlasting glorious abundance.

It is because servanthood brings great blessings that we are called by Jesus to be servants – bringing great blessings upon those we serve and upon ourselves as disciples of Christ...

Service

- It brings an excitement of real life to our lives, for all things in God are good
- It brings healing to our lives
- A difference to those we serve

- Service inspires and motivates those who receive and witness such service
- And a servant life is one of fruitfulness in both the natural and supernatural realm.

So, are you a disciple of Christ?

Are you saved and called by Jesus?

If you are then you are a bondservant of Christ

The disciples had a very clear understanding of their roles ... hear how they describe themselves

“Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1.1)

“James a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1.1)

“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1.1)

“Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle” (Rom 1.1)

The Greek word **δούλος** that is usually translated as **bondservant or slaves** in the New Testament is also the same word used for **those galley slaves, or “lower rowers”**, kept in chains below the decks of large ships.

They were **unseen** – doing the exhausting, difficult work – rowing the ships through seas and storms. This was **unrecognized, unpraised, unrewarded work**.

Yet **this is how the disciples chose to describe themselves and their work for others** – there was an honour to be a bondservant, a lower rower in the work of the Kingdom.

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This makes no sense to us today – we recognize success and achievement; but it is the achievement of those who get to the top, who are accomplished and visible are applauded and told they are the most successful.

But in **God's eyes** – in His Kingdom – **the successful person** is the one willing to be **the lower rower** for the benefit of **others** and for the sake of **the Gospel**.

In fact, it is for the sake of the gospel we are bondservants of Christ.

It is because we are saved, justified by the blood and sacrifice of Christ **that we must** follow in His footsteps – as servants – regardless of the area we serve in the church, in our communities, and in our families.

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Servanthood is to be our attitude and our motivation as we follow Christ Jesus our Lord.

Some of you may feel it is only the pastor, or the praise leader, or the elders, or someone else in the church, anyone but yourself, who are God's servants.

Let me tell you – **if you have accepted Christ as Saviour then YOU ARE CALLED TO BE A SERVANT OF GOD – and to serve others. NO one is excluded.**

But we must be guided. We are all equipped with gifts from God. What are those gifts?

Service is doing the good works of God, as He leads and directs through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pray – seek God. Ask for him to speak into your life and point you, reveal to you where you should be serving the Kingdom...

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During the Second World War, Polish Priest Maximilian Kolbe was arrested by the Gestapo for hiding Jews and Polish refugees from the Nazis. During the Second World War, Polish Priest Maximilian Kolbe was arrested by the German Gestapo for hiding Jews and Polish refugees from the Nazis. When three prisoners disappeared from the Auschwitz concentration camp, the deputy camp commander issued orders to pick ten men to be starved to death to deter further escape attempts. One of these ten, Franciszek Gajowniczek, began to cry out, “My wife! My children! I will never see them again!”

At this point, Kolbe stepped forward, removed his cap, and said, “I am a Catholic Priest. Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children.” ... and unbelievably, the commander allowed the request. In the starvation cell, Kolbe celebrated Mass each day and sang hymns with his fellow prisoners. After two weeks of dehydration and starvation, only Kolbe and two others remained alive. Because the cell was needed for other prisoners, they were given a lethal injection.

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Maximilian Kolbe’s service, was the ultimate service – laying down his life that another may have life. I guess a bigger service you couldn’t offer.

But I ask this – what are you called to do? How are you called to serve? What greater calling has God upon your life for the Kingdom.

St. John Chrysostom – an early 4th century church father, of Antioch and Constantinople wrote

“One who is loved wishes the love to be shown, not just in word, but in life. To claim we love someone, and not behave as those who love, is ludicrous, not just in the sight of God, but even in the sight of other people”

If we love Jesus, we must love one another, not only in words but in our actions, in service.

Let us not waste our lives like the smashed conkers of my youth, but plant our lives in service and bear fruit for the Kingdom - for we are called.

Jesus and the disciples set the example of becoming a bondservant of Christ.

Will we not run away from the opportunities to serve placed before us – even if it means becoming a lower rower.