

Sunday 9th June 2024 - That's The Spirit! : The Spirit of Service

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Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0 : 00] Good morning. As Kim was saying, we're kind of continuing with our series this morning, That's the Spirit. If you heard, if you were here last week, or maybe you've listened on YouTube, Ruth looked at the spirit of holiness and learning. She used the analogy, didn't she, about learning to climb out of the nest, to get involved, to speak up, and to make a difference, and to know that in all of that, God has got us. Okay, that reassurance.

And so this morning, we're going to take a closer look at the spirit of service. Now, this word, service, it's one of those words that just seems to permeate all and many different sort of aspects of our lives together. Here's just a few of them. So we talk about our church service, and here we are. Okay? A place of worship, a place of celebration, of laughter and tears.

You know, it's such an important place, isn't it, for us to come together. And then something I think most of us value and cherish, even with all the problems that it faces, because we know that deep down, that everyone should have access to decent healthcare, our national health service.

service, and the many thousands of people around the world listening to the world service, you know, to reconnect. And then serving the government, and ultimately us, our civil service.

And I couldn't resist this picture at the bottom in the left-hand corner there. It's a train service, okay? From London to Edinburgh that's been named by LNER, okay, wait for it, as the Flying Swiftly.

[2 : 17] Okay? For those of you that know, it's to celebrate the first UK concert this weekend of Taylor Swift's ERAS tour, yeah, yeah, which is starting up in Edinburgh. And yes, it is fully booked from London's King's Cross. And my eldest son, Josh, dutifully escorted his fiancée, Joe, who is a confirmed Swiftly, to the concert last night. Not on the train, no. And we haven't heard anything back from them, but I'm assuming they had a great night. I don't think Taylor Swift is Joshua's seen, really, but there you go. And of course, if you're a Wimbledon fan, you'll be getting plenty of tennis services at the start of next month, weather permitting, of course. Probably not from this guy, though, because I think Federer's resigned there. He's retired, isn't he? So this idea of service, I think it's something that's deeply woven into our shared or our corporate kind of lives together. And what it means to live in community and to give and to receive. And not just at an individual level, but I think, you know, something much more pervasive about how we live together well.

Well, I'm sure you, most of you, recognise this picture taken at the Monday drop-in, which I know a number of people, many of whom are here this morning, have faithfully supported and serving, you know, to just be there for others, to take the time to listen, maybe offer practical help.

And I guess I could have used a picture, if I'd have had them, but I didn't, of any one of the many different groups that are here at St. John's that faithfully serve others here and in the wider community. And yeah, we're not naive enough to think that there aren't forces pulling us in another direction, which is, you know, just about looking inwardly, about simply focusing on my life, on my life, on myself. But for most of us, we know that that's not how we were made to live. You know, it kind of rings hollow pretty quick. And I think whether you profess to have a Christian faith or not, there's something deep within all of us that recognises that, that resonates within our spirit of just how important and valuable a life well lived in the service of others actually is.

We couldn't really, could we, talk about the spirit of service this morning without mentioning the commemoration events that have happened this week to mark the 80th anniversary of D-Day.

And I, I don't know about you, but I just thought it was so good to see that it, how it was that the veterans that were on the front row, if you watch any of the ceremony, okay. You know, and all the dignitaries were all behind them in the audience. You know, there's something right about that, isn't it? And it's absolutely right that we recognise the bravery and the sacrifice of those who served and

those who died to liberate France and Europe. And as, as terrible and as appalling, I mean, truly appalling as war is, there is something deeply, deeply moving and spiritually uplifting about the sacrifice and the selfless acts of those who served, many of whom who gave their lives for people that they would never meet. And one last topical theme on service that I'm sure hasn't escaped your attention these last few weeks.

[6 : 51] Hmm. The upcoming general election, okay, which has inevitably put a spotlight on these two and their respective parties, okay, together with, of course, the other main parties that are standing.

Now, I make no comment, okay, about either of these or any of the candidates and the TV debates, which you may or may not have seen. And, you know, that is for you to decide. And yes, of course, policies matter. Okay. But I think what most of us really want to see in our elected politicians are people who will act with integrity and honour. You know, not out of any sense of entitlement or as an opportunity to advance themselves, but rather to serve the people who have elected them with humility and to step up and to speak up for those that don't have a voice.

That's the type of leadership that, you know, I want to see. And with that in mind, let's watch a clip of our Bible reading for this morning. It's taken from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verses 35 to 45.

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. Teacher, they said, we want you to do for us whatever we ask. What do you want me to do for you? He asked.

They replied, let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory. You don't know what you're asking, Jesus said. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with? We can, they answered. Jesus said to them, you will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with. But to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant.

These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.

