

4. The Practice of Servanthood (Gen. 3 : 1-7 & Mark 10 : 35-45)

Introduction

For those of you who are visitors to St. John's we are in the middle of a series of sermons based on John Ortberg's book, "The Life You've always Wanted" It's all about training ourselves to change and develop in our spiritual life.

Last week Mike talked about 'slowing' in order to make time for God so that we can tune into his leading and guidance for us. Mike issued a challenge to choose the longest supermarket queue and make the most of the time there and to do the same when driving. Did anyone have a go? Was it as bad as you thought? I had to practice this slowing thing last week as I sat in Cairo traffic on the way to the pyramids! If every Egyptian driver practiced slowing then the place would be transformed! I also experienced the solitude Mike spoke of as I climbed Mount Sinai. It was a tough climb but when I got to the summit I was the only one there – it was wonderful and quiet – just me and God and the awesomeness of the mountains and the wilderness.

This week we're looking at **servicing** under the title of 'Appropriate Smallness'. It's interesting that we are doing this on a Sunday when we have just witnessed the baptism of Katie Skye. Believe me, Richard and Sarah will find themselves putting Katie's needs first and their own last as they parent her and love her into adulthood. Ahead of you is the possibility of a lifetime of servant heartedness.

So a question for us all to consider this morning; 'How servant hearted are you?' In other words, how good are you at putting others' needs first and you own last? It's not always easy (you only have to look at today's readings to see that) and it doesn't necessarily come naturally so ... we probably need a bit of training to be better at humility and servanthood.

Humility

A word about humility – I think ‘humility’ has had a bad press in the past – it always conjures up pictures of grovelling, snivelling types (like Uriah Heep in the book David Copperfield. Or people who are prepared to be a doormat and let others walk all over them.

That’s not the Biblical view of humility. Jesus says everyone who humbles themselves will be exalted (Matthew 23:12). So what does it look like to be a humble person?

Being humble doesn’t mean you have to be a doormat – it does mean that we are willing to let others’ needs come before our own. John Ortberg says humility involves a healthy ‘self-forgetfulness’ so that when we are with other people we are truly ‘with them’ and not thinking how they could be of benefit to us.

Humility is not about beating ourselves up or trying to make ourselves nothing – it is about seeing ourselves realistically. Neither thinking we are not worth anything or being fooled into thinking that the world revolves around us and our personal needs.

The story is told of the famous boxer Muhammad Ali, who was on a flight to an event. The aircraft ran into severe turbulence and was being shaken violently. The passengers were all instructed to fasten their seatbelts immediately. Everyone complied except Ali. When a stewardess approached him and asked him to fasten his belt Ali replied, “Superman don’t need no seat belt.” The stewardess took one look at him and snapped, “Superman don’t need no airplane either. Belt Up!”

I’m afraid that thinking the world revolves around us is the world of the baby! Much as we love Katie Skye she is not humble and does not have a servant heart. She thinks the whole world revolves around her and her needs.

“I’m hungry – feed me ... now!”

“I’ve done a poo –change me ... now!”

“I’ve woken up and I’m lonely – cuddle me ... now!”

Richard and Sarah, does that ring any bells with you? Seriously, if we don’t have a humble attitude and we are selfish not selfless I’m afraid we are living in the world of the baby – and we need to grow up.

In our reading from Mark chapter 10 we find James and John living in the world of the baby. They were realistic enough to know that they wouldn’t get Jesus’ seat in heaven – but they wanted the next best seats – and blow the other disciples! I have a friend who calls this type of behaviour ‘The meme monster’ Me, me, me!

A Question to ponder

What areas of your life are you prone to selfishness and want ‘me first’? Be honest! (a minute to share).

The Servant King

There are times when we need to stand up for ourselves and protect what is ours but we need above all a servant heart. In talking to James and John, Jesus says that we are not to lord it over people and think we are better than everyone else. In fact if we want to be big in God’s kingdom we need to make ourselves small. That’s the pattern that Jesus gave us in how he conducted himself when he walked the earth. Jesus did not come to be served – but to serve and give his life for each one of us sitting here this morning. One of my favourite songs from the 80’s is Graham Kendrick’s The Servant King.

