

LUKE 12:32-40
 READY TO SERVE

You can still do it in Juniper Green. Abraham did it and countless generations have done it since then. You need to do it at night! There are parts of city where it is impossible to do this, but in Juniper Green on a good night it is certainly possible. If you know what you're doing it is good fun and you can show yourself to be quite clever. It is almost different every time you do it, because things are moving and changing, but there are markers by which you can identify even some most remote items. I'm talking about star-gazing, looking into the night sky and watching the stars. You can see for millions of miles into the Universe and some of the stars we see now have died before their light gets here. There are familiar constellations like the Great Bear, or the Plough; or Orion's belt; and so on and if you know what you're doing you can work your way round the sky. Of course, in our world, street lights have made this more and more difficult to do, but you can still star gaze in Juniper Green.

Mind you, Abraham was looking at the stars for a reason and not just to gaze! It was part of something God said to him that left him ready to believe, ready to trust God and ready to serve Him. It started in a very different mood. It all began with a complaint. God had promised Abraham to be a great nation, that there would be lots of descendants; but a great nation starts with one descendant and to this point there was no sign of Abraham having that one son who would kick-start the whole process. So he complains: "*O sovereign...*" (*Genesis 15:2,3*) We're not quite sure who Eliezer of Damascus was, except that he was probably a servant in Abraham's household, someone who he had bought or acquired along the way; certainly he was not Abraham's flesh and blood. 'Is he to be my heir? I'm not quite sure that's what the promise says, Lord!' Abraham's in a mood to complain and God listens to that complaint.

Then God repeats His promise: "*Then the...*" (*Genesis 15:4*) It is a clear promise that Abraham's own flesh and blood will inherit the family business, the family wealth and above all the promises of God for the future blessing of the world. It can't be clearer to Abraham; 'your own son will inherit'. As if to reinforce that point, Abraham is invited to look at the stars, to gaze into the night sky and then do the impossible. "*Look up...*" (*Genesis 15:5*) 'Count the stars, Abraham! How many are there? Can you count them? Oops, you missed one over there to your left; there's another new one above your head!' You get the point! Then God says "*So shall...*" (*Genesis 15:5*) The stars are a visual aid to the promise; here's what that promise means, that one day the blood descendants of Abraham will be too many to count. This is the promise that God had made and from where we sit, we know – He kept it!

Abraham's reaction: "*Abraham believed...*" (*Genesis 15:6*) "Faith is Abraham's chief religious act and frame of mind." (Vos) It this blind? Or stupid? Well, Abraham considered the evidence, the promises of God and believed. These promises of God left Abraham ready to believe God, ready to trust God. God had earlier said "*Do not...*" (*Genesis 15:1*) and Abraham saw what that meant, that God was someone he could trust because God promised great things. Abraham believed these promises and trusted that God could deliver on these promises. This was not blind faith; not faith going against reality. Here was a man ready to believe God because of the promises God had made and because Abraham saw God as worthy of his trust. He was ready to believe because above all, He saw the blessing of God for himself and for the world and was ready to embrace that blessing and was ready to serve God in the world.

Abraham is just one example of the kind of person Jesus is talking about in Luke 12. The theme that comes up time and time again in these words of Jesus is of people who are 'ready to serve!' There are two pictures here that tell the same story, that combine to persuade us that we are to be people who are ready to serve Jesus in the way we live our lives. We said last week, that the way in which we think is vitally important, that the way we think shapes all of our lives; it shapes the way we speak, the way we behave, the way we act and things that we say and do. Here is a way of thinking that is the best: we are people who are ready to believe God's promises and so are ready to serve Jesus as Lord. This is crucial; I'm not sure we really understand how important this is, how vital this is for our lives and for the future of the church and the gospel in our society. Jesus does not start with what we say and do, though that becomes important later; He starts with the way we think, in this case, that we are people ready to serve.

The first picture is that of the servant. "*Be dressed...*" (Luke 12:35ff) We are not so used to the picture of household servants as perhaps our society once was, but that's the picture Jesus paints; it would be a common part of His culture and it's not so hard for us to understand. The Master is away from home, at a wedding and these weddings could last for days in Jesus' culture; there is no real way of knowing when it will finish. So what are the servants to do? They are to wait and to wait in such a way that they are ready to serve their master whenever he returns, to be people ready to serve whether the master comes in the middle of the night or at midday; whenever he comes, they are to be dressed ready for service. It is to be their mindset, their very way of thinking: 'we are servants, always ready to serve our master.' The beauty of it is that when the master does return, he serves them!

