

MARK 1:29-39
SET FREE TO SERVE

What inspires you to serve? Let's say you hear an intimation in Church; we are looking for people to do a particular job and it is a job that you can do; you have the gifts, skills, and aptitudes for this job and you sit there thinking "I could do that!" You volunteer. What inspires you to serve? Or you care for someone who is ill – what inspires you to care? There are a few possible answers to that question: you might do it out of a sense of duty – you were brought up to think that helping others is a good thing, or that being involved is a good thing, and you have a sense of duty, that these things must be done and it is part of your duty to do them; so you volunteer. You might do it from a sense of guilt – nobody else might volunteer and we'd be left with nobody to do job and so from a sense of guilt should that be case, you volunteer; you're not really sure you want to do it, but you'll endure it to make the guilt go away! (I'm not sure I'd call that being inspired!) You might do this job from a sense of gratitude – God has blessed you and so you want to serve Him in return; other people have loved you, and have done things for you and you feel immensely grateful, so you want to serve others in return. You do it because of love – you care for someone because you love that person, deep in your heart. Which is best?

There is a seven-letter word at the heart of our attitude to the kind of people we are and the things we do - "Service"! It is not a very popular word in our culture because it suggests putting someone or something else before us and lots of people in our culture want to put "me-first!" and sometimes me-second, third, and last too! However, service is important: we talk about serving other people or serving the community; as Christians we talk about serving God, or serving Jesus as Lord. Why do we do that? Where do we gain the inspiration that gives us the impetus to serve? Where do we gain the energy and the strength to serve when it gets hard? We look at three people today, each with a story to tell, each learned to serve and there is something for us in each of these three stories.

Peter's mother-in-law: all we know about this woman is here in this little story. We know that it was the Sabbath and that Jesus and His friends have been in the synagogue; they leave to go to Peter and Andrew's house and we presume that when they get there Jesus discovers that Peter's mother-in-law is sick. "*Simon's...*" (Mark 1:30f) It is a very simple little story for what seems a very simple action; she is healed. Again, very simply, Mark tells us "*She began...*" (Mark 1:31) She begins to do hospitality; does she make supper? Does she serve food? What else might she do for her guests? Whatever she does, the story implies that instead of sitting down with a cup of tea, this is her response to Jesus' healing her. Jesus heals her, so she waits on Him and His friends; she looks after them out of a sense of gratitude for her healing.

In some very simple ways, this woman whom we only know by her connection to Peter, serves Jesus. In the "ordinary" household tasks of hospitality, she serves. We sometimes think that serving God has to be full of grand gestures or the whole-life-committed tasks like being a preacher/minister. Service can be done in some of the most ordinary things in life. Hospitality is a much-underrated form of service, giving a cup of tea, a meal, caring for someone who hasn't had time to make their own tea because they are visiting someone in hospital, or making a meal for a family that is being run ragged by the pressures of life, doing the garden of someone who is not fit to do it for themselves – these simple things are as much forms of service as the all-life-consuming ministries! Are we inspired to serve – why?

Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul reflects on his service as an apostle. "*Woe to...*" (1 Corinthians 9:16) What lies behind that deep sense of "this is my service"? He writes about being compelled to preach "*I am...*" (1 Corinthians 9:17) Jesus called Paul to be an apostle and in a sense Paul is simply discharging that call, a trust that Jesus committed to him and he knows that this is something he must do. When I was sensing a call to ministry, I expressed that to a

senior minister in the Church and probably with a little uncertainty and hesitancy because that was what I felt at time and his comment was all about being sure and having a much stronger sense of call; “if there is something else you can do, then go and do that!” Paul knew that there was nothing else he could do than be a preacher of the gospel and everything about him was geared to that; the rest of that passage is about his mission strategy, trying to reach people by all possible means, serving those he was trying to reach. His great desire is to see people come to Christian faith and so he will take on all kinds of strategies to open doors for people to hear the gospel and respond to Jesus. He serves because Jesus has called him; he serves because Jesus has set him free from his sin and out of that sense of gratitude and love, he serves.

