

THE CHRISTIAN A SERVANT LUKE 17:1-19

There is a great skill in being the political cartoonist. You take some characteristic of Alex Salmond, Gordon Brown, Geo W Bush and exaggerate it just a bit; it is still recognisable, otherwise the cartoon loses its force, but poking fun at the person by exaggerating them just a bit. Cartoonists do it to comment on the issues of the day and allow people to laugh, but at same time to understand that issue just a little more clearly. For me, the best cartoonists are those who don't take this too far; taking it too far can become silly, and can lampoon the person and that's a different style of humour altogether; I don't enjoy that quite so much. To understand the humour of the cartoon, we need to understand what's going on here. We need to realise that this is not the real person, this is not a portrait of real life as it is exactly. Real life is here, but it is exaggerated for a purpose and that's whole point!

When we read the gospels and listen to Jesus, I think there are times when we need to think like the cartoonist. Real life is here and powerfully so as we shall see, but we also need to understand that Jesus draws little cartoon pictures that are not meant to be taken literally, but are drawn deliberately for effect. We see two of them today. Here's an example from elsewhere: Jesus talks about taking the speck you're your brother's eye while you have a log in your own eye. There is something impossible about having a log in your eye and something equally impossible about trying to perform eye-surgery while you have that log in your eye. You can't get a log in your eye! But if you understand the picture, you get the point; you understand exactly what Jesus is trying to say: don't criticise your brother without a clear self-awareness of own faults first!

Real life is here in Luke chapter 17. It seems at first to be a random collection of sayings, but in fact there is a thread all way through and it is all to do with the attitude of the Christian to other people and to God. In the title I've given to the sermon, I have described it as the Christian as a servant, with an attitude of service; we could also describe it as humility; both go together. We can't be good servants without a spirit of humility in our hearts and minds. So we see that Jesus is taking some real-life situations and telling the disciples (& us) how to handle them and He does that with some little cartoons and a living illustration. There are lots of ways in which we can describe the Christian – the Christian is a disciple as someone who learns; the Christian is a follower as someone who follows Jesus; the Christian is a servant as someone who is called to serve both God and other people and if we get that right in some of the most ordinary things of life, then we will be people who bring good honour to God.

We have been speaking in the last few weeks about the Church as family, both at home and all over the world. We talked a couple of weeks ago about the Church family 'photo' we have here on the wall beside me, the people shapes with your names and mine on them. When we put that picture together, it was clear that the people had to be joined up, they had to be connected. Some are holding others up, some are standing on others' shoulders, but they all are connected in some way or another. That is the reality of the Church, indeed of the reality of life. 'No man is an island, entire of itself' wrote John Donne and the quote goes on 'every man is part of the Continent', joined up, having to relate to other people. The only way to avoid that is to become a hermit or a recluse and we regard people who do that as somewhat eccentric. We all have to relate to other people and some of that can be good and some can be painful and we get it woefully wrong. Jesus' concern here is that we approach one another in the right spirit, in a spirit of service, with humble hearts.

“Things that...” (17:1f) It is inevitable that we will come up against stumbling-blocks in our faith; it is inevitable that there will be times when the road we travel is a bumpy road, full of potholes perhaps or certainly twists and turns. We can’t avoid that, though sometimes people have the idea that if life is hard, their faith must be lacking in some way. No! Life just is rotten at times. But, hear Jesus: ‘stumbling-blocks are inevitable, but don’t be one yourself; don’t you be stumbling block to other people.’ Here we have the first cartoon: a person with huge, great millstone tied round his neck and being thrown into sea and that would be better than being a stumbling-block. This is just not possible; have you seen the size of a mill-stone? This is not something that Jesus is advocating, but by painting that picture He is showing us in no uncertain terms that we have a Christian responsibility towards one another and how important that responsibility is. We have to serve others and care for others.

“If your...” (17:3f) Forgiveness is hard; this is not about counting up to eight either; “forgiveness is to be habitual” (Morris) i.e. a habit for us, a way of life. The other person may be well in the wrong and you may feel totally superior and totally justified in being angry, but your anger might just be the stumbling-block, or your criticism, or harsh words, or your shouting might just be stumbling-block to people whose faith is weak. Forgiveness is the way of the servant, the humble way, that says ‘no matter what you have done, I will treat you as if you had done nothing wrong!’ Being a servant is not the same as being a doormat, though; Jesus shows us that we also have a responsibility to help people change, away from wrongdoing to learn what is good and right, though that too needs to be done in a spirit of service and humility and with great caution and wisdom.

