

Sermon 17 March 2023 'Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'

Romans 12:9-16 John 12:20-28

This short Gospel passage contains several interesting points. I want to focus on three of them. Firstly, for not the only time, we have Jesus predicting his death. *'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'* He is even more explicit in Luke 9:22, *'For I, the Son of Man, must suffer terrible things. I will be rejected by the leaders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. I will be killed, but three days later I will be raised from the dead.'*

So Jesus is fully aware of what lies ahead of him, and what's more, he knows it is not going to be nice. *'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour?" No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.'* This became even more obvious when he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest. *'He prayed more fervently, and he was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood.'* Luke 22:44.

This is important because it really does make his sacrifice so much more meaningful. Without wanting to diminish the sacrifice made by those who went off to war on our behalf in the past, you could argue that at least they went off with great hope of conquering and returning, albeit understanding that there was a chance they might not. In Jesus' case, there was absolutely certainty that he was going to die, and what's more, it was going to be a horrible death. That really does put his sacrifice in a very different light and brings another dimension to it.

However, this brings us to the second point. Jesus also knew that his death would bring about change, that his death would be about new beginnings, new life. *'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'* Verse 24. Herein lies the essence of the Easter story. We will deal with that more fully in two weeks time, but suffice to say, death leads to new life. In short, Jesus' death is followed by his resurrection, which leads to a new understanding of God and the beginnings of our Christian church.

Just an observation, this does again present us with the question of the boundary between Jesus as the Son of God and Jesus as God himself. Knowing that he is not only going to die, but that he would rise from death, and thus resurrection would bring about glory and massive change, does tend towards Jesus certainly having the mind of God. Just a thought.

The other interesting observation on these words spoken by Jesus is that once again we see him using an agricultural analogy – a grain of wheat. Jesus' audiences were by and large country people. That's the nature of society of the time, and so Jesus invariably used images that they would relate to – a farmer ploughing his field or sowing seed, a shepherd, the grape vine, an ox's yoke, the fig tree.

The third point I want to highlight is verse 26, *'Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'* Bottom line is, we are called to serve. It is a message you have heard repeatedly and I make no apologies for that. I cannot stress it enough – giving of ourselves for the benefit of others is more than being important to being a Christian, it is a prerequisite. We simply cannot sit here in church on Sunday worshipping God and then go about our business for the remainder of the week oblivious to the needs of others.

I repeat that well-known quote from Martin Luther King, *'Life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?"'*

I want to spend a couple of minutes looking at our reading from Romans. It is packed with wonderful advice. Paul confirms Jesus' call to serve: *'When God's children are in need, be the one to help them out.'* Roman 12:13. This issue of service permeates the Christian gospel. You just can't get away from it.

Paul also gives us directions as to how we should be loving and benevolent in our attitude and dealings with others: *'Don't just pretend that you love others. Really show them.'* *'Love one another with mutual affection.'* *'Bless those who persecute you.'* *'Live in harmony with one another.'* In a sense, this is also service. Put it this way, by following these instructions, these guidelines, we are surely following and serving God, as he beseeches us to do. The Christian religion is love-centred.

However, it is not easy, is it? It is very easy to live in harmony with those who are in harmony with you, but what about those who are not? We all, every single one of us, have people in our lives to whom we feel some degree of antipathy or antagonism. That's life, and I am sure that invariably those feelings are justified. But to be a complete and consummate Christian, we are called upon, we are challenged to have an attitude of benevolence towards those, who for whatever reason do not have similar feelings toward us. As Paul says, *'Bless those who persecute you.'*

I guess it is called 'forgiveness,' and there is no doubt that forgiveness very much underpins the Christian gospel, the life and teaching of Christ. As we said last week, Christ reflects the character and disposition of God. That's the reason he came. And God is a loving God: *'The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.'* Psalm 103:8. We must do our level best to comply but it is not always that easy. On a slightly lighter note, let me conclude with a little story in illustration.

It was the coldest winter ever. Many animals died because of the cold. The porcupines, realising the situation, decided to group together. This way they covered and protected themselves, but their quills proved to be most uncomfortable to their closest neighbours, even though they gave off warmth to each other.

After a while, they decided to distance themselves from each other but they began to die, alone and frozen. So they had to make a choice: either to accept the quills of their companions or disappear from the land of the living. Wisely, they decided to go back to being together. This way they learned to live with the little wounds that were caused by the close relationship with their companions, but most importantly, they were able to survive.

The moral of the story: learn to love the pricks in your life.