Jesus Why does Jesus serve? A couple of weeks ago we read the story of Jesus’ baptism and God’s voice “*You are...*” (*Mark 1:11*) and we said then that this was Jesus’ commissioning to serve; God calls His Son to begin His ministry and so Jesus goes out into the world to begin the work of God’s kingdom. He goes to preach the good news; He goes to call people to be disciples; He goes to heal people who are sick. Why? Because His Father has called Him, His Father has sent Him. When His service got hard, that notion of being called and sent by His Father would be important, and would help to sustain Him in the face of opposition and apathy. He is about His Father’s business!

But there is another reason why Jesus serves. He loves people and other places in the gospels talk about the compassion that is in His heart for people in need. He sees Peter’s mother-in-law and cares for her, so He heals her. When the crowds appear at His door at midnight after the end of the Sabbath, why does He go out to meet them? He sees their sense of need and He loves and care for them; He heals them. Jesus’ service would lead Him to the cross and ultimately to give His life for us and for the world – why would He do that? Is that not a waste of a good life? The reason is the same – He loves the world, He loves us and loves us so much that He is ready to give His life if that is what it takes to save the world. We believe that His death and resurrection are the events by which God saves us and the world and so Jesus’ service is not in vain, but continues to bear fruit across the world in those who believe in Him.

Why do we serve? Why do we do things in the life of the church, in the community? Why do we care for people in need, in our family and beyond?

- From a sense of guilt? Guilt is a poor motivator, a poor reason for serving; we are almost doing things against our will, not because we want to but because we feel we have to, otherwise nobody else will. Don’t do things because of guilt!
- A sense of duty is better – we ought to do it because it is part of our duty to God or to other people. It is not the highest, but not the worst motive either!
- Gratitude – now we’re in a better place; we serve because someone else has served us and we’re grateful and glad. As Christians, our highest sense of gratitude has to be to God – God has loved us and we are glad and so we’re ready to serve God and other people; gratitude inspires us to serve Jesus and others, even perhaps those who have served us.
- Love is the highest motive of all – we serve because we love God; we serve because we love other people. Again, it’s a response: we love because God loved us first and so we serve.

Love and gratitude need sustaining. “*Very early...*” (*Mark 1:35*) This is the next thing Jesus did after a night when lots of love, power and service were given. He found a quiet place and He prayed. This quiet place and this prayer were His ways of finding strength to go again in love and service. In the quiet place and in prayer, Jesus renewed His strength; He found new energy; He rediscovered His desire to love and serve. Do we have a quiet place? Do we have place to pray, place to renew our strength, to find new energy from God, to rediscover our desire to love and serve? Without that quiet place and without prayer, we will dry up; we will

burn ourselves out in love and service; we will lose the desire. We need these quiet places where we can stop for a time and read the Bible and pray and find God again and find His grace so that we can be equipped to love and serve all over again. We think this became a regular habit and pattern in Jesus' life, this quiet place to pray and this sustained Him all way through His ministry.

Peter's mother-in-law was set free to serve. She was set free from her fever and the first thing she did was to serve her guests, to bring them hospitality; she was glad to be well, glad to be free; she served. Paul was set free to serve. He was set free from his sin by Jesus, set free from his old way of life, to become a new man; Jesus did that for him and he was glad to serve, glad to preach the gospel and tell other people about Jesus. Jesus was free to serve: it was His calling, to love people in need and to serve; He healed them and brought life and love to their hearts and lives. Why do we serve? Not from a sense of guilt, I hope – that will just weigh us down. From a sense of duty – that's OK. Best of all, we serve because we're glad that God has loved us; we serve because we love God and love others; these are best reasons to serve; this may be something to aspire to, but this is the best of all motive to serve. We love and serve God because He has loved and served us; we love and serve others, in our family, in the church, in the community, because God has loved and served us.