

Here to serve **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 22nd September 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Mark 10:35-45

Introduction: service with a smile

Last week I went to Frimley Park hospital for a scan. When I arrived, the young woman at the reception desk greeted me with a friendly smile. During the time I was in the unit, the radiographer and other staff explained the procedure and assisted me in practical ways. A short time afterwards I got a text message on my phone inviting me to fill in a short survey. I was pleased to be able to make some positive comments about my experience. The staff had not only done their job by serving me in practical ways, but had done so with a genuine interest in my welfare.

An attitude of service

Today's sermon is the third in our series on *Building blocks for life* – six key ingredients needed for living a fulfilling life as a follower of Jesus. The first was one of the most obvious ones – *prayer*. Last week we looked at how the *Bible* is a vital handbook for learning about God and for guidance as to how to live. Today we are looking at *servicing* God and others.

So what does serving mean? One way in which we use the word in everyday life is in what we call the service industries, such as retail and catering. We expect shop assistants to ask,

“Can I help you?”, and a waiter or server in a restaurant to come to our table to find out what we would like to eat. In her last few years my mother was looked after by carers, who served her by attending to her personal needs, which towards the end she was unable to do for herself.

Serving means:

- Thinking about what other people need or want.
- Putting other people’s needs before your own.
- Being humble.
- Being willing to do something that is unpleasant or difficult.

The request of James and John

Today’s gospel reading is about two of Jesus’ disciples who asked him to do something for them. James and John were two of Jesus’ closest friends. They knew that he was the Messiah, the person sent by God to be the King of Israel. Their request was essentially this: Jesus, when you become king, please can we have the 2 most important jobs in your kingdom? They wanted to be important, and have other people respect them. In Mark’s account their words are “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, *in your glory.*”

But, Jesus asked them, are you willing to suffer like I have to? Being a leader isn’t about how important you are; it’s about serving others, helping them, meeting their needs,

and that can be tough. For Jesus it meant dying on the Cross.

If we want to follow Jesus, then we have to think the same way that he did – seeing how we can serve other people, rather than just trying to have what we want all the time. Jesus follows up this conversation with James and John to teach his disciples the right way to think:

“... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”¹

This is completely different from the message we are often given by the world, which trains us to think that we are the centre of the universe. How many times have you read or heard in an advert the phrase “It’s all about you”? I worry about how this attitude seems to be reflected in styles of parenting. Many parents seem to think that it’s good for children to give them lots of choices about food, toys, activities and so on. Of course, it’s important for children to learn how to make choices, but if we’re not careful we can unintentionally convey the message that life is all about having what I want. It isn’t. Choice has become one of the gods of our age, but it’s a false god.

This attitude can sometimes also be shown in church, when people treat it as if they were consumers of a religious

¹ Mark 10:43-45 NRSV

product rather than members of a community. “I don’t go to church any more because I don’t get much out of it”.

Here to serve

When I left university I got stuck in to my local church. I joined the choir, and in due course found myself running a small music group in our daughter church. This group consisted of two children who played the recorder, one who played the flute, another who sang, a mother and her disabled son, who really didn’t have a singing voice but felt good to be part of the group. I also joined two other young adults who ran a youth group during the service, and was also a member of the PCC. The local church gave me the opportunity to serve God in these different ways, and by doing this I grew in my own faith. These experiences of serving at church led eventually to my getting ordained.

As you know, I have now been serving here at St Michael’s for 20 years. What is so good about this church is not the beautiful building, nice though that is, but the people who have that attitude of serving which is expressed in giving their time, skills and money to enable this Christian community to fulfil our mission. Doing the flowers, serving refreshments, mending things, cleaning the church, singing, reading, visiting, teaching children, listening to people’s worries, contributing financially, taking minutes, applying for faculties and many other types of service make St Michael’s what it is.

There are many reasons why people do these things, but the most important reason for serving God and others is

because we want to show our appreciation for what God has done for us. When we come to understand that our heavenly Father loves us unconditionally, not because we do things for him but just because we are his children; when we appreciate what Jesus did for us on the Cross to take away our sin and guilt and give us eternal life; and when we have come to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, then we're set free from the need to put ourselves first. We are able to give our time, skills and money to serving God and other people simply because we want to, not so that other people will look up to us or thank us or tell us how marvellous we are.

Serving is one of the keys to growth in the spiritual life. So when you hear of an opportunity to serve, for example doing the refreshments for a fundraising event, or giving a lift to someone who can't drive to church, don't look at it as a chore that hopefully someone else will do, but as an opportunity to make your contribution, however small, to the life and mission of our church. And of course, don't miss opportunities to serve God outside the church too, whether in your circle of family and friends or in the wider community.

If, like James and John, we want to share Jesus' glory, then we need to think like Jesus and act like Jesus. And the more we think and act like Jesus, the more we will become like Jesus.

And one day, when we meet him face to face, we will be thrilled to hear his words, “Well done, good and faithful servant”.

That’s what I want for myself. May that be the desire of each one of us. Amen.

Some questions to consider:

1. What does this passage tell us about what it means to follow Jesus?
2. Am I a Christian for what I can get out of it?
3. What could serving Jesus look like for me?