The second picture is of the thief. This makes their situation much clearer. "*But understand...*" (Luke 12:39f) Jesus is not a thief and we are not to compare Him to thief in any way except one! The Son of Man has come; Jesus is in the world and the disciples are witnessing His first coming. But here is a promise that the Son of Man will come again to the world and from other places we know that this will be more glorious and will be a world-shattering and world-transforming event. One thing we don't know and the question that has intrigued people ever since Jesus made this promise is – when? When will this take place? The early Church thought it would be imminent, with in a few years, but it hasn't yet happened. That does not mean the promise is wrong, but it means we still need to be alert. Hence the picture of the thief; the whole point of the thief breaking into your house is that you do not expect it; if you expect it, you will be there to catch him. So Jesus' coming will be unexpected; so be constantly alert and ready and serving Jesus all the time.

The disciples are to think of themselves as servants of Jesus; they are to be ready to serve Jesus at all times; in the light of His promise to come again to world, they are to serve Him constantly, tirelessly. They are ready to serve because they are ready to believe God's promises. In v.32 Jesus says "*Do not...*" (Luke 12:32) We are God's people, people whom God has blessed. "Blessings abound where Jesus reigns" says the hymn. The kingdom that God gives is first of all His richest blessing on the world, blessing full of grace and love, full of hope and peace. Because God has given us His kingdom, because He has given us His richest promises, like Abraham, the disciples of Jesus are ready to believe, ready to trust, and ready to serve. This is the way Jesus wants them to think, to see that God's blessing is the richest, most valuable treasure they could ever have; it makes all the material riches fade by comparison. Having this treasure, they are people ready to believe, ready to trust, ready to serve.

The Christian as a servant, one who serves Jesus. How do we think of Jesus? What's the picture in our mind when we think about Jesus? Saviour, friend, shepherd, one who loves us and cares for us, some kind of divine healer, one who answers prayers? None of these is wrong, but the very first Christian confession of faith in the early Church, and the simplest confession of faith and one that often seems to have lost its impact – Jesus is Lord! How do we decide our priorities in life? How do we decide the way in which we spend our time? The way we use our money? The way we relate to and treat other people? The way in which we speak to other people, and the kind of words that we use when out with the boys? Do we ever ask the question: what would Jesus have me do? What does Jesus want? For the Christian to be a servant, we have a Master whom we serve; so we have to think of ourselves as Jesus' servants and that means shaping our lives as He wants.

We say that we've signed up to that, but I meet so many Christians who reveal by the things that they say or the way they behave that they've never really engaged with what it means, practically, in everyday life, to call Jesus 'Lord'. Christians who are caught up in superstitions; Christians who bad-mouth one another at every available opportunity; Christians who give of their time and energy grudgingly and complaining about having to do it. When you read what Jesus challenges us to be and what He taught His disciples to be we see a very different picture: people who are willing to love and keep loving, with patience and generosity and even to love people whom the world counts as nothing and by love He means walking with them as friends and companions, not people whom we would treat as a good cause to be given some money. He challenges us to be people who give of ourselves and our energy unstintingly and without complaint, willing to serve, to give of ourselves for God and for other people and for the gospel. We do it, not because we have to, not as a duty but for love's sake; inspired to be like this we respond to One whose emblem is cross, place of service and self-sacrifice.

The Church of Scotland Guild has a motto: "Whose we are and whom we serve"; it comes from the story of Paul's journey to Rome in Acts 27. These words capture this way of thinking completely. We belong to God; we are His people, people whom He has loved and blessed with love beyond measure; He has given us His kingdom and "blessings abound where Jesus reigns"; perhaps we've never really believed that in the first place; perhaps we've never really believed the promises of God, never really taken them to heart. Without that, service is a duty to be performed, a task, burden. But when we see whose we are and how richly God has blessed us and how He has lavished His love upon us, then service is transformed; it is a joy to serve one who loves us perfectly, who loves us as we are and who has promised to give us untold blessings. We are ready to believe the promises of God; Abraham was ready to believe and it changed his whole way of thinking; ready to believe, ready to trust, he was ready to serve God. Servants of Jesus: is that our way of thinking? This is not self-serving, it is not for our own advantage or gain, it is not constrained by protocols and traditions, but real service. Is this the way we see ourselves, as servants of Jesus, glad to serve because of the way He has loved and blessed us, a joy to serve Him? Is the way we speak, act and behave shaped by this way of thinking? Are we people ready to serve?