

JOHN 13:1-17
CORE TASK #3 - SERVICE

These are poignant photos, of soldiers killed in Afghanistan over the last few months. We have become used to news of more deaths, but we should never become immune to what these photos represent in terms of cost and pain and emotion. What has struck me most over the last few months hearing stories of these men is the quiet heroism they display; they are prepared to put their lives on line for the cause. More than that, there have been incredible stories of what some individuals have done for their mates, some who have risked their lives to rescue soldiers who have been injured; some who have been killed themselves as they went to rescue others. It is entirely right to begin our service with the words that Jesus spoke: "*Greater love...*" (Jn 15:13)

Service is at the heart of these men's attitudes; we call them 'service personnel' as they are soldiers in the service of Queen and country. They have given their lives in that service, willing to do the work, knowing what it might cost. Service is one of five Core Tasks of our Church. In 2001 we identified these five Core Tasks: Worship, Nurture, Service, Mission and Prayer and today we consider the third of these. Worship, we saw, is something that we offer to God, something in which we all participate. Nurture is about growing, growing in our relationships with one another, becoming more mature in Christian character and growing in our faith and our relationship with God. Both of these sermons are on the Church website and in print in the library here. Today we consider Service.

There are certain things that we do that fit into this category. The Christian Action Team sponsors our involvement with the Care Van and Care Shelter caring for homeless people in city in partnership with Bethany Trust and the City Mission. It has an involvement with some of the care homes in the area; it arranges a clothes collection and a collection of food, also for Bethany. We are also involved with Fresh Start, collecting goods each month for people who are beginning a new life. At Christmas we involve ourselves with the Salvation Army's work in giving presents to children and families across the city. We hold social events for people in the community from time to time. We have a growing involvement with Cambodian Hope Organisation, supporting their work amongst poor with monthly giving and there is a plan for a group from the congregation to visit Cambodia next year to do some work there and learn a lot more about Christian service to the poor. These are 'Church-based' programmes with which we are involved, and Christians are serving the community in so many other ways, being involved in all kinds of community organisations and supporting new initiatives such as Community Council. The way in which we go about our work is part of our Christian service.

The foundation for Christian service is in Jesus Christ. There is no more powerful example of service than the piece we read from John 13. Here is Jesus, the night before He died, sitting round the table with His friends eating, or about to eat the Passover meal together; He is about to share bread and wine with them and talk about His body broken and blood shed! Then Jesus takes a basin of water and a towel and goes round the group washing their feet. They had just come in from the street; the streets were dusty and dirty, and there were no pavements! Their feet were dirty and smelly, perhaps. The good host would have sent a servant round his guests when they came in and the servant would have washed their feet on behalf of their host. There was no menial servant in the room, so Jesus does it Himself, much to the embarrassment of others, especially Peter. "*Lord are...*" (13:6) Peter needs to be persuaded that this is a good idea for Jesus to be on His knees washing feet. Why

did Jesus do this? Why did He go round His group of friends and wash their feet? There are two clues:

1. To show them His love: *“It was...” (13:1)* These words are wonderfully ambiguous! They can mean two things. Most obviously they introduce this story: here is Jesus showing His friends how much He loves them, so He gets on His knees and washes their feet. Just to make sure we get measure of that, let me ask you – how many friends do you have whose feet you would gladly wash? I suspect it is not a very long list! Here is Jesus kneeling on the floor to wash their feet, to show His friends how much He loves them and perhaps, to this point, this is greatest demonstration of His love. But these words can also be taken to introduce the whole of the rest of the story of the gospel; the gospel is about to reach its climax during the next 24 hours; that very night Jesus will be arrested and the next day crucified – it is quite easy to understand that these words introduce the whole of the rest of the story so that by dying on the cross Jesus is showing His friends the full extent of His love. He laid down His life for His friends. It is certainly right to say that there is no greater love and people have proved that time and time again ever since Jesus spoke these words.

2. to give them an example to copy: *“You call...” 13:13ff)* This is not just about foot-washing, though there are some branches of the Church where as part of their Easter preparations, they do have an event like this. No! This is about the willingness to serve one another in all sorts of ways; it is about “a readiness to perform the lowliest service... No act of service should be beneath (us).” (Morris) Here is Jesus showing His people, His friends, how to live and behave towards one another and people in need. He says quite clearly, that to call Jesus Lord commits Christians to this kind of attitude and behaviour. So Jesus is not just someone who loves us and shows us full extent of His love; He is the role model for life and the living of life; He shows us what service is all about and within the next 24 hours would again take that to another level by laying down His life on the cross.

This is how we understand what ‘service’ means. This is the attitude that must underlie Christian service of whatever kind. I came across a phrase a few weeks ago and wrote a blog about it: “Be kinder than necessary” to people because you do not know what battles they might be fighting. “Be Kinder than necessary”. It struck me that we’re very good at doing what is just necessary; we put our hand in our pocket to give money to a worthy cause and we consider that necessary to do, perhaps to salve our conscience; we give to some of things we do in Church and we’re happy to do it knowing that someone else will do work and we don’t have to be involved at first hand! Actually, while “be kinder than necessary” has a lot to teach us, it only scratches the surface here. Christian service is about more than kindness; it is cross-shaped! It is sacrificial; it is about us putting ourselves at risk for the sake of others. Is there anyone in this room for whom you would lay down your life? That is the spirit that should infuse Church that belongs to Jesus Christ, service that is cross-shaped!

I read John 13 one night in Cambodia. We had just arrived in Poipet, the city that our group will visit next year. It was a Saturday night; the team met for time to reflect, read and pray together. The passage that Alistair Duncan picked was John 13 and he asked me to read it. Earlier that day, we had visited an Aids Clinic run by CHO and just before we got there a baby had died; its mother was still cradling her child in her arms and mourning deeply for her dead child. The experience itself touched the whole team deeply; then putting that experience alongside these words of Jesus, we knew that the place where we had been was the place where Jesus would have His people serve, washing the feet of the poor, the suffering, the victims of Aids. If ever an experience brought Bible words to life it was that place.

Last Saturday, the elders spent the day at Heriot-Watt Chaplaincy Centre for a day conference; we were asking questions about the relationship between Church and the communities around us; how can we as a Church serve the communities of Juniper Green and Baberton? We don't know the answers to these questions yet, but whatever answers we do come to, this is spirit in which we need to go about that work. Serve and not count cost; serve for sake of people in need, with no thought of reward or gain; serve simply to serve in name of Jesus. There might be times when we will do wrong thing, the thing that people don't really need, but we must never get the spirit wrong; we must never get the attitude wrong; we serve one another because Jesus has loved us and Jesus has served us; we serve with no thought for reward or gain; we serve and not count the cost; we serve simply to serve.

Christian service will mean lots of things; caring for the poor; working in Church; being called to ministry; working in a school, bank, or office. Wherever we serve, here is what service is all about. Christian service is cross-shaped; the next best emblem of Christian service after the cross would be a basin and towel. "*Greater love...*" said Jesus; we have seen all kinds of examples of that today; the best example is Jesus; let us serve one another and others in way He has served us!