



Sermon
21st October 2018

Service and Ransom

Mark 10:35-45, Isaiah 53:4-12

© 2018 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Some years ago a school of theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed to interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the man seeking to be our president. This was done and a janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology.

Somebody on that search committee understood, in a flash of genius, that those who live close to Christ become so secure in his love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. They treat janitors and governors with equal dignity. They regard everybody as a VIP. Children seem to do this intuitively; adult Christians have to relearn it.

A couple of weeks ago, we considered some very similar ideas in Mark 9. The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them. Jesus explained that the world's values are upside down. Kingdom values are the other way up. If you want to be first and greatest in the Kingdom you must be last and servant of all.

This was obviously not easy for the disciples to accept. Here we are, a chapter later and they are still arguing about who should be top. Today's gospel reading follows on from the third time of Jesus telling them that he will suffer and die and rise again. Poignantly, he tells the main events exactly as his stated purpose:

"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." ¹

Obedience and Perfection

The Letter to the Hebrews says Jesus learnt obedience – not that he was disobedient before, but there is a difference between being ready to obey and actually obeying. Jesus proved his submission and obedience to the Father by obeying to the death – the furthest point possible. And that obedience was important because not least because the first and continuing major sin of humanity has been rebellion. By obeying even to death, Jesus showed he was not subject to that sinful nature. Hence he was perfected. Now again you might think that meant he changed from being imperfect to perfect but that is not it. The word is about completion and finishing. Through his suffering he completed the task given to him. He finished his work. That is why he said just before he died, "It is finished." ² Derek Prince points out that this is expressed in the perfect tense. The perfect tense is named in the same way – it is about things which are complete. It is used for something

¹ Mark 10:33-34

² John 19:30

completed which continues to have an effect thereafter. So Prince says that Jesus is in effect saying, "It is completely completed."

Disciples' Reaction

Back to the Gospel account – Jesus has made this shocking statement about his future. What is the disciples' reaction? James and John come up to him and ask him:

"Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."³

There seem to be two different conversations going on. You know, talking to the kids who are engrossed in something else and then they come back with a reply which shows their minds are on their own concerns. James and John want to be in charge. And the others are the same – when they find out what these two asked, they are annoyed that they snuck in first.

Jesus picks up their request and asks if they are going to be qualified for such status. They boldly and ignorantly assert they are. But the cup and the baptism to which he refers are not a nice cup of tea after the baby has been dunked. Nor is he talking about being wetted in the Jordan River or any physical liquid drink.

The cup is an Old Testament image for judgement. For example:

Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath...⁴

Baptism simply means "immersion." To baptise is to dunk, to submerge. He is referring to his drinking the cup of judgement against humanity and being immersed in suffering. They don't know what they are talking about. So again, he tells them that he cannot assign those places of honour to them and the Kingdom order is different.

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."⁵

The previous time he tried to get the idea across to his followers, Jesus

... took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."⁶

Children were at the bottom of the importance scale, yet again he turns their understanding upside down. To welcome even a child is to welcome God Almighty.

Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, pointed out that we can serve in a way which is still focussed on ourselves or we can serve focussed on Christ⁷. Here are some contrasts between those two ways:

- *Self-focused service is concerned with impressive gains.*
Christ-focused service welcomes all opportunities to serve.
- *Self-focused service requires external reward, appreciation, and applause. Christ-focused service is content with hiddenness. The divine nod of approval is sufficient.*
- *Self-focused service is highly concerned about results.*
Christ-focused service delights only in service.

³ Mark 10:37

⁴ Isaiah 51:17

⁵ Mark 10:43-44

⁶ Mark 9:36-37

⁷ Quoted from Paul D. Robbins, *Leadership*, 1988, p. 146

- *Self-focused* service is affected by feelings.
Christ-focused service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need. The service disciplines the feelings.
- *Self-focused* service insists on meeting the need; it demands the opportunity to help.
Christ-focused service listens with tenderness and patience. It can serve by waiting in silence.

Ransom for many

After telling the disciples that greatness in the Kingdom is expressed through service not dictatorship he points out that he himself came to serve:

“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.”⁸

And not just to serve but to pay the ransom. A ransom is the amount paid to free a slave or a prisoner, to redeem a pledge or reclaim something pawned. You may remember that Richard the Lion Heart was captured on his way home from the crusades. The Holy Roman Emperor demanded a ransom to release him. The amount (150,000 marks) was 2-3 times the annual income of the crown and required a property tax of 25% on his subjects! When the full amount was delivered - 65,000lb of silver, that’s \$17,000,000 these days⁹ – he was freed to return home.

When Jesus said he gave his life as a ransom it implies we are enslaved and it is impossible for us to get free. Someone else can buy our freedom but we cannot. That’s what our Old Testament passage was talking about as well:

⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ...

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ ... the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

^{8b} ... For the transgression of my people he was stricken.

¹⁰ ... the LORD makes his life a guilt offering...

Do you know in your heart that he bore your sins? Do you know you have sins to bear? Some people think they haven’t sinned. Well the Bible tells us that we have all sinned. We may not have murdered or committed adultery, but we have all chosen to rebel against God. We have all run our lives in independence from him. We have all been selfish. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.¹⁰ That’s the standard of righteousness – the glory of God - and we fail to reach it. We need to be rescued and only Jesus can do it because only he is free of sin and can ransom us from the captivity of sin and the penalty of sin.

This is at the heart of Christianity. Jesus bore our sins so we could be forgiven. But there is something else. The one ransomed belongs to the ransomer. As Paul puts it, “You are not your own, you were bought with a price.”¹¹ If we are forgiven by him, then we are his – in other words if he is our Saviour, he must also be our Lord and our Lord is the person we obey.

So the question is, do you know Him as your Saviour? Is He your Lord?

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version* ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁸ Mark 10:45

⁹ \$US17/Troy Oz or about \$NZ22.90

¹⁰ Romans 3:23

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a