

## **“We Are Worthless Slaves”**

*A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church*

*on Sunday 2 October 2022, by David Gill. Readings for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost were Lamentations 1:1-6, 2 Timothy 1:1-14 and St Luke 17:5-10*

Some of you know Changi Airport, in Singapore. Its enormous transit lounge offers everything a weary traveller could desire, including a hotel, a swimming pool, a pond full of beautiful koi carp – and a barber shop.

Airport shops tend to charge like wounded bulls. As a general principle they are to be avoided. But on one trip I landed in Singapore in an advanced state of scruffiness. My connecting flight had been delayed and my need of a haircut was painfully obvious, so ... why not? I found my way to the hairdresser. To be met by a charming young Singaporean girl.

“Oh sir,” she gushed, smiling happily, “do come in. Please be seated.” Clearly my arrival had made her day. She ran her fingers through my hair. “Oh sir,” she said, “you are so lucky”. I was starting to enjoy this.

Why am I lucky, I asked. “Because you are so tall,” she replied. You like tall men, I asked.

“No,” she said, “it’s not that. It’s ... because you are tall, people cannot see that your hair is falling out!”

She built me up. Then she cut me down. She made me comfortable with that wonderful smile. Then she stopped me in my tracks with a truth I really didn’t want to hear.

Jesus does something similar in this morning’s gospel, talking not about bald patches but about service. Slavery, remember, was part and parcel of his world. Everyone knew about slaves. So that’s where he starts.

You wouldn’t invite a slave to join you at the meal table, he tells his disciples. A slave’s job is to prepare the meal and serve it. He can eat later, when the work is done. And you don’t thank a slave for doing what is his job anyway.

You can almost see Jesus’ listeners nodding agreement. Quite right. That’s how slaves should be treated. They’re here to serve their owners. They shouldn’t be given ideas above their station.

Their friend from Nazareth is talking good sense. His hearers are comfortable, relaxed.

Then he hits them with the painful truth. *You* are slaves, he tells them. He goes further: even when you’ve done all that you should, you are *worthless* slaves.

This to the same disciples, remember, who would irritate him with their arguments about who was going to be first in God’s kingdom. Don’t even think of making special claims for yourselves, you are worthless slaves! That must have hurt.

What is Jesus doing here?

He’s trying to get it into the thick skulls of his friends that service is the name of the game. It was for him. It was for his followers then. It is for us now. Evidently they needed the reminder. As do we. Constantly.

In all our relationships, we are called to embody the servant way of Christ. How? Where to start?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian martyred for his opposition to Hitler, has some words to help us:

*The first service one owes to others ... involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God's word, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them. God's love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives God's word, but also lends us God's ear ....*

*So often Christians, especially preachers, think that their only service is always to have to 'offer' something when they are together with other people.*

*They forget that listening can be a greater service .... Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either.*

Today, especially, we need that warning.

For these are dangerously talkative times. The politics of hate is enjoying a resurgence not only in the Middle East, the United States, Europe. But also right here in Australia. The issue of the day may be monarchy or Muslims, race or politics, climate change or asylum seekers. On these subjects and many more besides, civil discourse all too often descends into vilification, contempt and abuse.

As a piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* well said, "politics has become an arms race of outrageousness". Our shouting matches are magnified by social media, and made the more dangerous by easy access to weapons.

But thank God that's not the whole story.

You may remember, couple of years ago, there was an appalling tragedy at Oatlands, in the western suburbs of Sydney. Three children of Danny and Leila Abdallah, aged 8, 12 and 13, had gone with their cousin to buy some ice cream. On the way, they were hit by a drugged and drunken driver. All four were killed.

The parents must have been shattered. Yet somehow they came through it. They were able to speak not of hatred or revenge, but of forgiveness and their concern for the driver.

We hear that and we wonder: after such a terrible loss, how is it even possible? But the Abdallahs are devout Catholics, Maronites, from Lebanon. Their answer was clear. How is it possible? We are Christians.

When anger is in people's eyes and hatred lurks in their hearts, Jesus says to us no, that's not the way to go. When prejudice takes over the streets and intolerance starts to win votes, he says no. If you follow me you will serve, not hate. You will listen, not vilify. You will practise mercy, not contempt. You will promote understanding, not intolerance.

In this morning's passage Jesus goes even further. Sacrificial love, he suggests, does not look for reward or even recognition. "When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done'".

There is no annual bonus for improved performance in discipleship. There's no gold medal for coming first on the road to the cross. We're all stumbling along together.

Oh yes we will thank God for the saints and we'll try to learn from them. But we have no illusions about those great figures of the faith. They had feet of clay, as do we. All of us are to love God and neighbour. And all of us even at our best do only what we ought.

But take care. There are traps, as we try to take seriously today's gospel.

First -- the trap of *pride*. There's nothing more off-putting than a person with the attitude "You ought to admire me because look how good I am" or "You ought to commend me because look how much service I do". Or even, as one of my friends likes to say with a glint in his eye, "When it comes to humility, I can beat anyone!" Don't build yourself up.

Second -- the trap of a *negative self-image*. Jesus is not asking his followers to develop hang-dog expressions or go around groveling, telling themselves, God and anyone else who might have to listen how utterly worthless they are. Don't put yourself down.

Third -- the trap of *frenetic activism*. At one point in my working life I calculated that I belonged ex-officio to 52 Uniting Church and ecumenical committees, and for one fleeting moment I thought that made me important. (Actually it wasn't so bad: the meetings often cancelled each other out, providing the perfect excuse for not attending the boring ones!). The value of people is not found in what they do, but in who, deep down, they really are. Being is more important than doing – and both are vastly more important than sitting on committees! Don't kill yourself by taking on too much. Avoid the traps. Concentrate on the serving.

And us? Now?

Now we move again to this holy table. To receive again the mystery of bread and the wine. To be nourished for service by the real presence of our servant Lord.

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