

14 March 2010

The Purpose Driven Life – Part 5 – Shaped for serving God - Ministry

Readings: Psalm 100 Matthew 20: 20-28

A member of my family is an Elvis Presley fan. Been to Graceland, seen the grave, and for a significant birthday last year an Elvis impersonator was brought in to entertain. Elvis died of obesity and drug dependency at the age of 42 over a quarter of a century ago, yet his songs still make it regularly into the pop charts. Elvis may have been outwardly successful to all his fans; inwardly he lived an unfulfilled and unhappy life. His wife Priscilla said in one interview about her husband, “Elvis never came to terms with who he was meant to be or what his purpose in life was.” I don’t want you to make that mistake.

Paul wrote in Eph. 2:20, “*We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*”. God made you to make a difference. And what matters is not how long you live, but how you live. The Bible says we’re created to serve, we’re saved to serve, we’re gifted to serve, we’re shaped to serve. We’re commanded to serve God.

One of the verses I’ve often quoted here is 1 Thessalonians 5: 24 ‘He who calls is faithful, and he will do it’. Whenever God calls us to do something, He equips us first. This is what Job says, “*Your hands shaped me and made me.*” (Job 10:8). Those of us doing ‘Growing Leaders’ will remember the five things that God uses to shape us: **S**piritual gifts, **H**ear, **A**bilities, **P**ersonality, and **E**xperiences. That spells ‘SHAPE’. If we think about it, each of us has these five things but in different ways – each of us is unique - we each have a unique purpose. And that purpose is to serve God. I’m not going to go deeper into ‘SHAPE’ today because it features in our daily readings this week. But I remind you: God made you unique - and your uniqueness is not for your benefit.

Throughout the Bible we are called by God to serve one another – to do good works. Every one of us is expected to contribute to this world using the gifts that God has given us. As it says in 1 Peter 4 v 10, “*Each one should use whatever gift he’s received (not to make money but) to serve others.*”

“My fourth purpose in life is to **serve God by serving others.**” Many people want to serve God but they don’t want to serve others. You can’t do that. The only way you can serve God is by serving others. Think about that – it’s like love. You can feel it – but it has to be directed to another, shown in action to another.

The Bible word for serving others is ‘**Ministry**’. Again, as we have found with the other key words we’ve looked at over the last three weeks - worship, fellowship and discipleship - these words are often misunderstood. When we speak of ministry, it is far more than those who are ordained to the

clergy. All of us are called by God to minister to, to serve, one another. It's a ministry that we all share together.

Someone once wrote:

There are 560 members in our church but 100 are frail and elderly,
that leaves 460 to do all the work.

But 74 are young people away at college,
that leaves 386 to do all the work.

There are also 150 tired business men and women,
so that leaves 236 to do all the work.

Then there are 150 mums with children, that leaves 86.

A further 46 have other important interests

That leaves 40 to do all the work.

But 15 live too far away to come regularly
which leaves only 25 to do all the work.

Then a further 23 say that they have already done their bit, and that leaves you and me.

I'm now exhausted, and so it's over to you!

The truth is, that whatever our age, whatever our gifting from God, whether we are men or women, we are all called to serve as ministers in the Body of Christ. There is no 'opt-out clause' available. God has called all of us by our baptism to serve one another.

When Christ called his disciples he said, "*Follow me.*" By following Jesus as his disciples we are called to be like Him. When Jesus came to this earth of ours, he came 'to serve'.

In today's reading: Jesus said, "*Your attitude must be like my own, for I did not come to **be served** but **to serve***". (Matthew 20 v 28)

Again, as I've said previously, what we do now is a warm-up, a practice, for what we shall be doing in eternity for ever and ever. In eternity, we shall be serving God and so we start learning to do that here and now during our time on earth.

So how do we learn to serve like Jesus? It takes three things.

