

Session 4: The Servant Jesus Transcript

Hello everyone and welcome to session four of our Lent Course, Knowing Jesus.

In the past three sessions we have done two things. We have learnt *about* Jesus, who he is and what he has come to do. But we have also explored what it means to *know* Jesus personally, to let him into our lives and to live like him. And that's what we will be doing in this fourth session also as we explore the Servant Jesus, focusing especially on Acts Chapter 6 in which the early church selects seven deacons.

We live today in an era of Big Man politics. At a time of global uncertainty and insecurity, people in many nations, democratic or not, seem to want strong leadership from a dynamic, self-confident leader, almost invariably a man, who blows away the froth, faces down the opposition and gets stuff done. Whether it's Trump, Putin, Erdoğan, Netanyahu, Modi or Xi Jinping, leadership today is all about invincible strength, raw power and big egos.

And it was the same in the time of Jesus. Luke Chapter 3 begins with a history lesson as Luke places the ministry of Jesus in a precise historical context, and crikey does he name some big egos there. Emperor Tiberius, the repressive recluse who oversaw numerous purges. Pontius Pilate whose suppression of the Jewish people and whose violence in the face of revolt was infamous. Herod who murdered John the Baptist and so on. It's a list of the powerful who used violence and repression to assert and maintain their power.

All of which makes the ministry of Jesus even more extraordinary. Throughout his life he seems to have been harried by those who wanted him to adopt the Big Man approach to leadership. Philip and James who wanted seats with him at the top table. The Jewish crowds who welcomed him with palms as the one who had come to save them from hated Roman rule. Peter who drew his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, thinking this was the moment of revolution. Even John the Baptist seemed disappointed at one stage with Jesus' failure to launch a coup, seize political power and make himself King to restore the ancient Davidic line.

But Jesus had another way altogether. On Maundy Thursday many churches will be reading John Chapter 13 which, to my mind, has one of the most staggering sentences in the whole of the scriptures. Listen to this, it's verses 3 and 4:

'Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer garment and tied a towel around himself.'

Jesus has come from the Father. He is God from God, light from light, true God from true God. He is going back home to the Father in the Ascension. And what does he do? He

takes off his clothes, takes up a towel and kneels to wash the disciples feet. God washes dirty human feet. This is the whole sweep of salvation history in one sentence. Jesus the King of kings has left his palace to dwell with us. He is soon to return to that heavenly palace to be with the Father. And what does he do in between? He serves us like a slave.

In Philippians Chapter 2, St Paul sings to us an early Christian hymn. *‘Though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, being born as a slave.’* Jesus could indeed have exploited his equality with God. He could have amassed wealth and power and fame as the Devil tempted him to do in the wilderness. But he did not. He emptied himself of power and became a slave. He washed feet. He chose the path of service and self-giving love.

‘The son of man came not to be served, but to serve,’ he tells the disciples in annoyance at their arguing over who will be the greatest. He tells his followers to take the lowest place at the table. He hangs about with the poor, the marginalised and the powerless. He even cedes his authority to a little child whom he places at the centre of the community and holds up as the model of discipleship.

No wonder people got frustrated with him. They wanted an earthly monarch. They wanted him to see off the Big Man rulers of the day by being a Big Man himself. They wanted him to start the revolution.

But of course he was. He was indeed starting a revolution, just not the one they wanted. For the revolution of Jesus is not about an earthly kingdom. It is about God’s kingdom. So through his life of service Jesus does two things.

First, his loving service declares the Kingdom – in other words it shows people what it is like. Jesus’ life is almost like an advert for kingdom living. For in that kingdom there are no rich or poor, powerful and disempowered. Rather all are equal, all have enough and all live in right relationship with the Father.

But second, the servanthood of Jesus makes the kingdom available to us. He doesn’t just show us what it’s like. He also throws it open to us. As well as the advert, he hands us a free entry ticket. Look how Paul’s song continues. *‘He became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.’* The cross is the greatest ever act of service. In that moment of seeming defeat, Jesus became the suffering servant who broke down the barriers of sin and death so that we can enter in. It is his death that sets us free from the unjust structures of the world and carries us to the perfect love of the eternal kingdom.

And as we might expect, all of this is lived out in the early church. Now doubtless your own church congregation lives in perfect harmony with no one ever falling out with anyone else. Sadly that was not the case in the early church and in Chapter 6 a row has broken out. The first Christians held all things in common and the Greek speaking

Christians are complaining that the Hebrew speaking Christians are keeping all the best food for their widows. The apostles feel a call to go out and declare the Good News to those who are not yet part of the Church and they fear that this row might distract them from their own call. So they appoint seven deacons, or servants, to distribute the food whilst they get on with their job.

