

Servants of one another

A sermon prepared by Revd Sarah Flashman for Sunday 23 August 2020

Refs: Isaiah 43:8-13, Acts 5:12-16 & Luke 22:24-30. Festival: Bartholomew the Apostle

I retain a vivid childhood recollection of a rather interesting responsibility my younger brother and I assumed, whenever my parents threw dinner parties and buffet parties. Church folk were often invited, along with friends and family, to wonderful occasions in our family home when hospitality was rolled out with generosity. My brother and I were invariably required to seat our guests at the big dining room table and serve after dinner coffee and chocolate mints! The thing was, we had to seat and serve them in order of age; the oldest taking precedence! We were often to be found discreetly (as well as small children know how) standing in a doorway discussing whether Mrs Fenton Smith was older or younger than Mrs Parker Jones etc! This ritual would be frowned upon today, but back in the 1970's it was 'the way things were', certainly in many households where this particular 'pecking order' was observed!

The Lukan gospel reading opens with a tiff at full throttle. Who should sit where and who therefore amongst the disciples should take precedence. Its poignant tragedy, as Barclay points out, is that it plays out beneath the shadow of the cross. A moment, when, at the Last Supper (where this dispute occurs) and with Jesus hours away from agonising death, we find his disciples simply miles away from this intimate opportunity. They are thoroughly distracted by the notion of who is most important. Their squabble centred around seating arrangements typical at a Jewish Feast. Such seating plans were quite set and definite with the table organised around a square, open at one side. At the top side of the square, in the centre, sat the host with his first guest of honour on the right, second guest of honour on his left, third guest second on his left and so on. The disciples however were quite stuck in the mind-set of how an earthly kingdom functions. The penny hadn't quite dropped as to how things work in God's economy. Jesus was blunt and unequivocal about Kingdom standards as opposed to earthly standards. He wanted to move them right away from how a king on earth would be evaluated. A common title for kings at that time was *Euergetes*, a Greek word meaning 'benefactor'. It was certainly true that these authoritarian kings would invariably get all the credit for what their position had enabled them to do.

A clergy friend of mine sometimes refers to living as Christians in this broken world as 'walking backwards up the stairs'. This metaphor reveals the opposite movement we as Christians embrace as we live out kingdom values, going against the tide of popular worldly standards. 'Don't be like that', says Jesus, choose the better way! It is interesting that the Matthean and Markan gospels contain similar accounts in slightly different chronology and the Johannine gospel account gives us the tender foot washing account at the Last Supper. This sits beautifully alongside Jesus's exhortation to them to be servants just as he sits among them as one who serves. It is not a king, but a servant upon whom the title of benefactor will be conferred in God's eternal kingdom.

As we as church families go forward into a new season of discernment, prayerfully dependent upon seeking God's guidance for the choice of a new vicar, we move forward as servants of one another and our community. In these days, particularly as we face ongoing decisions concerning covid pandemic restrictions, we move forward as team, collaborating one with another. Working together in unity can be challenging, yet this gospel passage sets before us an encouraging and obtainable picture of humble service. Whatever our position in the church, we are called to work together, working out humbly the way ahead, without asserting our position or view, but offering ourselves to God and one another in grace filled

service. As we well know, this is not the role of 'doormat', far from it! Teamwork and collaboration requires attentive listening, patience, sacrifice, bearing with one another and serving with compassion and love. It is so easy to become distracted just as the disciples did and so we need to stay focused upon kingdom values with humility and therefore dependence upon God.

Today, we recall the life of the apostle Bartholomew who the collect reminds us, received grace to believe and preach God's word. As much as Bartholomew's life was shaped by his belief and preaching of the word, so may our hearts be soft and likewise open to God's word. May we be shaped by praying Scripture. Our passage from Isaiah contains a call to be witnesses and the reading from Acts reminds us of the empowered lives of the disciples. May each of us be filled with the Holy Spirit, and so filled, live humble lives, holy lives, faith filled lives and empowered lives of sacrificial service, so we too in collaboration with God and each other can be faithful witnesses to God's presence and power amongst us. Amen.