

Passion Sunday 21 March 2021

12:20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

12:21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

12:22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

12:23 Jesus answered them; "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

12:24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

12:25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

12:26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

12:27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

12:28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

12:29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

12:30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

12:31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

12:33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Participating in the life of God. (Revd David Treharne)

Part 1. Switch off???

Have you ever watched a sporting event where you got to a point where you couldn't watch anymore and had to leave? Watching the England cricket team can be like that. There were times in the recent series with India when it was too much to take; too painful!

We're at the point in the church year with the story of Jesus where things have started to get rather tough. Things had been looking so promising with people recognising him as Lord and Messiah. The healings, the miracles... but now the time has come (the hour) when opposition is mounting and the forces against him seem stronger than him, and will lead him to a cruel death.

At this point there is a sense. I'm going to switch off now. I can't cope with this. I'll tune back in at the end of it all! It's too much!

It's Passiontide and for the next 2 weeks, before we jump to the fantastic resurrection bit, we will journey with Jesus through his dark days of betrayal, crucifixion and death.

The journey, the experience of Jesus and with Jesus, starts to get extremely uncomfortable, and we may be tempted to switch off especially as Jesus' teaching seems to become harder and more costly.

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.

Obviously if we leave a great sporting event we miss something rather important that the final result doesn't convey. Whilst the analogy struggles, it is very true with the journey to the Cross. If we disengage from the passion of Jesus, we miss something vital, so please don't switch off now only to re-engage on Easter morning!

For in walking this journey with Jesus we get to know who God really is. We also get an understanding of our lives, our world, our sin, our pain & suffering... as God in Christ inhabits the darkest depths of human experience.

Someone once said "Every believer, every minister and congregation is tempted to realize the Kingdom of God apart from the cross of Christ" Rev. Bryan Findlayson; and I once heard a church leader say... "We are an Easter people. We don't do Good Friday. We don't have Jesus on a Cross." I think I know what he was saying, but he was missing the point bigtime.

Indeed, I'm not sure we can't make sense of the resurrection and experience it ourselves unless we have journeyed to the Cross.

As much as we might want to be pain avoidant, or have a palatable feel-good Gospel, we can't ignore or bypass the Cross. The Cross is the instrument of our salvation. It represents God's central act of self-emptying love... a love we are called to follow and enter into, not avoid.

Rev Robert Hawker, of 19th Century Harvest fame said, *"Had Jesus not descended to the grave, how would he have been the life-giving, the soul-quickenning root of all his church and people?"*

It seems like weakness and foolishness but the Cross is the manifestation of the love and power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18ff) and to miss out the Cross means missing out on participation in the life of God.

St Paul said, I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10ff)

In walking the way of the Cross... we discover who we are and can make sense of our lives. We also discover who God is as we journey with him.

Those who stay with Jesus, who journey with him through and beyond the Cross; those who listen to his words and trust his promises... those who participate in the life of God, there is rich reward, there is life, there is fulfilment... there is glory.

Part 2. Sharing in the life of God as servants

The broad theme of my talk today, but also of this Passiontide, is participating in the life of God.

Those who want to participate in the life of God will follow Jesus, and following Jesus will lead to a life of a servant. *Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. John 12:26*

Not necessarily what we want!

This is something we might not want to hear. It's one of those 'switch off' moments...

I'm guessing that not all those around Jesus were too thrilled about the idea of being a servant that followed in Jesus' footsteps, especially as those steps led to the Cross! Yet this is the way of Jesus! Jesus served his Father's will with sacrificial self-emptying love and commitment... a love we are called to follow (and enter into)

Jesus is our Lord, and we are his servants ready to do his will. This is a reminder that Christian living, vocation and service isn't about doing what we want to do and getting personal satisfaction from it, and ticking off our bucket list in life. It is about being ready for what Jesus calls us to be and do. We may not necessarily want to be it, do it or like it... but out of love and as servants of God we undertake our calling as his servants... and in so doing we live out our vocation as his creation following the way of the Cross... and find life and utter fulfilment.

If you know God has called you to be or do something which you'd rather not be or do (and it'll happen... the Bible's full of such examples)... caring, serving, loving, forgiving, healing, preaching, praying... if he has placed you somewhere you'd rather not be... think of yourself as his servant, serving him.

As a commentor said, "The point of faith in Jesus isn't just faith, or comfort, or satisfying spiritual desires. No, the point of following Jesus is that we might be drawn more deeply into the kingdom of God through our love for, service to, and sacrifice on behalf of those around us."

So being a servant of God might not be what we want... but it might be what God wants. Father, glorify your name (John 12:28) ... not my will but yours be done (Mark 14:36).

Right Motivation

And in response there's something really important here about doing what we do with the right motivation. Jesus' service, his good deeds, his doing was not born out of duty, but out of a loving relationship with his heavenly Father. And this motivation behind his actions is utterly crucial. If his motivation for service, his ministry, and especially his death had been anything other than pure love... he would have thrown in the towel. Instead, he took the towel out of loving obedience to his Father.

Is our service and practice of faith coming from a place of love of God deep in our hearts? Something arising from the core of our inner being, from a loving relationship and communion with God, rather than something that's dutiful drudgery, a guilt response, visible outward observance to be seen by others?

Motivation like this keeps us close to God whatever happens. Ulterior motives for the Christian servant can lead to burnout, disillusionment, drifting away, and building our own kingdoms rather than God's Kingdom. I've been there! As soon as we start doing stuff for something other than the love of God... things can start to unravel.

What motivates you to live life as a Christian and serve God? Listen inside to those subtle drivers. "Do this or that, or you'll be a failure." "What will others think about you?" "You'll never succeed unless you..." "Try hard", "please others", "be perfect..." "you'll feel guilty if you don't."

Living life as a servant of God, like Jesus, has to spring from our loving relationship with God. If being a servant of God and others in church and community has become dutiful drudgery then go back and talk with God about it as a matter of great importance. God doesn't want our dutiful drudgery but a heart of love response.

Inadequacy

Being a servant is about wanting to love God (his will, not ours), and having the motivation of love.

But finally, there are things God's calls us to... thing we have to live through, deeds we are called to do which just feel way to big, too difficult, too hard.

Wherever God has called you to be, whatever cross he has called you to carry... just remember none of us can do it by ourselves. We can easily get into a pattern of thought where we are saved by faith but sanctified by works. In other words, grace is where we start the Christian life, totally reliant upon God, but often we somehow end up "thrown back upon our own resources" and start to depend on our own energy, efforts, skills and accomplishments rather than God.

All along the servant Jesus relied on his heavenly Father and the gift and grace of the Holy Spirit, and when he had to face the Cross, the hardest part of his call, he placed himself in God's hands... "My soul is troubled..." the Greek is closer to my soul is greatly distressed, filled with fear and dread. How did Jesus respond? From a place of deep loving relationship to his Father... he abandoned himself totally into God's hands and trusted that his loving Father would see him through it. We can and should do the same in all lives whatever we are facing, whatever we are called to be or do. Rather than look merely to our own resources we look to the Lord at every turn. "I can do everything through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13)

Conclusion

We are invited to participate / to share in the life of God as his servants. It's tough, it's costly, it's hard to watch at times but utterly necessary... and ultimately life giving.

And what is our response? That is a question that will face us over the days and weeks ahead.