

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH, 21ST. October 2012.

SERMON: I'm over this '**servant**' concept!

A friend, a longtime friend who I met when we job-shared, has experienced the trauma of abuse in her family, by a trusted husband. One day she cried out to me: "where is God when I am suffering, when my girls are suffering?" The only answer I could think of was: "dear friend, I'm here."

Another time, trying to hold her faith alongside the suffering of her family, she said about Jesus, the shepherd, Jesus the Servant, "Jen, I'm just sick of this servant business. I've been a follower for ever. Yet I've been betrayed, why do I keep hearing that to be a follower of Jesus I must keep on being a servant?"

Her anger still surfaces sometimes. "I only go to Bible study, not to worship. I'm still hurting. I've experienced so much shame. Love me, transform me, heal me, remind me that God loves me again and again."

Mark's gospel invites us to see ourselves in the disciples: following Jesus, not always quite sure of the path he wants us to take; sometimes being like those two sons of Zebedee, James and John, and wanting to be important; sometimes like the other disciples, a bit jealous of each other, and cross...

Just 4 weeks ago in chapter 9 of Mark, we heard Jesus ask: what were you were arguing about on the way back here to Capernaum? and they all went quiet, feeling ashamed: they had been arguing about which one of them was the best disciple! And Jesus reminded them that their task was to offer radical friendship to all who are lost, or stigmatized, or unloved. And now they have Jesus' ear, ahead of the rest of the followers on their journey to Jerusalem:

Jesus, will you do something for us?

Yes, what is it, Jesus answers.

We want to be either side of you when you come into power!

Jesus didn't rebuke James and John – he understood their very human way of gauging their own worth, that they were hoping they were very distinctive disciples.

Martin Luther King, Jnr called it the 'drum major instinct'. He said that deep down within each of us is 'a desire to be out front, a desirer to lead the parade, a desire to be first'.

Charles Campbell suggests: maybe they totally got what Jesus was saying, and, rather than being power hungry, they were seeking security – that – "no matter what happens I'll be safe feeling."

Jesus handled the incident well: he didn't tear strips off them: he really knew they had the capacity to follow, to be leaders.

So he said: can you drink this bitter cup that I must drink?

They jumped in immediately with their answer: yes, yes, of course we can! From the text, and from the previous chapter, we can be reasonably sure that they had blinkers on; Mark's gospel keeps reminding us: the disciples didn't understand. Jesus accepted their answer: yes, you will drink the bitter cup I will drink – a reference to the later persecution of Jesus' disciples.

"I don't want you to copy the powerful rulers 'lording it over people'. 'What I want you to be is first in compassion, first in generosity and understanding. I don't want you to be dominating, bossing people around -- I want you to offer acts of service which gives someone else the opportunity to flourish a little more.'" Jesus lived his words: recall how at the Passover meal, Jesus took off his outer garment, took a basin, and washed the feet of all his disciples.

The disciples had left their nets behind. They certainly weren't at the top of any social ladder: they were fishermen. James and John probably had expectations or assumptions of prestige and power. And were struggling with these long-cherished expectations... Instead of growing closer to Jesus' radical vision of God's reign, they still hankered for some sense of importance. To climb to the top of the ladder and beyond.

The surreptitious nets of desire for personal power and glory that can trap and entangle us all, in our own way. Can we leave behind all desire to **'be important'**? It's a normal human trait:

"whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." Marcus Borg helps us understand that Jesus is talking about turning worldly ideas of power and success on their head : Jesus uses the image "drinking the cup" as an image for death. Jesus is quite aware of what is to come through his radical preaching. We also know that many of his earliest disciples are said to have been martyred (along with many other early Christians).

In our own time, we recall Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, the women missionaries killed in El Salvador, and any number of other martyrs who literally died because of their faithfulness to Jesus. But what about the vast majority of Christians today who long to follow Jesus faithfully, but will most probably not (literally) lose their lives for doing so? Borg speaks of this kind of dying as a metaphor with two meanings, both at the core of Christian faith: "a dying of the self as the center of its own concern" and "a dying to the world as the center of security and identity." That kind of dying, leads to transformation, when we lose our self-absorbed insecurities and are reborn: "the radical recentering brings about a change so sharp that it can be described as dying to an old life and being born into a new life."

It happens to different people in different ways (and we don't accomplish it--it happens to us), whether suddenly or by a long journey, but it surely involves "a letting go." I think it's a series of "letting go's". We get on a roll and we're doing OK as followers, then we get side-tracked, seduced by some opportunity to shine!

Paul said it this way: I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.