*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to The Servant King.*

So how do we actually *practice* servanthood? What can we do to develop a humble attitude and a servant heart? What can we do to train ourselves up in this area? A few suggestions.

1. The Ministry of the Mundane

The first suggestion is what John Ortberg calls, ‘The Ministry of the Mundane’. This happens in the thousands of opportunities you and I get each day to put others first and serve them. These opportunities occur at home, at work, at church, in the gym or wherever you find yourself.

Let me give you an example. It’s the middle of the night and Katie Skye starts to cry. Richard could pretend to be in a deep sleep and only when he hears Sarah get up to see if the baby is OK does he groggily say, “Shall I go?” (knowing full well it’s already too late!) Real servanthood happens when Richard gets up, not resenting the fact that he’ll spend a few precious minutes with his daughter, and lets Sarah sleep on. The ministry of the mundane.

Last week, when I was away in Egypt a number of us were ill; I won’t go into details, only to say that at one stage ‘Imodium’ had become so scarce that I could have made thousands selling the few tablets I had left on the black market. But I witnessed so many ‘ministries of the mundane’. Someone carrying a suitcase, helping another off the bus, offering water, loo paper even! I saw others put first and self put last time and again – often when they thought no-one was looking – it was a ‘Secret Service’ if you like. The ministry of the mundane.

And you know the more we do this small kind of mundane servanthood the more it will become a joy and the more it will become a habit.

2. Ministry of Holding your Tongue

When I worked in the NHS I had a member of staff who was very rude. She used to pride herself in not holding back, “I tell it as it is” she used to say. I’m afraid that attitude meant that she hurt people and used it as an excuse for plain rudeness and bullying. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote,

Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words It must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him.

He called this ‘the ministry of holding your tongue’. Sometimes we serve others by speaking out – truth, compassion, encouragement, etc. But at other times we serve others by keeping our mouths firmly shut.

Last week in Egypt I was on someone else’s pilgrimage – I wasn’t the leader. One evening a group of us were talking about aspects of the pilgrimage and they were criticising some things about the itinerary. They were right and when I lead a similar pilgrimage next year I’ll be doing things very differently. But I held my tongue and didn’t join in – the best way of serving the group and the leader was not to speak but to remain silent.

Why don’t you practice ‘the ministry of holding your tongue’ this week – or even this morning when you talk to me about my sermon!

3. The Ministry of Bearing

Finally the ministry of bearing. You and I are called to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), to help carry the load which weighs down on them. In practice that might involve us praying with or for the person. It may involve giving comfort or practical support.

It might also involve ‘bearing with’ people – especially if we find them difficult. Last week there was a couple who seemed very needy in the group. They wanted attention and when they felt they weren’t getting enough rather sulked. As an outsider to the group I observed it on the first night. Rather uncharitably I thought “I’m glad they’re not coming on my trip.” And then regretted it immediately. These were hurt people, created by God and loved by him. So I decided that I would deliberately sit in the seat in front of them in the coach (which of course no-one else sat in!) and bear with them. My view of them changed as the week went on – I’m not saying I’m a saint or that they still didn’t irritate me at times – but I think God taught me something about the richness of humanity through them.

Have a go at the ministry of bearing this week (especially with someone you don’t find easy) and see what God teaches you.

Conclusion

So to end, ‘How servant hearted are you? Jesus said that to be great in God’s kingdom we must be the servant of all. Have a go at training yourself this week in the ministry of the mundane, the ministry of holding your tongue and the ministry of bearing.

I’m going to end by showing you a picture of Dave Thomas, who founded the hamburger chain, ‘Wendy’s’.



One year in the annual report to shareholders he was pictured wielding a mop and bucket – not for a publicity stunt but to show that he wanted to lead by example. The report said that at Wendy’s an MBA didn’t mean ‘Masters degree in Business Administration’ but ‘Mop and Bucket Attitude’. You are never too high up to serve and service at the lowest levels makes for great success. Have you got an MBA yet?

Jesus said, “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.”