[9 : 18] When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become 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. Jesus is going up to Jerusalem, and in the verses just before this, he warns the disciples about what's going to happen to him, his death and his resurrection.

And so here's James and John, turning his messianic journey into a march for glory, in which they want to sit on either side of him when he reigns as king.

And just like us, they've still got a lot to learn. They've obviously heard all that Jesus has said about his suffering, his death and his resurrection, but they've not really understood.

[10 : 46] Yes, we hear what you're saying, Jesus. It's going to be tough, but in the end, we're going to come out on top. But the cross isn't just something to be got through on the way to a happy ending.

I think it's God's way of taking the power of this world and standing it up on its head. At the end of this passage, when Jesus says, 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.

Jesus here is echoing what was known as the servant songs in Isaiah. Okay? Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight.

I put my spirit upon him and he will bring justice to the nations. I think Jesus is making a point here, just as Isaiah did, that the kingdom of God turns the world's idea of power and glory upside down and inside out.

And I think the reason that Mark includes this here is to be clear that the cross is not just about God forgiving our sins through Jesus' death and resurrection.

[12 : 17] Yes, of course, death is beaten. Amen. Amen. Okay? But the cross also challenges and subverts the human systems that claim to put the world to rights.

The world's way of getting things done is about wielding power. And the spirit goes in the opposite direction. We know the story, don't we?

We know who will be on the left and on the right of Jesus. As he hangs on the cross and comes into his kingdom. And I don't think that's quite what James and John had in mind.

The spirit leads us downwards. And in a culture that's obsessed with upward mobility and success, I don't think it's a, in some ways it's a message that has, I don't think it's a message that has much traction.

But the spirit leads us downwards to the bottom, to the place of humility, to the position and to the posture of service. Because that is where the spirit is able, like water, to flow.

[13 : 38] And Jesus' whole life reflects this way of living. And it's profoundly different, isn't it, to the enduring image of God as someone far off in the distance, high above on a white cloud, kind of looking down at us.

No. God comes down to where we are. The message Bible puts it really well. The word becomes flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.

And whilst we're racing to get to the head of the table, just like James and John, Jesus shocks everyone, taking the role of a servant, washing his disciples' feet.

And whilst they're pushing and squeezing to get into the inner circle, Jesus scandalously walks out into the margins and hangs out with the outcasts and the outsiders.

And whilst we're struggling to get more stuff, Jesus shocks everyone by pouring out everything that he is and everything he has.

[14 : 44] The wind can be blowing, but if your sail isn't up, you won't go far. The spirit of God, as we've been seeing over these last few weeks, is moving.

The aliveness of the spirit is all around us and our willingness to move with the spirit, to let the spirit fill our lives and to flow through us in acts of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control, as Paul describes the fruits of the spirits in Galatians.

For that to happen, we have to let go, don't we, of what we thought the world was all about and allow the spirit to truly come alive in us in acts of love and service.

It's all right. I'm guessing most of us here remember what got to be called the miracle on the Hudson yeah 2009 it's a few years ago it made the front page news and inspired millions of people around the world on the 15th of January 2009 US Airways flight 1549 crashed into the Hudson River minutes after take off from New York City's Lagardia Airport after being crippled by a collision with a flock of birds the plane was carrying 155 passengers and miraculously all the passengers and crew members survived the pilot this is him Chesley Sullenberger known as Sully and his co-pilot Jeffrey Skiles became national heroes praised for their kind of level-headedness and professionalism and skill in landing relatively safely on onto literally onto the Hudson and I wonder how many of you have seen the film Sully yeah yeah okay with Tom Hanks so to make this a little more real more than just me telling you what happened and in some ways more importantly what happened afterwards okay we're going to see a short clip from the film bringing together the events of that afternoon now here's the disclaimer

I should say if you are of a nervous disposition or you are flying soon and I am you might want to sort of just duck out at this point for a couple it's only a couple of minutes okay and maybe just hang out in the foyer for a bit you know anyway no no takers okay okay buckle up hello Donner captain altimeters verified 3023 3023 cactus 1549 gate 21 clear to push spot 28 ground for taxi clear for takeoff cactus 1549 clear for takeoff I'll never get over how beautiful it is up here life's easier in the air yes it is we got both of them rolling back double check your seatbelts please we should start firecraft mayday mayday this is a cactus 1549 we've lost thrust on both engines returning back towards the water we can get it for you do you want to try to land runway 13 airspeed optimum 300 knots we don't have that we may end up in the Hudson

