

Good God, Good Church: Service - 20th February 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's our next in our series, Good God, Good Church, and today we're looking at what we understand by service.

And your applause is all very well, but I'm afraid you're not getting around me that way. Because before we start, I'm afraid it's not a good day in school today.

And as your teacher, I didn't have to expect to speak to you like this. Yes, the rest of the children have gone out to play, and you have been asked to stay behind.

Needless to say, I'm very disappointed in you all, and I didn't expect to have to speak to you like this at all, especially this morning. Unfortunately, this is not the first time this has happened, which is why you've been asked to stay behind.

If only you could be like the other children who have gone out to play. If only you had tried that bit harder than you have done, we wouldn't be in this mess, would we?

[1 : 0 1] And I can see some of you sitting there smiling and giggling, pretending you don't know what this is about, which is perhaps why you are still here, and we're talking like this.

You know exactly who you are and exactly what you've done, and you've really let the school down. What will people think goes on here if we allow this to carry on happening like this? And before you're dismissed at the end of the morning, I want you to think carefully about what you've been doing.

I shall stay here at the front of the class, and I expect you, and you know who you are, to stay behind, and we'll have words, and we'll sort this out for once and for all.

And here ends up the telling off. I was only kidding. But I will come back to this drama in a little moment, okay?

Have you filled in the ways to serve form? I have. I was spoiled for choice. And because I'm so talented, really pretty good at everything, basically it's because I'm so in tune with God, and he helps me do everything, and I'm pretty brilliant really, so I've put count me in, God strength me, I can do anything.

[2 : 1 5] That's my little form. And as I think I've told you before, because I'm a super Christian, you know, I can do all this. Constantly on an ever-blessed trajectory, getting closer to heaven, bliss every day, and ready to go to the final frontiers to serve God.

And guess what? I'm just kidding again. Is this just another delusion that we're fed or supposed to believe? Christians are supposed to be perfect and therefore good at everything.

Some people actually believe this about themselves, that they're God's gift to everything and to everyone. But this isn't me.

Actually, you've seen that picture before, and that's much more like me. After two years of the pandemic, this is much more like how I continue to feel.

Serving God seems a long way off. It's much more like surviving than anything else. Everything I used to do is largely just gone, or it's on hold.

- [3 : 29] And we're told to look for new ways to serve that might be the answer. But when you're struggling, it's not that easy. So actually, I had a second attempt at this form.
- And I put, sorry, not very confident with this sort of thing. Because that's more of a reflection of how I feel at the moment. However, is this not more than seeing everyone else as somehow more worthy, more capable, and more spiritual?
- And I would suggest that this stems from our misconceptions about who God is and what God wants us to do. So what is service in God's eyes?
- We use the word service a great deal in our society. Businesses are obsessed with it. I'm quite tired of the emails saying, can you rate this service? They're desperate for a good rating on their customer service.
- The car service, it needs to be regularly serviced or it'll seize up and let us down. In some countries, they require you to do military service or some kind of community service.
- [4 : 40] And of course, in restaurants, we expect good service or we might complain. And then we have the church service. We come to church to worship in a service.
- We expect the service to follow a particular format or else we'll say, oh, that wasn't a good service, was it? And then there's missionary service. That's supposed to be the ultimate, isn't it?
- Those who are really dedicated will go and do missionary service. So the dictionary tells us that, you know, there's all sorts of things that can be used with the word service.
- But what does it mean for a good church? What does service mean for a good church? Well, back to our naughty children. Too often, we can see God as a stern, authoritarian figure who is not pleased that we're not doing our best.
- If we see God as some authoritarian figure, we feel we should be marching in step with everyone else, listening to God's commands and getting on with things.
- [5 : 49] After all, this is what we're here to do, to serve God to the best of our ability, to do as we are expected. But is this really what Christian service is?
- Service, as we have seen, is such a complex word. We use it in so many ways. As if we need to try our hardest to get grade A on our Christian report card.
- Let's listen to what we're told in Luke's Gospel. This clip begins with the Last Supper, which is relevant for what we're doing later on this morning. But did you know it turns into a bit of a heated discussion at the end?
- And this is the part I want to look at. But we'll do the whole thing. Then came the day of unleavened bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.
- Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover. Where do you want us to prepare for it? they asked. He replied, As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you.
- [7 : 07] Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, The teacher asks, Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples? He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished.
- Make preparations there. They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table.
- And he said to them, I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.
- For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God. After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, Take this and divide it among you.
- For I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. For I tell you, I will not drink again from the Lord.

[8 : 52] For I tell you, I will not drink again from the vine until the vine until the vine until the vine until the vine is filled with me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.

The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him. They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors.

But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table, or the one who serves?

Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials, and I confer on you a kingdom, just as my father conferred one on me.

[10 : 21] So that you may eat and drink at my table, in my kingdom, and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest.

