

COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5
CHRIST-CENTRED SERVICE

“Called to serve” – I wonder who we would describe by that phrase? Do we still work with a notion of public service and describe politicians at all sorts of levels as called to serve the people of their ward or constituency, or the nation as whole? Serving the public is tough thing to do: the public can be very demanding of those its sees at there to serve; just ask anyone who has worked in a hotel, a bar, or a coffee shop and ask them how they were treated; that kind of service is never really seen as a calling! We might use this as a way of describing Mother-Teresa-type people who clearly give their lives to serve other people, in her case, poor people on the streets of Kolkuta. You might use these words of me and people like me; some balk when ministers talk of their work as a job, thinking that somehow this denigrates the sense of calling; ministry is another word for service and we have a deep sense that God has called us to this service. Are there others that we would describe as “called to serve”?

“Called to serve” to describe the Church? Service is one of the five Core Tasks we have identified in the life of the congregation and we have also identified ways in which we serve the community, either by supporting people in need in our own community or working in partnership with other groups helping people across the city. Some people in the congregation see it as their Christian task to support these pieces of work and they give of their time and energy. How do we serve the community? We struggle a little bit to find ways by which we might do that more, but we would agree that the Church is called to serve the community of Juniper Green and Baberton Mains. It is easy to say that in broad-brush terms – “the Church is called to serve”; but what about individually; do we see ourselves as called to serve? Is that kind of language too high? John Bell’s hymn presents us with that very challenge; he takes his language to extremes as is his way, but nonetheless he reminds us that following Jesus challenges us to serve the world in which we live.

Paul accepted “called to serve” as his challenge. In Colossians so far, we have seen that Jesus is at the centre of everything to do with the Church. Paul has given thanks for the Christian faith, hope and love of Colossian Christians and has prayed for them to grow in the knowledge of God; two weeks ago we saw Jesus at the centre of everything, of creation, of the gospel, of the church, with a description of some big truths. There is a lot of that we don’t really understand; it is too big for us. Today, we see Paul tell us what it means for him and for his ministry to say that Jesus is at the centre of everything. Jesus is at the centre of Paul’s ministry and if we say that about His ministry, the challenge for us is to see Jesus at the centre of our service, of the Church’s service to the community, to people we know, to those in need. Paul’s work is to preach the gospel, to tell people about Jesus; our service may be the same, it may be different, but every form of Christian service is centred on Jesus. How does that work? Colossians 1:24-2:5 shows us; it is all about Christ-centred service.

1. The Christian embodies Jesus: “In a very real and sobering way, we must actually become the gospel to the people around us – an expression of the real Jesus through the quality of our lives... to give flesh to the ideas and experiences that animate us.” (Alan Hirsch *The Forgotten Ways* p.114) We are to embody the message by being like Jesus. That’s where Paul starts in Colossians 1:24-2:5: “*Now I rejoice...*” (Colossians 1:24) There is nothing lacking in Jesus’ sufferings; He died on the cross in Jerusalem and rose again and achieved our salvation, job completed. There is nothing lacking in

these sufferings. But now that Paul is serving Jesus in the world by telling people about Him, by preaching the gospel, Paul is sharing in Jesus' sufferings. He is suffering for the gospel, persecuted, thrown into prison, beaten up for his work. So Paul sees himself as identifying with Jesus in these sufferings; they are part of his service on behalf of the Church and they show world something of the spirit and attitude of Jesus Himself. Not only that, but the goal of his ministry is to see people become more and more like Jesus: "*we proclaim...*" (*Colossians 1:28*) His ministry in the Church is to grow people and make them more mature and make them more and more like Christ in way they live and behave. Christians are to embody Jesus.

There are all kinds of examples, both historic and recent, when Churches and Christians have done everything but embody Jesus in way we have behaved. We have allowed bitterness and acrimony to creep into our relationships; we have been greedy and jealous; we have gossiped, to name just a few ways in which Christians fail to embody Jesus. Look at Jesus in the gospels: what do you see there? We see man who was full of grace and compassion; a man passionate for what was right, for justice; a man who was ready to forgive and give Himself for the needs of others no matter the cost; a man who loved God and prayed; a man who came to serve. Is that what people see in us? We can say 'none of us is perfect' and that is quite right, but that is no excuse. Being a disciple is not the first step towards a promising career; we are all, and always will be, disciples on-the-way, people becoming more like Jesus; the challenge for our service is to embody Jesus in the way we think, the way we speak, the way we behave. There is no excuse. The Christian is to embody Jesus.