Jesus' words come to us again and again – in many situation: always as an invitation – an invitation to look at life in a new way.

Albert Schweitzer said: I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.

How do we hear Jesus' invitation this year? – not to be seeking power, but assisting in the flourishing of an individual or the well-being of the community. It may be you're called on to assist someone, when you had had totally different plans for yourself. A letting go of your own needs for someone in need. Bill Loader says: – being a servant and a slave is not about subservience to Jesus, but about joining him. John's gospel reminds us of that – I call you friends, not servants. This passage isn't meant to leave us insightfully limp, passive, or even panicky and cross like my friend. Jesus offers to empower us – to help us use our power of compassion and self-giving. To be part of turning the world's values and power systems up-side down.

Rev Denham Grierson, Professor of Education at our Centre for Theology & Ministry, now retired, in his book *A People on the Way*, suggests that much of our ordinary, everyday putting other people first is hidden. One such case, says Denham, was the complaint of an elderly woman to her minister that the church did not care for her. It was not true, the minister pointed out, for two women visited her regularly. One of these women, who took her shopping each week, was her elder. "But they are not the church, they are my friends." And strangely, the two women also did not perceive this as their ministry for Jesus.

They did it because of their nurturing in the church which had led them to live this kind of serving life, **as a matter of course**. I'm aware that many of you do this – taking a friend for an x-ray, feeding the neighbour's animals..... not being aware that you have put your own desires or needs last, because it's become such an ingrained part of your Christian identity that you haven't noticed it happening!

All through the 20th. century, and particularly in the late forties, early fifties and sixties – many of the people of what is now the Uniting Church were very involved in being active servants to the community; Our new President, Rev Professor Andrew Dutney, at the retreat for deacons prior to my ordination reminded us who the movers and shakers of Australia have been.

Some of your fore-bears were those who began the inner city kindergartens – to give health and hope to neglected children; the people of the fifties and sixties – the Congregationalists, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, you were among the movers and shakers who brought about important changes in slum housing in the inner cities, you were the ones who fought for the referendum to include indigenous people as citizens of Australia, who formed the Democrats– who worked through public instrumentalities like the SEC – bringing clever **and** safe power throughout the country..... **and had the courage to bring about our wonderful Uniting Church ---- what an adventure in faith that has been – a commitment of so many willing and hopeful serving people.**

Some of you were very very involved in Unicare: offering transport, relief from social isolation with marvelous companionship and radical friendship in craft lessons. In the 70's and the 80's people around my age were being encouraged to join school committees – remember those days, fundraising for kindergarten teachers, or special sports equipment at the kids' school.

I've got a little practical way of putting others first with me today: you can put your email address on some sheets in the foyer: it's a way of saying **COUNT ME IN, - count me in as a supporter of having a National Disability Insurance Scheme**. This coming Friday, all around Australia, a large group of people, all persons vitally concerned with the health and well-being of people living with many and varied forms of disability, are inviting people to a DisabilitiTEA - not fund-raising, just to tell more people about the National Disability Insurance Service, and how important it will be, when the Parliament decides whether to go from pilot schemes starting next year, to a nation wide scheme.

Hopefully this will bring about a change where my niece won't have to do a huge public fund-raising campaign to purchase a vehicle which her step-daughter can use to take her severely disabled teenager to medical care. Where parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents aren't under the huge emotional, physical and financial stressors of trying to provide physiotherapy, wheelchairs, prosthetics – you name it.

If you come along to the World Community Day next Friday morning at St. Silas, you'll have an opportunity to eat a fabulous chocolate cake I'm making – it will be covered with chocolate ganache – which I'm finding difficult to make. Why a chocolate cake: well for those who have watched **MasterChef**, one of the prize winners was Julie Taylor, whose sister Katie, lives with Down syndrome. This is Katie's favourite cake – an excellent way to spread the message.

I'll be up to my armpits with gooey melted chocolate and cream, to entice people to be counted as a supporter of the NDIS. Josh Frydenberg is a supporter of the scheme; I've been in touch with him, and you'll notice the logo Every Australian counts on his website. Then you can chat to a neighbour about it – not just the cake, but the reason for it.

Of course, it is going to cost – which means tax increases; however it will bring about the mateship, the equity, the sharing of the struggles of life which Australians do like to pride themselves on.

We're continually being called to be models of a new kind of being, of servant leadership. There will be times when our way of living will be disrupted, there will be personal cost.

We are invited to put aside our expectations of security and power and to open ourselves daily to the way God's love can shape and support us, his love as a gift which continues to transform us.

Rev Jenny Preston