Jesus' Passover meal was part of his process of protest against the injustice of the Jews and the Romans. Yet the enemies of the message of God's kingdom were not only without, but within.

Judas was obvious. He had his own agenda and his own ambitions. But the other disciples, too, had their own ambitions. Who was to be regarded as the greatest?

Because they still craved status and power. To be truly great, you need to serve. People seek to dominate others in many different ways today and then.

They want to be called benefactors. In Genesis, men and women together are given dominion over all the animals and plants in creation.

[11 : 44] But they are not given dominion over each other. Such dominion is a product of the fall and expresses the sin of that fall.

Throughout history, we see one nation controlling another. And within nations, others controlling or exploiting others.

The greatest among you should be like the youngest and the one rules like the one who serves. But I am among you as one who serves.

In God's kingdom, we are to build a community where people can serve each other. Where all are there to serve one another. Where no one controls another.

This is true service. This is true justice, too, as we saw last week. True service excludes any kind of oppression. And boy, this is hard.

[12 : 48] It's really hard. But this is what Jesus came to show us. In Mark, we're told, not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.

And whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So Jesus came to serve us. To share with us. To walk with us. To breathe with us. To heal and restore us.

To welcome us as equals into a wider family. To die our death. And to give new hope in this life and the life to come.

As we celebrate communion later, just reflect on these things. Jesus came to serve us. The Queen is celebrating her Platinum Jubilee this year and here's what she said in 1947.

[13 : 57] I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.

And then on the 5th of February, 2022, she said, as we mark this anniversary, it gives me pleasure to renew to you the pledge I gave you in 1947 that my life will always be devoted to your service.

It's not what you expect. Surely a monarch is high up, above everyone else. But Queen Elizabeth has repeatedly indicated that she's there to serve us, to serve everyone in the Commonwealth of Nations.

Most would recognize that indeed she has led a life of service and indeed these words have been fulfilled. What does Jesus have to say? The clip is a good reminder to us after two years of what no communion is like after all this time.

But we often miss off that end bit, don't we, about that he has come to serve. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we might consider then what else makes Christian service.

[15 : 18] We must first of all put aside that authoritarian God of marching to somebody else's tune. the bossy school teacher as we're not asked to be like that.

We're not all asked to be Mother Teresa either. The Good Samaritan not only looked after the Jew, and Jews thought Samaritans were not worthy very much, but this Samaritan knew where the wound was, what support was needed, not only there and then, but he knew what ongoing support was required too.

And what is really interesting is he entrusted others to be part of that service. He asked others to serve the man beaten up on the road and he footed the bill.

Jesus too allowed others to serve him. There are lots of examples, but perhaps Mary and Martha will be one that's easy to spring to mind as he often enjoyed their hospitality.

Here's an interesting story which I think raises a number of challenges as churches often form a service culture. And even if we give with pure intentions, we must always be aware of the effects of our service on those we serve.

[16 : 42] Calvin Miller, pictured here, a well-known author and pastor in the United States and professor who died in 2012, grew up in very serious poverty in the latter years of the Great Depression.

He and his family were the grateful recipients of charity during those years, but they were also ashamed of their need and wise to the ulterior motive behind it.

Observing the irony of it all, he later wrote in his memoir, I never felt particularly poor until the rich came by in December to leave us a Christmas basket.

Each time they stopped, they tried to win us to the Lord. They meant well. They were just trying to keep us out of hell until the next holiday, I think.

Needless to say, we children didn't want to go to those churches that brought us the baskets. The last place you want to go to worship is the place where people need you to be poor so that they themselves can feel rich in their dispensation of their charity.

[17 : 53] There is something grandiose about giving a beggar a dime, but there's nothing grandiose in receiving it. Beggars don't ask for money so they can think well of themselves, but because feeling bad about themselves is usually less painful than starvation.

We can't avoid these pitfalls only by creating a genuine service culture that permeates our lives and the life of the church, a culture in which ordinary actions of service are the norm in and out of season without the good need for the congratulations or acclaim.

So, Jesus didn't come just to serve the lowest of the low. He served everyone in his path. Service isn't just helping the poor, it's far more than that.

We must avoid thinking that the haves do nice things for the have-nots. And again, I think this is really hard, really hard.

We need to think carefully about how we do things, how we share, and how we serve. You often hear of people who start off, say, going to a food bank, for example, or a church group to be served, so to speak, but then they end up volunteering and helping out in that very thing that they were served by.

[19 : 20] Surely that's the work of the kingdom, isn't it, where you've got that two parts to it. In Matthew, we're told when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.

Then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. You can understand why we're told this, because it avoids so much. I'm a good person because this is what I do and who I help.

It avoids all that. One of the problems with the church's ways to serve form is it doesn't tell you that you'll be doing this alongside other people.

Most things tend to be a team effort. People play a part in delivering service as a whole. It should say to you, do you want to be part of a team that serves like this?

