

Power of a Servant

Mark 10:35-45

On a cold day during the American Revolution, a group of exhausted soldiers were struggling and straining to repair a small defensive barrier. The weather was extremely unpleasant and the wind and rain made the soldier's job even more difficult. The corporal, under whose command the soldiers were working, was barking orders at the rest and humiliating his subordinates but made no attempt to help them.

A man came by on horseback. He asked the soldier in charge why he wasn't helping in the effort. The soldier responded, "Sir, don't you realise that I am the corporal!"

The stranger apologized, dismounted, and helped the exhausted soldiers in their work. Once the job was done, he turned to the corporal and said, "Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief and I will come and help you again."

With that, George Washington got on his horse and rode off. Washington was the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and would go on to be the first President of the United States of America but his first instinct was to help his men rather than enjoy the benefits of his position of power.

This is in contrast to Jesus's disciples in our reading from the next part of Mark's gospel. Following on from the encounter with the Rich Young Ruler which we looked at last week, Jesus and the disciples are continuing their journey towards Jerusalem and two of them, James and John, decide to make a request of Jesus. They want him to do something for them. They want Jesus to "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." Interestingly, this story is also told in chapter 20 of Matthew's gospel but in that version it isn't James and John who make this request but their mother Salome. The former minister and biblical scholar William Barclay suggests that this is because "Matthew must have felt that such a Request was unworthy of an apostle and to save the reputation of James and John he attributed it to the natural ambition of the mother". If that is the case then Mark shows no such need for tact, showing the disciples as they really are as human beings whose ambition and desire for power lead them to vie to position themselves in high positions in the Messiah's Kingdom.

However, the kind of King they expected the Messiah to be – the powerful Ruler who would defeat the Roman emperors and free Israel from the oppression of Roman rule – was not the kind of King that God sent Jesus to earth to be and we can see this from what Jesus has said in the verses leading up to this passage. Last week we looked at Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler and his famous words in verse 31 that "many who are first will be last, and the last first." and in the verses which we have missed between that passage and this week's reading in v32-34 Jesus tells the disciples of the fate that awaits him when they reach Jerusalem – where he will be betrayed, and condemned to death – Jesus is showing them the different kind of King that he has been sent to be. Despite this, it appears that they still don't understand otherwise they would not have made their request.

For us looking at this today, knowing about Jesus' death and resurrection, it's easy for us to criticise the brothers' request or to dismiss the two men as arrogant fools. But Jesus does neither of these things. Just like James and John, we don't have to fear asking God for anything. He hears us when we pray but the answer may not always be yes. God wants to give us what is best for us, not only what we want. Sometimes it may be really hard to hear "no" particularly if we are personally convinced that it is the right thing but God says "no" sometimes for our own good, even when we don't always

understand why. We see this in his response to James and John. Jesus takes their request seriously, and engages in a conversation that is compassionate rather than condemning. James and John had got it partly right, they have placed their full faith in the right person. Undaunted by Jesus's predictions of betrayal and death, they continue to believe that in Jesus they have found their Messiah. Their personal hopes and dreams — despite their misunderstanding — are rooted in Jesus. Can our faith in Jesus match up to theirs?

In response to their request Jesus asks them “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?”

In the Old Testament the cup is often used to represent that which is assigned to men and women by God – which can be good e.g. Psalm 23, one of the most famous texts in the bible, talks about “My Cup Overflows” when referring to all of the good things that God has given but it can also refer to suffering and punishment such as in Isaiah 51 where he refers to a cup as the “the goblet of my wrath”.

The other metaphor used here can be confusing for us given how we understand Baptism but as William Barclay explains in his New Daily Bible Study Guide for Mark the Greek verb from which it comes means “submerged” and is regularly used of being submerged in any experience e.g. a spendthrift is said to be submerged in debt, a drunk person is said to be submerged in drink. ... The word is regularly used for a ship that has been wrecked and submerged below the waves” So it provides an image of being plunged into the depths.

Jesus knows that the cup he is to drink from leads to Calvary, drinking from the goblet of God's wrath that Isaiah referred to – a wrath which is in response to our sin – so he is asking the disciples if they are willing to endure the pain and suffering that he knows he will have to face which will plunge him to the depths of hell and separate him from his father.

It looks like the disciples don't understand this – otherwise I doubt they would have been so willing to accept it so when Jesus tells them that “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with” they don't realise that he is predicting the suffering that they will face after he has risen and returned to his father. Both James and John would suffer greatly as they spread Jesus' gospel – James would go on to be the first of the disciples to be martyred, executed by King Herod Agrippa, while John, although not believed to be martyred, would suffer greatly and is believed to have been exiled to the island of Patmos.

But even if they had understood what they were accepting, Jesus points out to them that he is not able to grant what they ask because it is not his to grant. Only God could assign places in glory and Jesus recognised his subservience to God – he had never tried to place himself as equal to God. As Barclay points out “His whole life was one long act of submission to God's will, and he knew in the end that will was supreme”

When the other disciples hear what James and John have asked Jesus for they are indignant so Jesus calls them together. He explains to them that Kingdom leaders are not the same as the earthly leaders that they are used to. Jesus's way is a different one “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” Their leadership is to be a servant leadership focusing on service, not power and being humble instead of focussing on status and prestige.

