

## Pentecost 18 All Souls' **SELF-EMPTYING LOVE** dtw

(This is effectively Part 2 to last week's **SELF-DENIAL**)

I know why some Anglicans sit near the back of the church. It is in obedience to our Lord's command: "Go and sit in the lowest place...so that the host may say 'friend, move up higher'"! When I worked at St George's Cathedral in Perth, Evensong in the summer was a challenge. Much of the fairly thin congregation would sit near the west door to get the cool breeze from the Swan River and one would be preaching to a whole stack of near-empty pews at the front – not much to do with humility – just plain common sense. Me? I would just melt under all the downlights and still, warm air.

This morning, we hear Jesus saying to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mk 9.35). The humility of Jesus himself leaps out from nearly every page of the NT – the despised, rejected one; the alienated, smitten one; the Servant Lord – the one, who on Good Friday, looked like a complete forsaken failure. We sing of such love that it was 'so amazing, so divine', demanding our lives, our souls, our all – yet do we really dare to imitate this way of life – this way of self-emptying love, as his followers? Jesus' disciples understood so little about the truth of his mission – rank and status were important to them – to the devout Jew, they were a sign of God's *blessing*. Rank and status can mean the same for us too.

Much of society is preoccupied with ambition, impression, influence, though we can disguise it with a false humility. I am a fan of the old *Peanuts* characters, Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus and co. One of my favourite captions has Linus contemplating his future career. He begins by dreaming of becoming a country doctor in a small country town. 'Yes, a humble little country doctor.' 'Mmm...people will come to me from miles around to be healed.' And the final cartoon? You guessed it: 'One day I will be a world famous humble little country doctor!'

Jesus specifically fought against being made a political Messiah – a powerful princely ruler. He rebukes Peter for this reason, just after Peter thought he was on the money with his "You are the Messiah" exclamation. You may remember an account when Jesus forced his way through the crowd and disappeared when they tried to make him their king. When Jesus tries to bring James and John back to the truth of his kind of Messiahship, he asks them whether they can share his suffering and death. They reply, 'yes' without batting an eyelid. OK, Jesus *can* certainly guarantee them that, but not glory, as this world knows it. The other disciples are angry (why, 'indignant' no less), but only because James and John got in first! Once more Jesus tries to contrast worldly greatness with greatness as God sees it. And he turns all common notions of greatness upside down. He calls them to his side and says (*The Message*) "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you." (Mk 10.41-5) Even in the church, people can vie for power, while

kingdom business goes undone. Jesus is saying effectively: if you truly want to embrace life friend, giving service without recognition, not being served, is the sign of true greatness; being last not first is the way to go – failure might even be your best success. You may learn to reclaim and enjoy the life you never knew you had lost.

The gospels present Jesus as a person of authentic authority because he was truly a servant. Jesus doesn't just talk the talk; he walks the walk. His authority finds expression in acts of compassionate love that bring healing and hope. His is the authority of the towel with which he dries the feet of his followers. This is radically different from dominating authority, top-down authority. Dominating authority achieves its purpose through coercion, manipulation, bargaining, bullying; it crushes its opposition into submission to achieve its ends. I'm sure you have met people in your life who like to 'lord it over others' – to 'make their authority felt'. (There's a bit of that going on in America at the moment!) Jesus forbids the use of dominating power in his community. As such, he does not reject authority; he embodies and encourages a unique form – an authentic form – modeled on the position of a servant – aligning himself and his followers with the powerless, that they might be empowered. The community of his disciples is to be a new community where authority is exercised in a context of mutual and equal respect and love. Sadly, down the Christian centuries, so much 'authority' in the Church that Jesus founded has been the very authority he came to condemn (Lord, have mercy) – we have even called bishops 'My Lord' to our and their shame. The best bishops in my experience are servant bishops who never forget that they are still deacons. (All clergy are 'permanent deacons') To take on Jesus' model of authority means the end of the ego-trip and the beginning of extravagant servant-leadership. Christ wants empty vessels that can be filled with light and love and hope for the world. Christ's followers, for as long as they have been faithful to the call, have never failed to recognise the duty of self-denial and renunciation. Today's society provides us with ample opportunities for exercising our responsibility here to take up the cross with all the gravity and wonder of its outrageous summons to radical discipleship.

Evelyn Underhill, that great spiritual writer, wrote these words in her last letter: 'Christianity can never be merely a pleasant or consoling religion. It is a stern business. It is concerned with the salvation through sacrifice and love of a world in which we can all see now, evil and cruelty are rampant. Its supreme symbol is the Crucifix – the total and loving self-giving of humanity to the redeeming purposes of God'.

When we are weak in the service of God, then we are strong. When we empty ourselves to live for others, we dare to follow in the way of the cross. In the pursuit of this world's standards or happiness there is little true joy or fulfilment. To follow Jesus is to know that our true food is the Father's will – to serve people in the name of the Lord who though he was Lord came as a servant and to give his life as a ransom for many. This is what we need to remember as we come again today to His Table and offer ourselves, our country, the needs of our world and our church. It is really the *Servant's* Table – a place to reclaim our very reason for being.