

The master returns

This story is about servants and about judgment, both subjects we are rather nervous to discuss.

In this parable, these are domestic servants, looking after the master's household. Nowadays, I think it is politically incorrect to talk about servants – people have cleaning ladies, nannies, home helps, gardeners or if you are really grand you have staff. Cleaning ladies used to be called charwomen, as ladies were to be distinguished from women. I remember as a very small child, my grandmother had 3 live-in servants, there really was a green baize door, you went through it into the servants' quarters, and they had their own staircase and back door. My grandmother was always addressed as madam. This was the forties, and very soon the big house was sold, my grandmother was living in a flat with a very nice cleaner coming in twice a week. No longer madam, but Mrs. Johnston. Equality was arriving, and nobody used the word servant any more for domestic help. Master and servant seems so old-fashioned, nowadays we don't believe in deference. Can we identify with the servants in the parable? Would we be prepared to stay up all night waiting for our master? Or would we consider it an unreasonable request?

However there are many servants in modern life, civil servants in Whitehall and town halls, who serve the community. Then there are the armed forces, or armed services, the military who protect the nation; the police service, who help keep law and order. Then there are the service industries, who employ the majority of people in the country; teachers,, nurses, doctors, shop keepers, all people who in one way or another serve the public. So, if serving the public is acceptable, why are we so chary about the more intimate relationship of a servant and his/her master? Are we too proud to acknowledge that someone could be our master?

Going back to the parable: the master expects the servants to wait up for him, and to be ready, dressed with their lamps burning , even if he is not back until after midnight. Remember this was the Middle East, where night falls by at least 8 p.m., and people would normally go to bed as the sun went down. The good master will reward these faithful servants by inviting them to recline at table while he waits on them himself, a great honour.

Peter asks a very pertinent question ‘Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?’

I think it is to everyone, but Jesus goes on to be specific about the responsibility of the disciples, by speaking of the duties of the manager. The faithful and wise manager treats the servants well, gives them their food allowance at the proper time. He follows his master’s instructions and when the master returns he may reward the manager by promoting him and putting him in charge of all his possessions. On the other hand, there is the manager who thinks his master won't be back any time soon, starts to abuse the servants, eats, drinks and gets drunk. When the master returns unexpectedly, that manager will be cut to pieces and cast out to be with the unbelievers. *V.47 That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows, but the one who does not know and does this deserving of punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*

So how does this parable speak to us as pilgrims? First of all, humility. Jesus is our master, to whom we owe obedience and deference. He may be our friend and comforter, but he is immeasurably our superior. We need to acknowledge that he is our master. Not for nothing is pride considered a deadly sin; ‘I did it my way’ may be Frank Sinatra’s credo, but as pilgrims we are meant to be doing it God’s way.

Our parable tells us it is a personal relationship; we are live-in servants, living in God’s house. Jesus lived for three years in close and intimate contact with his disciples. They called him Lord, Teacher and Master, they ate together, travelled together, but he was undoubtedly their boss. Yet at the last supper, Jesus acts as a servant, and washes his disciples’ feet. He instructs them to wash each other’s feet, his was a symbolic act to show us that we should serve each other as well as him, our master.

What are our duties as servants? Servants don’t sit around doing nothing, so we are meant to be active. Servants’ jobs may be dull, arduous and sometimes downright unpleasant. We mustn’t be too proud or too fussy to carry out tasks that we would rather not do, but know in our heart of hearts that this would be a service to others.

In the words of George Herbert

*Teach me, my god and King
In all things Thee to see
And what I do in anything
To do it as for Thee
A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws
Makes that and the action fine*

But this parable also emphasises the need to wait and to be ready for the Master to come, and he is likely to come when we least expect him. What does this mean? Does it refer to the Second Coming, or in the hour of our death? Or does it mean that we must stay awake and listen for his word to us, stop being so busy that we do not see the needs around us, the service we can render to others? In the parable of the Good Samaritan, I am sure the priest and the Levite were busy, righteous people and felt every justification for passing by on the other side, but it was the good Samaritan who did God's will, gave up his time and money to help the unfortunate man who had been beaten up by thieves. We need to be in tune with our Lord and Master, constantly thinking about what we should do to serve him.

We pilgrims all hope that at the end we will hear our Master say 'well-done thou good and faithful servant!' And we will be able to speak the words of Simeon, the nunc dimittis – Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.

But this parable is also about judgement. The lazy or wicked servant will be chastised. This isn't gentle Jesus meek and mild, and we are not little children; if we are pilgrims, we are grown-up responsible adults. When C.S. Lewis wrote the Narnia stories for children, the Christ figure was portrayed as Aslan the lion – not a pussy cat or a poodle. Children could climb on his back and pull his ears, but we are left in no doubt of Aslan's strength and power. The lazy servant being cut into pieces is a startling thought, so is being beaten. Also, dire warnings to us followers, if we know His will and yet disregard it and disobey, we will be punished more severely than those who commit the same sin, but in ignorance of God's commandments.

The world in the form of public opinion rapidly condemns hypocrisy whether seen in the church or a vicar or any professing Christian. Most recently, the Church of England coming down in favour of the Living Wage, was immediately criticised for not paying the living wage to all its employees. Because of all the scandals in the Irish Catholic church to do with child abuse, and removing babies from unmarried mothers, the church in Ireland has lost a great deal of its authority, witness the vote for equal marriage. More worrying, church attendance there is markedly down, and the young, on the whole, do not share the faith of their parents and grandparents.

When we were baptised we promised to fight against the world, the flesh and the devil. As pilgrims, we live in the world, but our values are not of the world. We are flesh, but mustn't indulge the flesh- whether it is gluttony (another deadly sin), vanity or immoral sexual behaviour. The devil, personifying evil, may tempt us to do wrong, but fixing our eyes on Jesus, waiting on our Master will help us to see evil for what it is.

Bunyan's hymn:

*He who would valiant be
Gainst all disaster
Let him in constancy
Follow the Master*

We all can say Amen to that, pray that we may be constant pilgrims, though we know how difficult that can be. Bunyan wrote that in prison. Why was he in prison? For preaching unauthorised by the Church of England. I am not authorised by the Church of England, and moreover am a woman, who would never have been allowed to speak in church until very recently. But I hope that the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart have been acceptable to you Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.