I'll make sure that's inserted. Do you want to be part of a team that serves like this? It brings a different meaning. Now here's a stunning photo of a young man with an incredible dress sense.

[20 : 35] Top right are my mother and then my grandmother and me and bottom right is my grandmother's bungalow. As a teenager, my grandmother was expert at finding me things to do.

Some gardening, a lot of painting and a lot of decorating. We lived 20 miles away from where she did and she had other family both living with her in the bungalow and other close by who lived just down the road.

But she always asked me to do it. Why? Well, because she lived 20 miles away, it often meant I had to go and stay overnight to get the jobs done.

On the first sight, it makes me look as though I'm a dutiful grandson doing his bit for his granny. But it was far more than that because my mother was very ill throughout my teenage years and my 20s and she struggled to look after us.

So my grandmother ensured that in this way I was well fed, I had my clothes washed and the holes in my jumpers mended and she provided much need, moral support and I was an excellent mentor.

[21 : 50] So who was serving who? Right, so here we are at St John's. What do we do with this crowd then?

Okay, these are our staff team and they serve us so well, so very well. And throughout the pandemic, they've been more than truly amazing.

But how do we serve them? Yes, we can pray and should pray for them. yes, we can thank them and tell them they're wonderful, which they are, but perhaps it should be a bit more than that.

Who's mending their jumpers? Who is providing them with support? I'm sure they'll say that they feel well supported and that's great, but shouldn't we be looking out for them a bit more and seeing how best to serve them?

and so with each other, our church community. So many in this church community serve us well, so very well.

[22 : 59] And throughout the pandemic, many have been more than truly amazing. But how do we serve each other? Yes, we can and should pray for each other and we can thank each other and tell each other that we're wonderful, but perhaps it should be a bit more than that.

Who is mending whose jumper? And how are we best to support each other? I'm sure many will say they feel well supported and that's great, but we should be looking out for each other and seeing how best to serve each other.

And so to our wider community and the global community. so many there serve as well. We have heating, lighting, sewage, you know, there's lots of things that happen even in this building that are not part of us.

And throughout the pandemic, they've been truly amazing. But how do we serve the wider community? We can and should pray for it. We can thank people and tell them they're wonderful, but perhaps it's a little bit more than that.

Who is mending whose jumper? How can we support others in our community and across the world and allow them to support us? We should always be looking out for each other.

[24 : 18] We should be looking out for those who suffer in the world and seeking how best to do this. A lot of that happens. It really, really does happen. But it's also really challenging and something we need to constantly come back and ask ourselves about.

On the Platinum Jubilee website, which is set up by Hope, a number of churches including the Church of England, in partnership with a number of faith organisations, we're encouraged to celebrate 70 years of faith and service.

And there's so many good ideas here. There you go, don't worry, I'm not going to read you all 70. But here's a little taste. Think of an everyday item that's in a good condition.

Find a recipient and give it away. an umbrella, hand cream, something like that. Number two, drop a small card to a hidden hero just to let them know they're noticed.

Number three, clean the sink in your school, your home, your office, or your staff room. Strike up a conversation with somebody you don't know at the bus stop or cafe.

[25 : 29] Take a chunk of time to chat to someone you might not usually see. The street vendor, the window cleaner, the station attendant, the homeless person.

Yeah, they're just easy, easy things to do. So service, I think, is often simpler than we think. We are called to serve each other and we do.

And we should continue to do so in so many different ways. I'm going to play a little song now and it's called To Do Your Will because I think we all struggle to know what the right thing to do is sometimes.

But the singer here is Helen Jane McKellar who had started a successful singer career in the 90s when all this suddenly came to a halt as she was diagnosed with ME or chronic fatigue syndrome.

And she's struggled since year after year after year after year. And she hasn't been able to make recordings and only recently has she been able to do that.

[26 : 36] So bear this in mind as you listen. I know I've been drifting fighting disillusion and I haven't known your mind in such a long time.

It seems that all your plans are taking all my life to unfold. How long must I stand here on my own?

Lord, all I want is to do your will.

Now all I feel is my life standing still. Lord, all I want is to do your will.

I know I've been searching, staggering from sea to sea, but I haven't heard you speak in such a long time.

[28 : 15] I've almost given up. I'm holding out an empty cup.

I'm waiting for the heavens to pour down. Lord, all I want is to do your will.

Now all I feel is my life standing still.

Lord, all I want is to do your will. rescue my heart renew my mind help me to seek you and lead me to find Lord, all I want is to do your will.

Now all I feel is my life standing still. Lord, all I want Lord, all I want Lord, all I want is to do your will.

[30 : 09] Let us pray. Lord, I've almost given up. Lord, I'm holding out an empty cup I'm waiting for the heavens to pour down rescue my heart renew my mind help me to seek you and lead me to find how best I may serve you Lord, all I want is to do your will.

Amen.