

The Church Unleashed as Servant

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[0 : 0 0] Hiya. It's not often that you hear a vicar telling you that a story about witches reminded him of the book of Acts and of Jesus. But I can tell you that in the middle of a musical that I was watching in London, and it was called *Wicked*, there was a song that so impacted me spiritually, it was a real moment for me. Because there are two witches, and they're called Elphaba and Glinda, that said to each other, whatever way our stories end, I know you have rewritten mine by being my friend. It's where there's a realisation that a life has been dramatically changed and impacted by somebody else serving you and caring for you. The song is called *For Good*. I won't sing it to you, I won't put you through the pain of that, but some of the lyrics are, I do believe I've been changed for the better, and because

I knew you, I have been changed for good. It was part of my conversionary life experience, I guess, that coming to know Jesus in later life, in the power of the Holy Spirit, changed my life for good. And in amongst all that's happening, I guess we have to ask ourselves, who changed your life for good? Who at the moment is changing your life for good? And whose lives are you changing for good through the way in which you are serving at the moment?

It's a big question. In amongst all that's been happening over the past few months, it sort of gave me an opportunity to think about how we're called to serve others, to change lives for the better in the name of Jesus. So how do we serve others? Service, it's an interesting thing, isn't it? Wherever you go, there's these questionnaires that you fill in one to five, you know. What was your visitor experience like? How did you rate the accommodation? Was it value for money? Would you recommend us to a friend or to others? Now I'm not suggesting in any ways the people that we serve you should drop a note through their door saying, oh, as a Christian, how do you rate me on a one to five? Hopefully they really are so grateful as to the way you serve.

But do they know that you're doing it not just out of love, but you're doing it in the name of Jesus? In our reading from Acts today, we see the early church, you know, they're faced with an opportunity, a huge opportunity. It's right under their nose. And it's they see people's lives changed for good, especially women, because in those days, there was no social services, no social care. And so what happened is when a woman's husband died, everything, everything they owned, property, land, everything went to the next male relative. Now, if they were lucky, that was their son. And hopefully they'd have a good son who looked after them in their age or old age. If you had three daughters, it went to the next male relative, which may not have been a person who was so kind and loving and sympathetic. And clearly that was the case within the culture that the early church was serving. And in fact, we see that in the book of Ruth earlier on, Naomi had to return to her people in the hope that somebody would look after her. The early church saw this as a huge opportunity and were called to serve and respond. And in many ways, the disciples, like the new kids on the block, were really enthusiastic about this because they saw what then was the established religious order arguing between themselves saying, well, it's not my problem, it's your problem. No, it's not. It's your problem. So nothing got done. And they actually got in there and saw a way in which they could bring the love of God, the love of Jesus into people's lives and make a huge difference and change lives for good. The early church decided that they would allocate some resources to this. So what's our richest resource? Our richest resource is always in people.

And they chose seven people headed up by Stephen. These people were keen and empowered, enthused and excited to go there. I don't see any resistance, any excuses. Oh, well, you know, sorry, it's I'm playing bridge on a Thursday night. I can't do this. Or, oh, sorry, it's my bowls day on a Saturday. I can't manage it. No, they just went and did this. And of course, the other resource that there was in the early church is as today, you know, when people ask, oh, can we afford to do this? Well, that was no problem in the early church because people had sold their houses, they'd sold their land. They totally got this thing, which it was to, to serve and to graciously serve that there was no issue about money. So they got on and did this. And it always reminds me that that people sat up and saw what they were doing because they were distinctive in the way in which they served in their Christian outreach. In AD 137, the Christians were still being persecuted by

[5 : 48] Romans, but the Romans wrote to each other and they were saying, do you see the way the Christians behave? You know, they're just giving stuff away. They're caring for people. They're bringing people into their own homes, homeless people. You know, they're just living out the graciousness of love and care. They were distinctive in what they did. And they stood out even to the people that were persecuting them. So if I asked, how do we serve the purposes of God in our lives?

How do we serve? How would you reply? What would that look like for you at the moment? You see, I think sometimes we might have been tempted to draw up two columns, the things we do serving the church and serving outside of the church building.

If you'd asked me at the age of 12, you know, just a few years ago, well, probably a few decades, what my list would have looked like of serving in the church. That column would have been full, you know, in the choir three times on a Sunday, on a Saturday, singing for weddings that was paid for.

