

Service
Mark 10.43-45

In today's Gospel we have an aspect of Christ's living and motivation which we are asked as Christians to copy. It says 'He came to serve'. To be a servant of God is our calling, The New Testament talks in stronger terms than that - of our being slaves - belonging to Christ totally. The Old Testament reading was one of Isaiah's Songs of the Suffering Servant, which Christians have traditionally applied to Jesus. Servant is a title we readily take on our lips in hymns - Ye servants of God, master proclaim. Ye servants of the Lord, each in his office wait, Servants of God the Almighty, the Lord.... So we could go on. But as in so many things, the word is easily said, and not so easily put into practice. It applies to lots of things. To say we repent is one thing - actually to face our personal sinfulness is another. To say we obey is one thing - actually to do what God wants when it is not what we want is another thing again. So with our service - we are put in a position of humility and giving and selflessness that may not always be congenial. As the modern carol put it:

No we haven't got a manger, no we haven't got a stable

We are Christian men and women, always willing, never able.

Let me direct your thoughts to three elements of our service - to God, to the world around us, and to our fellow Christians.

Service to God: I wonder if the meaning of the word service really impinges on us. 'What time are the services?' people say. Our worship is our service - our offering to God....think of the words that the old Prayer Book says about the offering to God we make in this service: "Although we be unworthy through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service". Worship is a tricky word to get hold of, but its basic origin gives us a start - we need to add in two letters to get back to the Old Testament word - worthship - telling God what he is worth - the expression of love, commitment, humility, love and devotion. Much of the problems that people encounter in church services come from the fact that they expect the work to be done for them. The only places where that is to an extent true is in cathedrals and places where the congregation don't join in - the choir sings everything on their behalf. But that leads to the awful statement a friend of mine once heard a member of a cathedral chapter saying to someone - 'Its such a pity when there is a congregation here - they spoil the worship'. How terrible to think like that! But for most of us, it is our offering - and what we get from worship basically depends on that. And no amount of changes in the liturgy or beautiful singing from a choir, or fine reading or whatever can make up for what we do or do not put into it. Ultimately what goes on does not matter very much, if we are truly come to offer our service to God, our offering of ourselves to him. If you have been abroad and attended a service in a language you don't understand, you will know what I mean - it doesn't matter that the words are beyond you - you can still worship where two or three are gathered together. What we need to cultivate and develop in ourselves is our awareness of the presence and glory and awesomeness of God - and yet of our right to be in his presence - that we are invited to come and give thanks and pray and

praise. I don't know a better place where that is expressed than in *The Wind in the Willow*, Mole and Rat are in a boat on the river just before dawn:

Then suddenly Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror - indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy - but it was an awe which smote and held him and without seeing, he knew that it could only mean that come August presence was very very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side, stricken, cowed and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew. Perhaps he would never have dared raise his eye, but piping was now hushed, the call and the summons seemed still dominant and imperious. He might not refuse, were Death himself waiting the strike him instantly, once he had looked with mortal eye on things rightly kept hidden, trembling he obeyed, and raised his humble head; and then, in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while Nature flushed with fullness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked into the very eyes of the Friend and Helper. All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered. "Rat, he found breath to whisper, shaking, "Are you afraid?" "Afraid?" murmured Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love."Afraid - of him? Oh never, never.' And yet- and yet - O Mole, I am afraid." Then the two animals, crouching to the earth bowed their heads and did worship.

Our service is offered to God - but we are told that love for God, being his servants, inevitably means been a servant of mankind. How can we love God whom we have not seen, if we don't love our neighbour whom we have seen? It is in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, the prisoner, that we do those things for Christ. 'In as much as you do it for the least of one of these brothers of mine, you do it for me.' Our service is tested in the practicality of loving our neighbour. The servant church has been a concept that it has been difficult to hold in times when the church has been powerful and influential. It has been more akin to the Lady Bountiful Church than the servant Church. Although they don't like admitting it, people outside the Christian community, and perhaps some of those inside, can cope with a serving church which dispenses largesse from its coffers - giving charity, much more easily than they can cope with the church which meets people actually in their need and truly serves. But thank God through the ages, Christians have gone beyond that to service which has been painful, mistrusted and even opposed. The service which in days past led to hospital care was largely Christian inspired. And more recently Hospices that have sprung up to care for the terminally ill - the unwanted, sadly, sometimes by both the official caring of the NHS, and the personal caring of the family - those too have started from Christian groups and churches. Helping the untouchable, the rejects, the people others find it hard to cope with - that too has been a Christian responsibility in the past - and continues into the present. And, getting into more contentious ground, it is in serving people in the mundane matters of work and daily living the Christians have tried to serve. The Trade Unions began with Christian provocation and help - helping people to help themselves. Savings Banks started as a Christian endeavour to help poorer people cope better And if we look around at the servant church in our own time, we are bound to light on people like Archbishop Romero in Latin America - persecuted and martyred because he was trying to serve people in opposition to their oppressive government. The Church has a political responsibility to serve people - to ask the questions of politicians that the gospel demands should be asked. Jesus put political questions to those around him - he challenged

the political views of the religious establishment, and the patriotic liberation people - what is the nature of any authority? What does Kingship mean? John the Baptist's challenge to official corruption got him served up on a dish. Jesus challenge to the status quo led him to Calvary. If we have a service to perform to mankind, it may lead us to opposition. The social and political and economic implications of the gospel can't be swept under a spiritual carpet. Romero said 'When I care for the poor, I am called a Saint. When I ask why they are poor, I am called a Communist.' We are called to serve our neighbours as they are.

And we are called to serve our fellow Christians. Why have I put that last? Surely the world is a bigger place for service? Well, yes, but I suspect that although serving our fellow Christians is a smaller task, it is a harder one. Bishop David Sheppard wrote in a book 'Jesus chose twelve, and each of them probably found that the hardest part of Christianity was getting on with the other eleven.' Just as John wrote that we can't say we love God if we don't love our brother - so we could go on to say that it is hard to see how we can love our fellow human being if we fail to love our fellow Christian. There has been much progress in the last generation or two - but we are still in a position where the disunity of the Christian churches is an affront to the gospel. We appear to be echoing Augustine's prayer for chastity, and praying 'Lord give us unity - but not yet'. Service of our brother has to cross denominational boundaries, And even within denominations, we have a lot to learn about service of the brother.

Not many deaneries have done what one deanery I was in did - the whole of the clergy of the deanery giving up a week to visit a vast new estate for one of their number, who couldn't otherwise have made much impact. Some parishes, or deaneries, or dioceses have adopted an opposite number in a developing country - help them, support them and encourage them. We have a long way to go in service, of our brothers in Christ. our brother - so we could go on to say that it is hard to see how we can love our brother human being if we fail to love our brother Christian. We do have a long way to go in service, of our brothers in Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote 'In Jesus the service of God and the service of the least of the brethren were one'. That is the challenge Jesus put to his disciples in the Gospel reading, and which he puts to us today.