Jesus explains to them how he will demonstrate this in his own ministry - humbling Himself through the giving of His life on the Cross, for our sake so that we might be saved. The disciples are to copy His example of servant leadership to serve others humbly.

Christians are called to follow Christ's example of Servant Leadership, focussing on how we help others rather than our own power and status. So how can we follow Christ's example?

Firstly we can SERVE the Lord. Whatever we do in our lives whether in work, study, volunteering or in our leisure time we should consider everything we do as an act of worship or service to God. Colossians 3:23 command us, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men". Note the word "whatever." This doesn't just refer to our work for the Church this is everything that we do – we should want to do to the best of our ability because it is an offering from us to God.

The second way that we can follow Christ's example is to ENCOURAGE others, helping others to grow and develop in their faith so that they can do likewise for others. We do this by taking time to share in fellowship both all together as a church and in smaller groups – listening to what others are struggling with, offering encouragement to each other, sharing encouraging words from scripture and praying for each other. As some of you know I have recently taken part in a period of discernment with the Church of Scotland, looking at where my own ministry is going, and as part of this God has blessed me with a mentor who has a great gift for encouragement which I have seen both in our relationship but also in the relationship he has with his own congregation – helping others to recognise how God is at work in their lives and encouraging them to develop the relationship that they have with the Father.

We can also REACH those who are seeking God. It can be challenging for us to share the Gospel message with others but Peter 3:15 commands us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect". We likely all have people that we know who do not yet know Christ and his saving Grace and our challenge is to take the message to those who need to hear it. If we try to do it solely in our own strength we are doomed to fail – but if we give ourselves over to God and ask for his help, anything is possible in his strength. Also, we don't just evangelise in the things that we say but in the way that we live our lives so if we reflect Christ in the way that we live our lives others will come to know him through us and, God willing, come to have their own relationship with him.

Another Christlike habit is to VALUE the Word, to consistently study and obey God's Word in the Bible in our daily lives. In John 8:31-32 we read that, "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" It is important to notice that it doesn't say that we are disciples when we know a lot about His Word but when we hold to His teachings - when we obey His Word then and only then we will know the truth and be set free. Knowing the truth has to do with obedience, not just with understanding it. God gave us His Word to change our lives, not just to increase our knowledge. God gave us the Bible for transformation, not just information.

One area where we can gauge if we really value the Word is when we make decisions. It's not as simple as asking, "What does the Bible say about this or that issue?" We tend to assume that if we can't find a verse about it, then we can do it. But the Bible does not work like a fortune cookie. It is not as simple as asking, "Is there a verse that talks about my problem?" The Bible teaches us to ask, "What is the wise thing to do?"

We should also ADORE God in our worship. We must take time to worship the Lord, taking time to reflect on his awesomeness and majesty, giving thanks to him for the many blessings which he bestows upon us, raising our voices in songs of praise to him, sharing Communion and worshipping him through our offerings. The purpose of our worship should be to glorify, honour, praise, exalt, and please God. Our worship should show our adoration and loyalty to God for His grace in providing us with the way to escape the chains of our sin, so we can have the salvation He so much wants to give us.

The sixth habit is to have a NATURE OF HUMILITY in our interactions. Jesus tells his disciples in our reading that “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” This contrasts with what our society encourages us to do – to concentrate on ourselves and our own desires, Like the disciple's, we frequently argue about who's number one instead of having a servant mindset but Jesus teaches us to put others before ourselves and to put God first in our lives. He demonstrates that humility in the event which we read about in the poem [*The Servant's Heart*](#) when he washed the disciple's feet. Walking in sandals on the filthy roads of Israel in the first century meant that feet had to be washed before a communal meal. When Jesus rose from the table and began to wash the feet of the disciples, He was doing the work of the lowliest of servants. The disciples must have been stunned at this act of humility and condescension, that Christ, their Lord and master, should wash the feet of His disciples, when it was their proper work to have washed His. The humility expressed by His act with towel and basin foreshadowed His ultimate act of humility and love on the cross and gives us an example of the nature that we should have – lowering ourselves to the level of servants to serve others.

Finally we should take TIME in prayer. We should regularly devote time to prayer both personally and with others. Prayer is a two-way channel by which we and God communicate with each other. Through our prayers we bring before God our feelings, emotions, desires, struggles and inadequacies, while God replies with answers and assurance through which we experience the love of God and grow closer to him and stronger in our faith.

So there we have seven habits which we should cultivate in our lives to help us to become more like Christ and focus on living a life of servant leadership. Some of you may have already noticed that I have designed a way to help you remember them as taken together the first letters spell out S-E-R-V-A-N-T.

In our earlier example of George Washington, it would have been completely understandable for General Washington to order the corporal into the mud to help his team or even to merely add his voice of encouragement to the soldiers. It would have been easy for him to say, “I am the commander-in-chief here, do it because I said so”. Instead he did what was necessary to benefit the men under his command and led by example, not because someone was looking, but because it was the right thing to do. At the end of the day, how do you perceive yourself as a leader? Do you see yourself as the corporal, watching from the sidelines, enjoying the perks of status and letting others do the work, or do you see yourself as George Washington, willing to get your boots dirty, be a servant, like Christ, and get the job done?