This decision to appoint deacons does two things which are of course exactly the two things that Jesus does in his own servant ministry.

First these deacons bear witness to the kingdom. There is an injustice at play in the early church. Some widows are going hungry because of their background and ethnicity. That is undermining the capacity of the church to bear witness to the kingdom where all are equal and all are fed. By sending the deacons to address this injustice, the kingdom is borne witness to in the life of the church. In the same way, when we serve by addressing injustice God's kingdom is seen amongst us. We are like an advert for the Kingdom.

Then second they make the kingdom available. The deacons free up the apostles to go out and declare the cross and the saving work of Jesus Christ so that, through their witness, men and women might know salvation and come to share in the life of God's kingdom. It is a temptation in the church today to divide up our service and our proclamation. Some churches are so busy serving that they don't get round to sharing the faith. Other churches are so intent on evangelism that they fail to serve the needy or make a stand for justice. The early church made sure it did both.

So we have explored the servant Jesus. He takes the place of a slave and by so doing both bears witness to the Kingdom and makes that Kingdom available to us who were otherwise lost in sin. He is the advert for the kingdom and the free entry ticket. But what does it mean actually to know that servant Jesus? What does it mean to be in personal relationship with the God who washes the disciples feet? I think that for us it means two things.

First it means that Jesus serves you. And being served by him is not an optional extra or a luxury. It is the starting point of the Christian life. In John 13, Peter doesn't want to have his feet washed. It undermines his Big Man world view. How can his Lord be his slave? But Jesus says, *'Unless I wash you, you can never be part of me.'* Peter must receive service from Jesus. He must receive service in having his feet washed. Above he must receive the service that Jesus offers when he gives away his life on the cross. You cannot serve unless you are first willing to be served.

That is a hard lesson to learn, especially for Christians who can be so intent on serving others that stopping to be served can be seen as a sign of weakness. I know that I find it really difficult to be served. It undermines my whole self-identity as a servant of Jesus. And that's not a strength. It is somewhere that I need to learn and grow. I am struck very often by conversations with retired clergy who, after a lifetime of service, are finding it

incredibly painful to stop and to be served by their fellow Christians. But for them also, Jesus is trying to teach them.

We all need to learn how to allow Jesus to serve us. And the chief way he does this is through our participation in worship. Of course a great deal happens when Christians meet for worship, but amongst so much else, it is a time when we are served by Jesus. He speaks to us in his word. He releases us from sin. He serves us at the table with the sacrament which is his own life. He strengthens us with the Holy Spirit. He cheers our hearts with our praise. He encourages us through the community of Christians who gather. In worship Jesus serves us. And as we approach him with humble and contrite hearts we receive from him.

But the second thing about knowing the Servant Jesus is that we serve him. And one of the best ways of serving Jesus is to serve others. One of my favourite saints is Vincent de Paul, a priest who oversaw an extraordinary revival in the French church in the seventeenth century, a revival based on proclamation of the Gospel and service of the needy. One of his guiding passages of the scriptures was Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats. You may know it. Jesus is seated as judge and he places one group, the sheep, on his right hand. These are the ones who fed him when he was hungry, welcomed him when he was a stranger, cared for him when he was sick and visited him when he was a prisoner. The sheep have no memory of serving Jesus in this way and so he tells them, *'Just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it me to.'* When we serve a neighbour, known or unknown it is Jesus we serve.

And Vincent pushed it further. If in serving the poor (and that word may sound uncomfortable, but it's the one Vincent used) we are serving Jesus, then in that encounter the poor are being Jesus to us. So Vincent claimed that the poor are our evangelists. In serving the poor, we meet Jesus. In meeting Jesus, we discover him anew.

That's when, through our service, lives are changed. Do you remember how in Acts 6, when the deacons served two things happened, the kingdom was proclaimed and the kingdom was made available? The same two things happen when we serve Jesus in those around us.

First the kingdom is proclaimed. When we make a stand for justice, feed the hungry or bring hope the grief stricken, we point to that Kingdom in which all have enough and all are equal. We are a living advert for God's Kingdom.

And second through us the kingdom is made available. Just like the apostles we must not and cannot separate our service from our proclamation of the Gospel. The most loving form of service we can ever offer another human being is to share with them the Good News of Jesus Christ. For as they come to believe in the cross, the Kingdom is

thrown open to them too. They can be sure that one day the beatific vision of Jesus reigning for ever in the Kingdom will be theirs.

Jesus brought about a revolution not through power but through service. And he invites us to join in him that same kingdom work. The servant king serves us. And that equips us to serve the world he died to save.