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Sun 27B (off RCL = Sun 25B gospel)

Sermon notes on Mark 9.30-37

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In our gospel reading this morning an argument among the disciples about who is the greatest leads to a remark from Jesus about greatness and servanthood: aspire not to be first, but to be last – *there* greatness is to be found. But the force of the contrast between the type of greatness the disciples were arguing about and the servanthood Jesus speaks of could be easily lost on us, not least because we don't have servants these days (unless perhaps we're still kids and we have parents!). Even those who do in this age have "servants" – people to clean their houses or to take care of their personal affairs or whatever – such people actually have *employees* and not servants in the sense Jesus intends here. This difference between servants and employees is critical because the biblical word which is translated here "servant" carries with it the connotation of "slave". An employee who might assist us personally in different ways is in most respects no different from us, apart from who is able to pay whom for work to be done. But when Jesus talks here about being the servant of others, he is not talking about who works for whom, but a type of relationship which is largely unknown to many of us today – one person being *subject to* needs or desires of another.

We need to recover at least some sense of what slavery involves in order to grasp what Jesus talks about when he speaks of service as the way to greatness. The service he speaks of is not simply being helpful or doing good deeds. It's relatively easy, in the sense of helping, to serve others; it is much more difficult to *be* a servant, because the *position* of servant is one of humility, one of allowing others and their needs greater importance. To push it further, we can say that to be a servant or slave is to be at the *mercy* of those one serves.

And it's here that the calling to servanthood begins to take on more troubling connotations. It's one thing to *help* another when we are able and perhaps even be generally available for helping others should a need arise; but it is quite a different thing altogether to be *subject* to others, to *have* to respond to their needs. It's this type of relationship which distinguishes helping from servanthood. The true servant has no will of his or her own, but only the will to meet the needs of the one he or she serves.

That Jesus might be talking about this kind of service as the way of Christian discipleship

should begin to make us nervous, not least because it hasn't been made clear yet *who* it is we are to serve, and so what kind of master it is – good or bad – we will be subject to. For the gospels, the servant is modelled by *Jesus himself*. Jesus' whole ministry can be understood by reference to a mysterious figure who appears in a series of passages in the book of Isaiah, a figure usually known as the "Servant of the Lord". This Servant was one who, as a servant of *God*, was subject to the abuse and rejection of the people, only in the end to become the means by which his abusers were themselves healed. So there is a double service taking place here – the Servant does the bidding of God, but is at the same time the one who serves the people by achieving for them who reject him just what they themselves need.

The service to which Jesus himself calls us is similar – a service of God which takes the form of the service of those around us. We can't serve God without serving others. But it *is* in the first place a serving of God to which we are called. We aren't called simply to subject ourselves to others' demands, but to their true needs. The service Jesus brings to those he encounters is not a meeting of their every desire but a breaking open of the things which enslave them. It is when the *proper* service which Jesus brings meets with the improper demands and desires of God's people that the wheels start to fall off.

Being called to serve as Jesus has served us, we come then to the possibility that our service may also involve being subject to the desires of others, with the same tragic outcome as he experienced. Jesus' own ministry is to be our guide – doing the will of God by identifying and serving the true needs of those around him, while at the same time refusing to meet inappropriate claims on him. Ultimately, Jesus' service of those around him *was* to refuse them what they asked, for to meet those requests would be to submit himself to a different master than the one who sent him. In the end, Jesus met the needs of those he was sent to serve by showing them that they didn't know what they needed, which involved an opening of eyes and ears or, in some cases, a further closing of hearts to the life God would bring us.

We are called to live a similar life of service. Now, quite other than being good news or gospel, this would seem to be bad news all the way. Life is hard enough without finding ourselves called to

commit ourselves to the needs of others, to place ourselves at the mercy of those who may not care too much for our well-being if we don't do as they demand. And indeed such a call to discipleship could *only* be bad news, *if* it were the case that we were being called from *freedom* to such servanthood, if we were *already* free! But it's here that we need the wider sweep of the New Testament as a broader context in which to hear what this call to servanthood involves.

The real, New Testament question is *not* about whether or not will you become a servant, but who it is you *already* serve. To serve is not an option. We all serve something; it's just a question of whether that thing ultimately brings life or death. That will seem like a strange proposal to us in our liberal 21<sup>st</sup> century western society. We like particularly to think that we are free from external laws and the world is ours to do with as we please. But there are powers which make claims over our lives, even if we're not conscious of them.

The call to the kind of servanthood Jesus presents to us is the kind of thing we'll only be able to respond to if we discover that we are already servants or slaves to something much worse than what he asks us sounds like. Only those who know what it is to be at the mercy of masters who abuse and run down and diminish our humanity can know the joy of being subject to a gracious master. Conversion is as much a matter of seeing what is already god in our lives as much as turning to the God and Father of Jesus the Christ.

Jesus certainly presents to the disciples a difficult road. But the New Testament as a whole would say to us that if all we see is the difficulty of *that* road, then we are blinded to the difficulties to which we are already subject. Becoming a servant of Christ is not something we choose or don't choose; it is something which becomes the inescapable conclusion of having had our eyes opened by him to the fact that the world is not what we thought it was. Christians are, in a sense, the "groupies" of Jesus – those who seek to follow, to be where he will be, because they've seen in him something which has caught their attention, and they want more of it at the expense of other things which once held their attention. In this Jesus we see one who comes to serve us, who willingly makes himself subject to us even to the point of losing himself, and yet who just so also received himself back because he has been obedient to a master higher than the powers we are subject to...

The call Jesus makes to servanthood is not a call to free people to become slaves, but a call to switch allegiances, an invitation to choose a different way, and a promise that *this* is the way

to the life we all most earnestly seek. If we do not argue as to who is the greatest, we are challenged to hear what concern it is which does have us in its grip – what it is we do actually serve – and called to let our service of that life-denying thing fall away for the service of the God who has served us and brought us life in the process.

For here is life, and in no other place – in the service which brings life to both the served and the servant. This is a giving which receives in giving away, a service which does not reduce us but enlarges us as it enlarges those we serve. It is with such a service that God has approached us, and it is such a life of service which we are to allow to grow in our own lives and relationships.

Let us pray, then, that what God has begun in his servant Jesus may find its completion in us as we are remade in Christ's likeness by the power of his Spirit. Amen.

