

John 13:31-35 with refs to earlier verses

### **Servant Love**

#### **Service – laudable or demeaning**

There are numerous instances of practices common in the United States finding their way across the Atlantic and into regular use in this country – no doubt eased by our consumption of American tv programmes and Hollywood films – perhaps I ought to spell program with one “m” in this instances and refer to movies rather than films to make my point! But these are minor differences. It is what it is – I suspect that already there is a divergence in our acceptance of such approaches between generations – but for the most part the differences aren’t fundamental. I even find myself saying movies now and again, though I still tend to talk about going to the pictures rather than the cinema! If you haven’t yet been to the new one in Montrose it is well worth going. One of the things that is very noticeable in the States is that there is a widespread appreciation in the general appreciation for those who have served in the armed forces. Ok it isn’t universal but it is very definitely extensive and it can be summed up with the simple phrase “Thank you for your service” addressed to anyone in uniform or on learning that someone had service in the military. That might not go down well with everyone, but it is widespread in the United States – perhaps akin to the genuine appreciation of those working in the health service and other carers in the height of the covid crisis with the Clap for Carers on a Thursday night. The point I am making is that we do have modern examples of “service” being seen as laudable or praiseworthy. And that is worth hanging on to because all too often people’s first thoughts about service or anything linked to the notion of serving, definitely being a servant is negative – almost demeaning and therefore NOT the sort of thing that any right thinking person would wish to have anything to do with. I am afraid that notwithstanding the fine intentions of politicians who may have entered politics to “serve the people”, my observation over the decades is that those high ideals are often watered down under the pressure of the “system”, though I would admit that there are a few glorious exceptions. Perhaps there is more we can do to encourage our politicians to grasp and hold firm to the notion of serving the community. Service shouldn’t be seen as being servile, giving of ourselves, often signalled by our willingness to spend time with others is (or should be) positive, worthy and laudable and is to be encouraged. Perhaps we ought to work on a UK equivalent of “Thank you for your service” – not only for those serving or veterans of our armed forces but for those who serve or care for others on a much wider front across our society?

#### **Serving – an example**

In the earlier verses of the chapter Jesus gives us an example of his readiness to serve. He took on the role of foot washer – a task normally assigned to the most junior, servant, in well-off families it would have been the lowest slave. Let’s face it, most people aren’t going to jump at the chance to attend to a lot of sweaty and dirty feet especially after a day in sandals on dusty roads and in the heat of the Middle Eastern sun. It would seem as though that aspect of the preparations for the gathering had been missed. And Jesus took it on himself to do the needful. It was, of course, a very

practical thing for him to do, but it also signalled to his disciples that serving others was integral to following him, fundamental to the living out of God's kingdom of love. He didn't do it to show up his disciples – but he did want to give his followers an example of the importance of serving others. An example we need to grasp. Early in my ministry in Aberdeen, the first time we'd looked at the foot washing passage, I got a bowl of water and a towel. In those days there was a Sunday School with a good number of eager kids willing to participate in the children's address. One of the boys, he'd was in the Junior Section of the BB so he'd have been about 8 came out, keen to see what the minister was needing him to do that morning. I explained that we were going to act out the Bible passage and I was going to wash his feet, if that was ok with him. I think his response was along the lines of "You're nae washing my feet!" I said – do you know Michael? – that's exactly what Simon Peter, Jesus' disciple said! And we talked a wee bit about how not only are we not always very good at serving others, but we can be reluctant to have others serve us. Jesus gave us a prime example of the importance of serving one another for his sake. I didn't wash Michael's feet, but years later I had the privilege of conducting his wedding.

### **A new commandment**

Jesus gave his disciples what he called a new commandment – Love one another as I have loved you. In some ways it wasn't new – there had always been a commandment to Love God; the obligation to love our neighbour was built into the whole Old Testament system and Jesus had opened out the definition of "neighbour" to anyone who needed help but this was certainly a clear restatement and broadening of the concept of love. He was obviously referring to his action earlier in the evening, when he had taken on the role of minor servant or slave, and washed his followers feet but remember too, that this was on the occasion of the Passover meal when he gave new meaning to the old ritual and signalled his forthcoming death – his ultimate service for his friends, the laying down of his life. He had talked a lot about love – love for God, for himself, love for neighbour, love for those in need, widows, orphans, refugees – any who were in need of love and care. But this raised love and service to new heights – the standard, the height of the bar was raised significantly – love one another as I have loved you. Love akin to the way I have served you – being ready to take on the role of servant to all, being prepared to lay down my life for your sakes, for your salvation. We may struggle with the notion of serving. I wonder if our problem with others serving us may in part be connected with unease we may feel, that actually it calls for us to be more generous in the way we serve others. Let's be honest, there is a lot about serving that grates with us; we don't like to think that it is "beneath us" though perhaps there is a bit of that. Sometimes it's because we (wrongly) take the view that others "don't deserve our help" but that's a mistake too because we don't DESERVE God's love either, but he gives it to us, freely, anyway. We can be too precious about what really matters to us – that may be money or possessions, but actually more often it is our TIME. The way we spend our time can be a real indicator of what is important to us – and perhaps a reassessment of how we spend our time might make room for us to play a greater part in serving others. And the other key factor is the WHY? WHY do we serve or not serve? In this short passage Jesus gives

us the best incentive to share in serving others – Love one another as I have loved you. The driving force for a true participation in genuine service of others is that Jesus first loved us. Our ability to love others comes from the overflowing of God’s love to us in Jesus. Nothing much is going to come from a grudging, reluctant minimalist response to some demand to love others, but as the Holy Spirit opens our hearts to the most generous love that God has given us in Jesus and the promise of yet more and more love to come, we can be released to share Jesus’ love in word and action with our neighbours – in a way that isn’t limited by our personal capacity to love and serve, but which is unbounded and fuelled by the limitless love of God in Jesus who empowers us to love others for his sake, as he has loved us.

Service needn’t be servile. It can be a profound privilege and very effective means of furthering God’s kingdom of love – to put it very simply – it was the key to Jesus’ strategy – the policy he adopted for himself and which urges us to emulate.

Love one another as I have loved you!

May the Lord bless you! Amen.