- 1) Serving like Jesus means being available**
- 2) Serving like Jesus means being grateful**
- 3) Serving like Jesus means being faithful**

1) Serving like Jesus means being available

When Jesus came to Jericho *“two blind men ... shouted, ‘Lord have mercy on us!’ ... Jesus stopped and called them. ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked.”*

Jesus **stopped** for the blind men. If you want to serve God, you must be willing to be interrupted. Most of Jesus’ miracles were done when he was interrupted. You think about it. All the people he healed – the blind man, the lame man, the sick people, the paralysed man, the dead child – all of them were interruptions. From his first miracle, the changing water into wine, to the healing of the High Priest’s servant in the Garden of Gethsemane, on each occasion Jesus was interrupted.

We learn much from studying the ‘stops’ of Jesus - the times when Jesus’ life was interrupted are the times when he healed or ministered to those who came to him. Almost every miracle Jesus did, He did it because He let Himself be interrupted.

I once heard a Diocesan Bishop say ‘never do today what you can put off till tomorrow’. But Proverbs 3 v 28 says, *“Never tell your neighbours to wait until tomorrow if you can help them now.”*

To learn to serve like Christ, we must first learn to be **‘available’**. We have to be prepared to respond to the interruptions that come our way – for these are God-given opportunities to serve one another. It’s very hard to do in practice. It’s always when I’m rushing to do something at my desk that the phone rings, the doorbell rings. Inside you may begrudge the interruption, but you know you are there to serve their needs.

There are three barriers that get in the way of making ourselves available to others.

First: Self-centredness. Paul wrote to the Philippians *“Forget yourself long enough to lend a helping hand.”* (Phil. 2:4) Whenever you see a need right in front of you, guess what? God is giving you the opportunity to practice serving. Whenever you see someone who is in need you have a God-given opportunity to respond. God is giving us the chance to serve like Jesus. The number one enemy of compassion is **‘busyness’**. Most of us just get too busy – we don’t have time to serve.

Our problem is we put up a ‘do not disturb’ sign. Do not disturb my career, do not disturb my family, do not disturb my free time, and do not disturb my comfortable life! Jesus whole ministry came about through allowing himself to be disturbed by others. At times the disciples would try their best to cushion Jesus and send people away, but Jesus was having none of it. Let the children come to me. Let that woman or man come to me. Don’t send the hungry crowd away, feed them!

The second barrier to availability is perfectionism.

All of us love things to be perfect. But life is seldom perfect and neither are we. We delay doing things by saying that I'm not ready. One of the things that has irritated me in churches I've attended is when I'm told 'We're not ready for that yet'. And – shame on me – I have even said it here.

Look at these wise words from Ecclesiastes 11 v 4, *"If you wait for perfect conditions, you'll never get anything done."*

If God only used perfect people, what would get done in this world? Nothing! We're all a bunch of misfits (or a ragbag of saints and fatheads, as I said in an earlier sermon). We all have weaknesses. We all have faults. We all have failures. But God uses us all. Why? Because God doesn't use perfect people because there aren't any. Real servants of Christ don't wait. They do the best they can with what they can for Jesus. They get on with serving and don't wait until the conditions are perfect. If God used perfect people, nothing would ever get done in this world. It is important that we don't make an idol out of excellence.

The third barrier to availability is materialism

Jesus said, *"No servant can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money."* (Lk. 16:13). The question is "What's number one in priority in my life?" What is the **real** priority in your life? That's, in effect, the alternative – Jesus said God and mammon (or money) but what's the real priority in your life? You **cannot** serve both. It's an impossibility. We can get so busy taking care of things that we don't have time to take care of people. And that's a problem. We can even become obsessed with taking care of the church building. Jesus asks: are we Kingdom-builders or wealth-builders? If God wants to give you wealth, that's great. That's wonderful, but it is not the number one goal of your life. Because you don't take your the wealth with you to heaven, but your character. Seek ye first the kingdom of God – and all these other things will be added later.

To serve like Jesus served means that we must learn to make ourselves available.

2) Serving like Jesus means we learn to be grateful

Lazarus had been dead, and buried, for a couple of days when Jesus turned up – not to weep at the grave, but to raise Lazarus from the dead. What we often miss in our reading of this is how Jesus starts – with a prayer of thanks. John 11:41-42, *"Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank You that You heard me. I know that You always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here.'" "I want them to know that I am grateful that you heard Me".* Jesus had an

attitude of gratefulness in everything that He did - Jesus was grateful in the tough times, when He was criticised, when things were not easy in ministry. Ministry and miracles always happened in this attitude of gratefulness.