[19 : 25] I have an emergency I got an 8-3-20 diving for the river if you can you got runway 29 available at Newark I don't think we can make any runway thrust levers confirm idle idle okay what do you need to land slowly we're too long obstacle obstacle obstacle obstacle pull up clear of conflict this is the captain brace for impact what brace brace heads down stay down too low three brace brace heads down stay down off your right side is Teterboro airport no relight after 30 seconds engine master one and two confirm off off heads down stay down we can land runway one Teterboro we can't make it we're gonna end up in the Hudson sorry say again radar contact lost alright let's put the collapse out collapse out come on talk to me too low terrain too low terrain too low terrain 150 knots going down going down terrain terrain pull up pull up pull up pull up pull up and breathe hopefully that will never ever have any of us will have to face a situation like that what's interesting about what happened on that day after the plane hit the water is not just the bravery of

the captain

Sully and his crew I mean can you just imagine how cold this was January in New York how cold that water was as it rushed in Sully went up and down the aisle of that listing plane as it was going down twice to make sure that everybody got out safely before he left but it wasn't just him fellow passengers strangers to one another were willing to risk their own lives to help others around them ordinary people just like you and me in extraordinary circumstances one passenger recalled that although she was soaked and shivering from being in the freezing water she stayed back to help one of the flight attendants who had suffered a very deep gash in her leg and was bleeding heavily the most amazing thing that she said was that she didn't see anyone pushing or shoving just people helping people showing compassion lifting children and even a baby to get them off the plane first how's that for a practical example of the spirit of service you know when we work directly for the good of others that is when we open ourselves and act in a spirit of service beyond ourselves I think it's then I think it's then that we get to glimpse something of the heart of God and our meaning and our purpose and what it means to be created in the image of God and that deepens in ways that reward us then beyond measure the Bible describes the spirit with stunningly beautiful and vivid imagery about the spirit in Genesis God hovers over the primal waters like wind I know Ruth was talking about that like a bird circling last week and creation emerges out of the chaos and the spirit breathes it brings breath the ruach of God that Matt was talking about breathing life into us and in Exodus the spirit appears as fire in the burning bush beckoning Moses and then again as a pillar of cloud and fire leading his people to freedom and then centuries later John the Baptist enters the scene and starts immersing people in water washed clean of their old life and marked with a new spirit and when John baptizes Jesus people see the spirit descending on him like a dove and Jesus starts his mission by turning water into wine a new wine infused with joy at a wedding banquet and later Jesus promises those who trust and follow him that they will experience living waters rising up within them these are these these are all really powerful and vivid images of the movement of the spirit at the heart of Jesus life and message was this good news the spirit of God the spirit of what it means to be truly alive in wind and breath and fire and cloud and water and wine and in a dove a dove a symbol of peace and renewal and hope the spirit is on the move looking for opportunities and that gives us a choice how willing are we to really let go to drink that new wine to feel those living waters bubbling up within us or is it easier to stay put to play it safe

I'd like to finish by reading a short section to you from a book by an author called Brian McLaren I've mentioned him before it's called *We Make the Road by Walking* and it's a book really about spiritual formation if you listen to the spirit here is what will happen to you you'll be at a party and you'll notice on one side of the room all the beautiful people laughing and having fun together and in the far corner you'll notice someone who is alone feeling awkward not knowing anyone and the spirit will draw you to that person and you may very well become the bridge that connects the outsider to the insiders and in making that connection both will be better off here's what will happen to you if you listen to the spirit you will realise that someone is angry at you or resentful towards you you'll hear that someone has spread false rumours about you or worked behind your back to harm you and everything in you will want to write them off or to get back at them but the spirit will draw you towards them in humility

[27 : 26] I have a problem and I need your help you will say there may be some tension or distance between us and I want to close that gap and be sure that things between us are good and they may be too angry or insecure to respond to you well but whatever happens know this is the spirit at work in you here's what will happen if you listen to the spirit you'll see a person or a group of people a group being vilified or scapegoated everyone is blaming them shaming them gossiping about them feeling superior to them and venting their anxieties onto them and if you join in you'll feel part of the group and if you're silent they'll assume that you're with them but the spirit will draw you to differ courageously and graciously

I'm sorry you'll say but I see things very differently I know this person he is my friend she is a good person and they are human beings just like us and you will risk your reputation in defending that person or people being scapegoated and in doing that both you and they will know that God's spirit is alive and at work in your midst but the spirit moves downwards here's what will happen if you listen to the spirit you'll be out somewhere and you'll see a person who by their dress or language or mannerisms is clearly from another religion or culture or social class and that person will be

uncomfortable or in need and you will feel the spirit inspiring a question within you if I were in their shoes what would I want someone to do for me and you will move towards them and you will overcome the differences in language and culture and your kind eyes and your warm smile and the gentle presence will speak a universal language of kind heartedness and in that moment they will feel that

God is real for God's spirit is alive in you