Hearing these challenges, the disciples say: “Lord, if we are to do these things, give us more faith; we need more faith; our faith is too small for these huge challenges!” I have heard some of you say the same; ‘my faith is not strong enough for these challenges, I’ll not try them; I can’t manage it; I need a stronger faith!’ The mulberry tree was one of the deepest rooted trees in the Middle East; it was not easily moved. So Jesus draws a cartoon picture of this deep-rooted tree uprooting and being planted in the sea! Let’s not get the wrong idea here; to do this would be a really trivial way of putting faith into practice. What Jesus is trying to show is that it is not more faith we need; small faith the size of the mustard seed, but genuine faith, can achieve enormous things. “It is not so much great faith in God that is required as faith in a great God.” (Morris) We don’t need more faith; we need simply to put into practice the faith we already have.

Why should we do this? Why should we be servants? Why should we be humble? We can come at life, Church, Christian responsibility in a quite different way: ‘I’m doing God a favour by helping others, by coming to Church, by giving money; I’m doing Him an obligation! I’m lending God a helping hand!’ If we take that kind of attitude, then we have a reason to stop, to retire, because (we can then argue) God doesn’t need my helping hand anymore or because I have fulfilled my obligation; God doesn’t deserve any more favours! There is the picture of the slave, not even a servant earning money. Slave does his work in the field for the day and then comes into the house. What next? Does the master sit him down and make him tea? No! The slave has to prepare the meal and wait on his master before his work is done for the day. Does that seem unfair? Perhaps, but that’s his job; that’s his duty! *“So you...” (17:10)* We are under the Lordship of Jesus; He tells us what to do; we have an obligation to serve Him; every service we do offer is flawed and so we are always ‘unworthy servants’, but we have no option but to serve Christ. It is our duty, our obligation – this is the quality of our service under God’s kingship and there is no retirement age!

Finally, just to show that obligation does not mean chore, Luke gives us a living illustration of this attitude. We have already spoken about the story of the ten lepers as an example of people saying 'thank you' to Jesus or not, for the gifts He has given. Gratitude and service go hand in hand. The Samaritan came and threw himself at Jesus' feet, glad to have been healed and humble enough to admit that it was only Jesus who could have done this. His very body-language tells you what he thought of Jesus and what he thought of himself. Worship and service go hand in hand; we worship God today as part of our Christian service and we serve God in the world, which is also an offering of worship.

All of these are pictures of the kind of connections we have with each other all of time. These are illustrations of the kind of connection we have with God through our faith. These are no extra-special stories or pictures; there is nothing extra-ordinary here. These are everyday stories of real people, the kind of messy situations that we find ourselves in all of time. Church and Christian faith is often not about extra-ordinary feats of daring, or of spiritual highs and ecstasy; Church and Christian life is much more often about living out our faith in the ordinary places, in the everyday world of work, in our relationships, our families, at school and that can be both brilliant when we get these connections right, or messy when we get them wrong.

We have to bring the right kind of attitude to these ordinary, everyday connections with one another. We have to bring the right kind of attitude to our relationship with God. For both, the Christian is a servant. We are to serve one another, accept, support, encourage one another rather than criticise and condemn; we are to forgive, be kind, patient, and loving to others, no matter the circumstances in which our paths cross. Equally, we are to come to God as His servants, looking to serve Him in the way that He wants, looking to be the kind of people God wants us to be; we can't ever dictate to Him terms and conditions of service; can't really ever say that we've had enough and are going to retire! We come with humble hearts, ready to serve God with all that we are.

We live in the real world. Jesus knows the real world in which we live; He expects us to serve Him in our real world; He expects us to serve one another and other people in that real world as our paths connect. It doesn't come naturally to us, perhaps; it doesn't come easily to us either, but a small faith in a great God can achieve great things. Put your faith into practice day by day in the real world; serve Christ as Lord in your everyday world; serve other people with humble hearts in your everyday world. We can do no more than that; Jesus expects that we will do nothing less than that. This is what it means for the Christian to be a servant.