

Sermon "The Servant King" by John Boylan Authorised Lay Preacher All saints Church Wokingham

21st October 2018

Let holy charity mine outward vesture be,
and lowliness become mine inner clothing;
True lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part,
and o'er its own shortcomings' weeps with loathing.

A Catholic Priest and a Rabbi were chatting one day when the conversation turned to a discussion of job descriptions and promotion.

"What do you have to look forward to in way of a promotion in your job?" asked the Rabbi.

"Well I'm next in line for the Monsignor's job." Replied the Priest.

"Yes, and then what?" asked the Rabbi.

"Well, next I can become Assistant Bishop", said the Priest.

"Yes, and then?" asked the Rabbi.

"If I work really hard and do a good job as Assistant Bishop, it's possible for me to become a full Bishop" said the Priest.

"Okay, then what?" asked the Rabbi.

The Priest, beginning to get a bit exasperated replied, "with some luck and really hard work, maybe I can become a Cardinal."

"And then?" asked the Rabbi.

The Priest is really starting to get angry and replies, "with lots and lots of luck and some real difficult work, and, if I'm in the right place at the right time, and, play my political games right, maybe, just maybe, I can be elected Pope."

The Rabbi thought for a moment and then said, "Yes, and then what?".

"Good grief man!" shouted the Priest. "What do you expect me to become, God?"

"Well", said the Rabbi, "One of our boys made it!"

I was reading a report the other day about the promotion expectations of Millennials. Having worked on assessment and development and training programmes I've got the impression that candidates today have higher and quicker expectations of promotions than used to be the case. The report agreed with this sentiment blaming the advent of the world Wide web and the access to faster information. This in turn has fuelled the technology, software and devices which enable today's Millennial generation to have immediate awareness and access to almost anything they want. But I got to thinking, it's not just the young. Many people, older generations included have embraced this idea and the practice of waiting, or saving up to get something has sadly become old fashioned. I use the word sadly because the discipline of waiting or saving often focusses the mind on what is really important and whether the immediate need for something is really that urgent. Our culture has changed over the years to become an 'I want it and I want it now' ethos and inevitably industry has moved to meet this instant demand; witness the rise of Amazon. Closer to home, supermarkets now stock fruit or veg whether in season or not. The decision is now not what to eat but simply the cost. Of course, the carbon footprint of importing food out of season is the consequence but is an ethical issue often overlooked.

The report also cited that in many companies this new dynamic has entered the reward system and expectation is increasingly short term and can quickly develop into a feeling of 'entitlement'. Companies are having to clearly define or reset expectations to deal with the high turnover of staff due to the disappointment and in some cases resentment, when the expectation isn't met.

Of course change is inevitable and is a symptom of the speed at which we live. But isn't it the desire and in some cases the need for recognition which is at the heart of this? It is not something new. People have always sought recognition. It is a basic human characteristic, from cradle to grave, most of us seek recognition love and respect. Psychologists have built careers on the subject, but generally agree that the desire stems for a need to reinforces their self-image. It says to them that the person they have chosen to become has value that others recognise, and this provides security for them within their social context.

Of course, as one gets older and (hopefully) wiser, the realisation that recognition normally comes at a cost or at least requires you to do something first, is more apparent than perhaps it is in earlier years. The consequences of rushing headlong into something not thought through in the desire for more authority or recognition is often where the tension exists.

In Matthews Gospel (20.20-28) it is the Mother of James and John who approaches Jesus requesting a position of power for her sons. Mark as we heard today, positions it as the two disciples seeking more authority. Either way, both stories demonstrate clearly that all of their desire for recognition was founded on idea of imagined glory and

authority in an earthly kingdom and they had completely misunderstood the reality of Jesus mission and the nature of the kingdom he referred to. In the preceding verses Jesus had given his final and most detailed prophecy of his forthcoming trial, suffering, death and resurrection. Yet all of them overlook this in their haste to have a share in the power and prestige of the great triumphs that they think are to come and their naivety is compounded in their approach; “we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you”, i.e. we are not going to tell you what we want until you agree to give it to us! Hardly an adult negotiating stance and Jesus does not commit until he knows what James and John are asking for. He then mildly rebukes them for failing to understand the message he has been trying to give them. Ironically, and as if further proof were needed that they were not alone in their misreading of the situation, the other disciples then launch into James and John, not on the grounds that they had got Jesus’ message wrong, but because they had tried to get in first and steal a march on the rest of them! Clearly, the other disciples were also enticed by the vision of a new kingdom and the royal power that Jesus would exercise.

So, we get to the point of Mark’s story. Without trying to belittle the basic human instinct for recognition Jesus identifies the failings in the socio-political power that the disciples wish for. Using the Roman authorities as a negative example he cites how they use this authority to “overpower” and “tyrannise” others (10.42) and how they maintain that position by control, coercion and violence. This same point has been made earlier in Mark when he describes how the authorities overrode reason and justice to further their self-interest and self-protection in the murder of John the Baptist. Jesus’ words therefore, that the “the son of man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10.45) repeated in Matthew (20.28) proposed a vision that was the anathema of established governance.

It would be easy at this point to argue that the Roman subjugation Jesus referred to, was predicated by violence and suppression and therefore his argument is not relevant today. But to do so would be missing the point. Jesus was identifying how the need for authority and power, although not inherently wrong, could focus the individual’s attention more on personal gain rather than giving their service to the community and those more in need. But one has only to look at our own society today; the increasing numbers of homeless on our streets; the steadily rising demand on Foodbanks even in the more affluent areas like Wokingham and Maidenhead and the chronic shortfalls in funding in the NHS and Social Services to see that we still haven’t got it right and Jesus’ prophecy has come true. Jesus’ words: “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” are a radical renunciation of the misuse of authority and privilege.

The reference to giving his ‘life as a ransom for many’ connect to the earlier words about slavery and service and indicate that his death will demonstrate the violence and opposition to his teaching and ministry by those in authority. The word ransom is a

literal translation but in Exodus, Deuteronomy and other Old Testament scripture, the word often referred to God's acting to deliver his people.

It is sometimes difficult to see the contemporary relevance of some of the biblical passages especially when they directly reference tangible things like the Roman occupation, but it would be wrong to assume that this 'release' referred solely to the context of physical subjugation. It is more generic and indicates that by his death Jesus releases everyone from the social and political restrictions that we impose on ourselves in the pursuit of power. We are restored to the community that lives under God's dominion and are therefore given the new instruction "to serve not to be served".

Jesus refers to himself as the "Son of Man". It may be commonly assumed that this is a messianic title commonly used to describe the son of God. Recent research suggests that the phrase 'son of man' was a first century Aramaic phrase used to describe oneself in the same way that today, we may use the word 'one' in talking about ourselves. The phrase is used 14 times in Mark and every time by Jesus to refer to himself and normally when he is talking about suffering and the vindication of such hardship. The fact that it is not a recognised title explains in some way why the disciples do not react to the words. So, we shouldn't be misled into thinking it's a divine prerogative and if we rephrase Jesus' words to "I came not to be served but to serve" then the example is placed on a very human level and makes it accessible for all of us to follow.

So, the next time we look for recognition or feel that we are 'entitled' to something, maybe the words of Jesus should prompt us to ask whether we are in fact serving or being served.

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Amen