So that was a good one. Also as well, there would have been choir practice on a Thursday. And then there would have been the church cleaning brass rotor. You were always put on the church cleaning brass rotor. And there was a lot of brass, I can tell you. On a Wednesday night, when people went and cleaned the brass, it stank of brass soap in there. Fortunately, on a Sunday that had gone because we flooded the place with incense and stunk the place out with that.

If I'd come to the serving outside of the church, I would have been struggling to put anything in there at all. Certainly in my own Christian journey at that time.

[7 : 47] What's our list look like? Because don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with being in church. In fact, we should be in church. We should be joyfully, passionate, enthusiastically engaging in what we do, of sharing areas in which we are serving each other. We are powering ourselves to go out into the community to serve Jesus Christ in the everyday. That is what church is about.

Giving thanks for all that he is doing, for all that each of us are doing, and praising and worshipping him. The problem is, is when there's nothing in the outside, that I hear this holy fire alarm bell ringing in my head that says, get out of the building, get out and see the opportunities that are there.

I think we're really getting a lot better at that as a church. That we are out and we are scattering out into the community. What strikes me about the early church is they were visible and they were distinctive in what they were doing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

They were worshipping in the community. They were serving, teaching, praying, baptising, living, giving sacrificially, and encouraging others into a living and life-giving relationship with Jesus, out and about as part of their everyday lives.

People saw and experienced a model of serving and living. They transformed their lives for good. They caught it, they engaged with it, and they joined in in their thousands.

[9 : 28] It's so important to be serving. And over these past few months, I've had some interesting conversations, as well as you have, and opportunities to serve others.

Some large, some small, some in our own way, but equally important and valuable and distinctive in the way in which we have served Jesus, in the way in which we have served other people. We queued outside of Sainsbury's, Tesco's.

We queued for prescriptions. We served others by doing their shopping for them. We delivered meals. We delivered meals through Make Lunch, the Make Lunch team, for serving young people in food poverty as well.

People came and cooked meals from Christchurch and took out to people. We engaged in distance conversations. We spoke to our neighbours. We phoned them up, said, how can we help you? And in return, we expressed our thanks for people that had served us.

You know, on a Thursday, we'd go out and clap the community, clap the NHS, and say thank you. And thank you to all those who had served us, the person who brought my post, brought my parcels. You know, we expressed gratitude.

[10 : 35] We encouraged one another. James and Emmy, week by week, on the blog, on our website, encouraged us with bringing us a service that encouraged us to go out and do what we were doing in the everyday.

So important as scattered servants. Scattered isn't bad. The early church scattered in order to reach the world.

And in the book that we're reading, Unleashed, there is a great comment that is made here. And it's by Alan Scott, who wrote a book called Scattered Servants.

And he said, I love that quote.

Scattered Servants. Because scattered servants reflect what the early church did. And as we transition and slowly return to our building on the 4th of October, which just happens to be a fact day where we gather young families, I want to ask you, have we been changed for the better?

[11 : 51] As we return, or if we're able to return to the church building, how have we and our community been changed for the better through us Christians in our service?

Will we come to a service with a fresh fire and enthusiasm to go out and serve? Will we move and be stirred by the Spirit of God to give sacrificially, financially of our time, in order to see the things that's under our noses, as scattered servants to go and make a difference and change lives for good in our community?

And please forgive me, please, please forgive me, if I don't welcome you back to church. Because as a church, we have never been away. We have happened to be scattered.

And maybe over these past few months, we've caught a glimpse of what it means afresh to be a scattered church, serving Jesus as he called his early church to do the same.

I think there's a lot to ponder on this morning, and I'm going to leave you with that. Be encouraged about the way we serve, the way you are being called to serve, the way we as a church are being called to gather our resources together, people and financially, to make Jesus distinctive through his local church, you and I.

[13 : 24] Let's pray. Father God, sharpen us, give us fresh energy and courage for this day. May we see and acknowledge your calling on each of our lives and respond.

May we can give whatever we can afford, whatever it is in time, resources, finances, sacrificially we pray, in order to see your purposes fulfilled in the people you've called us to serve.

and for ourselves, Holy Spirit, would you come and make yourself known to us, in us and through us. And may you use us, Lord, to change lives for good.

And Father, thank you for changing my life for good. in Jesus' name. Amen.