We need to learn to serve each other gratefully, with an attitude of gratitude. Psalm 100: 2: *“Serve the Lord with gladness”*. We do not serve others out of a sense of duty - we serve because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. We can never thank God enough for what he has done for us. We can never out-give God.

As it says in 2 Timothy 1 v 9, *“It is He who saved us and chose us for His holy work not because we deserved it but because that was his plan...”*

So there it is, we have been saved so that we can serve. Serving others is an outward sign of our salvation, our giving thanks to God for all his goodness.

There are **two further barriers** that get in the way of gratitude.

The first barrier to gratitude is comparing and criticising.

When you compare yourself to others or criticise others your gratitude is lost. In the Vicarage, we try to remember to say grace before meals, giving thanks to God. I can remember when I was small, living at home. ‘Not fair, he’s got more than me’ to which my mother would sometimes respond ‘I’ve measured them they’re both the same’. Rick Warren tells the story of going off with a group, and being lavished with wonderful accommodation in a beach-front hotel. He was truly grateful – till he discovered that others in the party had been allocated even better rooms! That’s how ridiculous we are when it comes to comparisons. Think of where we live, the opportunities we have, the time that we live in! And I’m like you, human nature is, we compare to others and we let it steal the joy and the gratitude out of our lives. Look at all that God has done for us. And when I have gratitude for that, there’s no longer any need to compare and criticise.

If we criticise others, we are breaking up the fellowship to which we have been called.

Paul wrote in Romans 14 v 4, *“Who are you to criticise someone else’s servant? The Lord will determine whether His servant has been successful.”*

The truth is all of us are gifted to serve God and others in different ways. What is important is that we work together to serve God as his Family here in this fellowship. As God’s children, as brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, we are called to serve and not to judge others. We are all called to serve.

The second barrier to being grateful is the wrong motivation.

Jesus taught in Matthew 6 v 1, *“When you do good deeds, don’t try to show off. If you do, you won’t get a reward from your Father in heaven.”*

There’s perhaps a tension here between proper thanks, and doing something to get the glory of the thank you. A very good friend is ordained, on the staff of a church in Florida. We’ve been praying for some time for his son who was diagnosed with lymph gland cancer. We’ve been to the church – amazing facilities. Including a fully equipped crèche (with cots). We were talking about ministry, and John (my friend) said ‘we really need another staff member here but the money won’t come in for that. You can’t put a plaque on a minister’s back ‘to the glory of the given by’s’.

Self-promotion and serving don’t mix, but it’s easy to get them mixed up. Serving can easily come to self-serving so that others will like us. Serving is quite simply serving others with no hidden motive or agenda. It’s not about thinking how noble or good we are. We serve to be like Jesus.

I have mentioned Mother Teresa in a previous sermon in this series. Let me share another story. Malcolm Muggeridge, the journalist, went to Calcutta to make a film of Mother Teresa called ‘Something Beautiful for God.’ The Home for Dying Destitutes was formerly a Hindu temple, with very poor lighting - so poor that the cameraman, Ken Macmillan said it would be quite hopeless to film there. However, he was persuaded to take a few inside shots. When the film was processed, the inside shots were bathed in a wonderful soft light. Ken Macmillan agreed that this could not be accounted for in earthly terms.

Muggeridge said of the incident, “I have no doubt whatever as to what the explanation is: holiness, an expression of life, is luminous ... The camera has caught this luminosity, without which the film would have come out quite black, as Ken Macmillan proved to himself when he used the same stock in similar circumstances and got no picture at all.”

3) Serving like Jesus means being faithful

As we make ourselves available and being grateful for what God has done so we need to learn to be faithful. Faithfulness means you don’t give up. It is all too easy to start things but quite a different matter to see them through to completion. Faithful - you keep on going, you don’t quit in the middle of the assignment.

