

## Sermon 17 June 2018 Servanthood

### 1 John 3:17-20 Matthew 20:20-28

In our gospel reading the mother of James and John make a request of Jesus that they should have places of special prominence in the kingdom. Jesus replies that in order for his disciples to share in his kingdom, they first must be prepared to share his cup of suffering. He also makes the point that it is not his prerogative to make that decision, but rather God his Father. The other disciples are naturally quite indignant that they are making this request.

This passage tells us two things about James and John, and what goes for them, probably goes for all of the disciples. Firstly, they are quite ambitious, in other words, very human. And secondly, they have faith in Jesus; they have come to the point that they do believe that Jesus has this special relationship with God and that he will be seated in heaven with God, and that this is quite imminent.

This exchange takes place just after Jesus has talked to them about his impending journey to the cross, so it is apparent that the disciples are beginning to understand, not just the significance of this, but that it really is going to happen. However, I must say this contrasts somewhat with their reaction when these events do come to pass. They are shocked, perplexed, scared and confused. But that is another story.

Then comes the part in this passage which is the crux of what we are talking about today. Jesus tells them that if they want to be leaders in his community, then they need to put aside their ambitions, to humble themselves and to serve. This is called servant leadership. A little later on Jesus gives a vivid demonstration of this when he washes his disciples' feet at the Last Supper.

What a powerful image this is. Washing of feet was the job of a slave and yet here is the Son of God, the Messiah himself, carrying out this menial and humble task. Of course, there is such power in humility. You only have to look at the mana of someone such as Nelson Mandela to appreciate that.

Talking of humility, I am reminded of the story of Mohammed Ali, who was not perhaps noted for his humility – 'I am the greatest!' On this particular occasion he had boarded a plane and was asked by the hostess to fasten his seatbelt. His response was, 'Superman don't need no seatbelt'. The hostess replied, 'Superman don't need no aeroplane.'

Back to service. There are so many ways we can serve, but I want to focus on just two ways in which every single one of us can be of service. The two ways are actually very much related. The first is simply being there for others. We all experience problems at various times, some serious, some not so serious. But a problem is a problem. When experiencing a problem the most helpful thing that can happen for us is that we have someone to share it with, someone to talk to about it. So the corollary to that is that the most helpful thing we can do for others who are experiencing any sort of problem is to be there for them, to listen, to share, to encourage.

There was this little boy whose mother had sent him on an errand and it took him a long time to come home. When he finally got back, his mother said, 'Where were you? I was worried about you.' The boy said, 'Oh, there was a child down the street who was crying because his tricycle was broken and I felt bad so I stopped to help him.' The mother says, 'You don't know anything about fixing tricycles.' The boy replies, 'No, of course not. I stopped and I helped him cry.'

That is purely and simply love in action. That is carrying out to the letter the instruction given to us by John in our first reading – 'Dear friends, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions.'

This very much leads on to the second way by which we can be of service to others, and as I said, related closely to being there for others. And this is listening. I think we have lost the art of listening but it is an art which can play a major role in relationships, and especially in a situation where one is doing one's best to be there for another person. When you listen to someone, and I mean listen with total focus and empathy, you are giving a very important message to that person. You are telling that person that right now they are your number one priority, that you care, that you are interested in what

they have to say. Now, for someone who might be struggling emotionally, that is a critical message. It is a message that can make all the difference to how they will feel, right then and perhaps for some time.

Conversely, by giving any indication that we are not listening with all our attention can give a very negative and hurtful message. We all lead full and busy lives and being a good listener is actually a very hard thing to do, but what you can achieve in terms of offering support and comfort to someone is massive.

Scott Peck, American psychologist and author, who wrote that wonderful book, 'The Road Less Travelled', said, 'You cannot truly listen to anyone and do anything else at the same time.'

In a similar vein, I am sure we all have had the experience when we are on the phone and the person we are talking to says, 'Sorry, I have to go. Have got another call coming through,' or 'My wife is calling me.' In fact, we have probably all done that ourselves at some time. We need to just think about the message we are giving – at the moment you are not my number one priority. Seriously, that is really what we are saying.

Now, I am sure there are occasions when, of course, you probably don't have much option. If I was on the phone to someone and they said, 'Excuse me, I am going to have to go. It looks as though our house is on fire and I probably need to ring the fire brigade.' I would naturally think, 'That's fine. I understand.'

Now just imagine if a couple of minutes later the phone rings, 'Sorry about that. The fire brigade is on its way and should be here in ten minutes. Now, what were you saying?' Wow, does that make me feel important or what? His house is on fire and he wants to listen to what I have to say!! Of course, that is not very likely to happen, but you get the point.

Attentive listening is a very simple but effective way of showing someone that we care. It is a very simple way of putting into practice the words of Paul as in Galatians 6:10, 'Whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone.' There are two operative words in that sentence, *good* and *everyone*.

It is important that we are not selective with our love, that we are ready to be there for everyone and anyone. It is easy to be kind to someone with whom we have an affinity. Jesus asks us to love our neighbour. Now, our neighbour just might not happen to be someone for whom we have a soft spot. We need to be like this lamp. We all benefit from the light of this lamp, every single one of us. The lamp is there for us all. It does not judge, it does not select. Let us all be lamps.

Reverend Warner Wilder