

Reflection Jeremiah 18: 18 - 20 and Mathew 20: 17 – 28 Revd Linda E Hunter

Serve." "Servant." "Service." What image does that word conjure up for you? Perhaps Mrs Patmore or Daisy from *Downton Abbey*. Perhaps Rose or Mr Hudson from *Upstairs, Downstairs*, showing my age, there. Or perhaps you think of something entirely different.

We live in a world where people strive for position, recognition, influence. A world where leadership often means status. Where being first means being seen. Few people aspire to be servants. And when they do, it is often for what they might gain.

But in today's Gospel, Jesus turns that instinct completely upside down.

In Gospel of Matthew 20:17–28, we are told that Jesus is going up to Jerusalem. He takes the twelve aside and speaks plainly: **"The Son of Man will be handed over... condemned... mocked... flogged... crucified... and on the third day raised."** This is the third time he has told them. There is no ambiguity. No metaphor. He is walking toward suffering.

And immediately James and John, through their mother, ask for seats of honour. One at his right hand. One at his left. While Jesus is speaking about a cross, they are dreaming about thrones. I feel I almost want to wince at that. But before we judge them too quickly, we might ask ourselves: how often do we do the same? How often do we want the glory of belonging to Christ without the cost of following him?

It is not the first time a servant of God has faced rejection. In our first reading from the Book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah speaks of those who plot against him, who dig a pit for his life, even though he had stood before God to pray for them. **"Is evil recompense for good?"** he asks. The one who seeks their welfare becomes the target of their hostility. The pattern is painfully familiar.

Jesus responds to James and John with a question: **"Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?"** In Scripture, the cup is often the cup of suffering, the cup of costly obedience. It is the same cup he will later pray about in Gethsemane. They answer confidently, **"We are able."** They do not yet understand what they are saying. And when the other ten hear it, they are indignant. Not because they understand better, but because they wanted those seats themselves.

And here comes the turning point.

The world measures greatness by power over others. Jesus measures greatness by service to others. **"Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant. Whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave."** Jesus uses the strongest words available to make his point unmistakable. Greatness, in his kingdom, is not about climbing higher. It is about stooping lower. And then he anchors it in himself: **"Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."** That word "ransom" is interesting language. It speaks of a price paid to release someone from bondage. Jesus is saying that his service will not simply be teaching, healing, or kindness though he did all of that. His service will cost him his life.

Jeremiah stood before God to speak good for those who conspired against him. Jesus goes further still. He does not only pray for those who reject him he gives himself for them. The pit they dig

becomes the place of redemption. He serves by giving himself. This is sacrificial service. He did not come as a conquering king but as the suffering servant

Born in humility, Riding a donkey, Touching lepers, Washing feet. And finally stretching out his arms on a cross. His kingship is revealed in self-giving love.

As those who belong to Christ. clergy and laity alike , what does “service” mean for us? In ordained ministry, I am daily reminded that service is about standing alongside others, in the good times and the difficult times, it’s about helping out, its being there for someone else. And, each of us, in different ways, carries responsibilities, in family life, in care for others, in work, in faithfulness that no one else sees. There are moments when service feels costly. But remember, Christ never asks us to walk a path he has not walked first and he walks it still with us.

Service is rarely dramatic. It is not about visibility. It is not about being thanked. It is about living the Gospel in the ordinary, daily encounters of life. Listening when it would be easier to interrupt, Encouraging when it would be easier to criticise, Praying when it would be easier to worry. Choosing patience when we feel justified in irritation.

Service is often quiet. Hidden. Unnoticed. And that is precisely why it is Christ-like. Love one another. Pray for one another. Encourage one another. Bear one another’s burdens. This is what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God. Love poured out. So perhaps the real question this morning is How can I reflect Christ? Because the way to glory in this Gospel runs through Jerusalem..... Through suffering.....Through service.....Through the cross.....And in God’s kingdom, it is the servant who is truly great. **“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”** May we not only remember those words, but follow the one who spoke them.