Jesus said in John 17 v 4, *“I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”*

Jesus was faithful in completing the work His Father had sent Him to do, although it was seriously tested at times such as in the Garden of Gethsemane. If we're going to be like Jesus it means we have to serve God's purposes as long as we live. Christians never retire from serving others.

Paul said, *"The one thing required of servants is that they be faithful," (1 Cor. 15: 58)*

What motivates us to stay faithful in serving God over the long haul? It's both looking back – grateful for what God has done – and looking forward – grateful for the hope before us. Jesus said that we're going to be rewarded forever and ever in eternity for what we do here on earth in serving Him, and by serving others. We have gratitude for the past and we have faith in the future reward. But allow me to be a bit negative. Most of what we do in life doesn't matter. The Kipling poem 'Indispensability' – 'put your fist in a bucket of water – the hole that is left when you remove your fist is the measure of how much you'll be missed'. Cynical – yes. But any time you're serving in Jesus' name, no matter how small, it **does** matter. 1 Cor. 15:58, *"Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for Him is a waste of time or effort"* Every thing, every little thing, matters – has significance - to God. He said, "Even if you give a cup of cold water in my name to a child, that counts."

It is important here to appreciate the difference between '**significance**' and '**prominence**'. For example, our noses are prominent - but I could lose my nose and still live. On the other hand if I lost my liver, or heart, that would be significant. I would be dead! Things that are visible for all to see are often thought of as being the most important. That's not true. I could live without my prominent nose but my heart is far more significant if I am going to live.

With the Body of Christ, the Church, the actions that go on behind the scenes, unnoticed by the majority, are often far more **significant** to the health and well-being of the church fellowship. Those who look after the music and worship, those who serve on the various teams, those who the welcoming, those who give generously, those who look after our children, who write up Registers, and countless others are not always prominent in what they do but they are hugely significant in maintaining the life and health of our Church Family.

Serving each other is significant but not always prominent. But without those who are prepared to serve there would be no Church fellowship to share.

The 4th Purpose for our lives is 'to serve like Jesus'. Serving others is the way we serve God and share His love for us. Each one of us, whatever our gifting and age is called to serve in one way or other. Simply because it's one of God's purposes for our lives.

The letter to the Hebrews puts it this way, *“He will not forget how hard you have worked for Him and how you have shown your love to Him by caring for other Christians.”*

The strength of any community is reflected in the willingness of its members to care for one another. It was the one command that Jesus gave to his disciples, *“Love one another as I have loved you.”* That is serving as Christ served.

In two weeks time, on Palm Sunday, we have just one service, at 10.30am. We'll all wear name labels – and around the church will be signs listing some of the variety of ministries we have. Many of these are significant but not prominent. We'll have coffee here in church and, over coffee, let's take the opportunity not just to meet people we don't know, but let's also look at what ministries we can share in. Rotas like brass cleaning, flower arranging, or reading or leading prayers. I'm tempted to say we are going to start from scratch with all the lists – maybe I won't.

Some of you may have not have served on one of the ministry teams before. Now this is your opportunity to sign up where you think God is calling you to serve.

For others, you may not yet be sure how God is calling you to serve. That's fine! Take time to pray about it. The lists will remain open for a while so there's no panic – we'll be repeating some of this at the APCM, and again on a Sunday in May.

For me what matters is that God has given each one of us special gifting – our SHAPE - to serve Him. It's important that we find the right ways of serving Him that use these special gifts. The thing to remember is that as a whole congregation God has given us all the skills and time we need to serve one another. If people hold back their gifting and serving then the different needs of the church will not be met. But, by trusting in God, we know that together all of us can serve God and make this a vibrant community for God to grow his people.

Finally look what Jesus said in one of his parables, *“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things so I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!”* (Matthew 25 v 21)

Let us pray ...

Father, I know that you have called me to serve you by serving others. Forgive me for the times I've put a “Do not disturb” sign on my heart. Help me to see the interruptions as opportunities to serve. Help me to make time for what matters most. I want to serve you freely and gratefully and faithfully, and I want to practice before I get to heaven so one day I can hear you say, “Well done, good and faithful servant”. In your name I pray. **Amen.**

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