2. Jesus is the centre of the message: I love a good mystery. The whole point of mysteries is that you're presented with clues and have to try to work out the answer before the end of book, or TV programme. Sometimes it is obvious; sometimes in the last chapter or act there is a huge leap, a new piece of information that you didn't see coming or a new character; in the end mysteries are revealed! Paul uses the word and the idea of mystery here to describe God's plan, promised for generations, now revealed: "*I have...*" (*Colossians 1:25-27*) Mystery was an in-word in the First Century; lots of religions claimed to have the secret of life and the universe, but it was a secret and was only revealed to people with special access. Paul uses the idea of mystery differently, to talk about something that God had planned and then achieved and, most importantly, it is now revealed. The mystery is unveiled and at the centre of that mystery is the figure of Jesus. "*Christ in...*" (*Colossians 1:27*) "*My purpose...*" (*2:2f*) Jesus is our hope; Jesus is wisdom for life; in Jesus we know God; Jesus lives in us; He is Saviour and He is Lord.

Jesus told a parable about a banquet and about the people who were invited and who made excuses for not coming to the banquet. The parable focuses on the excuses and the fact that people miss out on the banquet because of these excuses. But the story seems to be sparked off by a comment made by someone sitting round the table at the Pharisee's house when Jesus was there for dinner. "*Blessed is...*" (*Luke 14:15*) Run with that picture for a moment: the Kingdom of God like a banquet, a feast and we're invited! The thing about a banquet is that there's plenty to eat, the table is groaning with food, there is enough for everyone and more besides. This is a picture of God's kingdom, full of treasures, blessings in abundance for us and it all centres on Jesus.

Christianity is Christ! There is a great temptation for the Church to make ourselves the message: "see how good we are at being Church – come and join us and everything will

be good!” Or there is a temptation for Christians to blow their own trumpet and tell people all about “our experience of life and faith and you have to have an experience like mine and if not...” and all of a sudden we make ourselves the message; people have to become like us and do things our way! The Church is not the message; neither you nor I is the message. Jesus is the message; He is wisdom, hope, truth, forgiveness, the Saviour, Lord, and our task, the thing we are called to do, is to tell people about Jesus so that they might believe in Him. God has always had a plan to bless the world and for a while it was hidden; but it is now revealed and Jesus is the centre of that plan; believe Him.

3. Christians serve in the strength Jesus gives – all of this seems bit daunting, what we euphemistically call “a challenge” when really what we mean is that it is hard, it is tough and we think we can’t do it! I’m sure that’s how Paul felt when he was called by Jesus to serve as a preacher of the gospel to the nations of the world; we certainly know that other Bible characters argued with God that they weren’t fit, or up to it. *“to this...” (Colossians 1:29)* There is a wonderful balance of life and faith here in these words, realistic and full of faith at the same time. Paul agonises over his work; he expounds a whole lot of energy on his ministry; the power of Jesus is at work in him. Paul knows that Christian service is demanding and writes about it as agonising, expending energy; but he also knows that power of risen Christ is at work in him to help him, to sustain him, support him, and is powerfully working in and through him.

Life itself can be demanding and we expend a great deal of energy and agony in simply coping with life at times: work can do that for us, family life, exams, relationships, each with their own demand for energy and agony. Being a Christian can be demanding and have its own difficulties, trying to live out our faith in a secular world, or being ridiculed by our friends, or simply the challenge to live by the values and standards of Jesus. Christian service can be demanding of time, energy and sometimes agony, whether that is a job in church or caring for someone in the community; we give of ourselves, our time, our energy and it can be great and rewarding, but it can also be agonising. In all of these areas of life and faith, that is a realistic picture. Here’s the other side: the power of the risen Christ is at work in us to help us; His energy, His power is at work in us and so we are able. We can meet these demands; we can rise to the challenges; we can deal with the agonies, hard though all of that may be – we can meet these demands because the power and energy of the risen Christ are at work in us.

We are called to serve – being a Christian parent, one of the greatest services you will ever be called to do; being a Christian grandparent is up there alongside that! Being a Christian at work, doing your work to the best of your ability and in way that reflects Jesus. Caring for a neighbour in need, a family member, someone who is struggling to cope with life. You have a job to do in the life of the Church and you are drawn to it and content to give of your time and energy to this job. And so on. We are called to serve; it is part of being a Christian. That service starts by embodying Jesus, being like Him, living out His values and standards; we serve in Jesus’ name, not to draw attention to ourselves, but to draw people to Jesus; we serve in the power that Jesus gives to us. This is Christ-centred service. I was speaking to someone recently and have spoken to them several times and they have come once or twice to something we’ve organised; afterwards I was forcefully reminded that my friendship with this person is to be without agenda; I am not their friend only if they come to my church, but to be friend, end of story! This is Christ-centred service; we are called to serve – will we rise to the challenge?