

SERMON: 21 October 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“Servers, Givers and the Cup of Suffering”
(Hebrews 5:1-10 and Mark 10:35-45)**

The Greek word for server is *diakonos* and it comes from a verb which means to minister. And the Greek word for slave is *doulos*, which means a giver of life. So, someone participating in kingdom business is someone who gives their life, hands over ownership of their life, in the way a slave became the property of their master. And not only that, but is someone who then gives life to others through their ministry, their service in the kingdom.

Diakoniae or ministry is not solely the role of a particular person, a deacon, like the church has often made it. It's much more than that. Ministry belongs to all followers of Jesus, to every kingdom worker. Even giving a glass of water to a little one is a participation in ministry in God's kingdom.

Ministry is so much more than a job title but in the past its too often been wrongly seen as the job title of one person rather than the ministry of the Holy Spirit in everyone. It's why I try as best I can to avoid calling myself *the* minister, when the truth is that the Lord invites us all to be ministers. Because of him, everyone can minister the love of God.

Former Moderator, Albert Bogle, writes in this month's Life and Work, “to speak of the minister as one in whom all the gifts reside is to limit the power of God and paralyses the church”.

I met someone this week, who as a young lad of 12 had the sole desire to become a minister. He went to every class possible at the local church - Sunday school, Bible class, enquirers class, anywhere where he could find out about matters of faith. And in every class he asked searching questions about what the Christian faith meant in practise. Usually these questions were directed at 'the minister'. Now, as we all know, ministers are not perfect. Well this one, got a bit fed up of the boy's questioning and told him not to bother coming back. And so he never did.

That boy is now a man and has served the people of this community faithfully as a councillor for many years. And the question that springs to mind is, has *he* not been ministering all these years?

But he's had to carry that rejection for most off his life. No wonder the Church has suffered in the way it has. No wonder we have lost so many young people.

We've been too proud to invite questions we couldn't answer. We've been too dependent on a model of church which has not enabled *real* ministry to flourish, the ministry of *all* believers. We need a new reformation. We need a revival, a fresh breath of truth and power to bring new life to the church, to put breath into dry bones.

As we know, change is being forced upon the church now, with the crisis of the shortage of ordained clergy to try and keep the sinking ship afloat. And part of this change will involve a new model of church where everyone ministers, in the way of Christ and the power of the Spirit.

I think we need to welcome this crisis and see it as a great opportunity to see greatness in Gods kingdom.

Willie Barclay, wrote that "the standard of greatness in the Kingdom of God is the standard of the cross".

Jesus puts it to his followers, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all". He would be the supreme example of that, in going to the cross, laying down his life for his friends and for the sake of the world.

Mark puts it in the words, "to give his life as a ransom for many". This is not payment to appease an angry God, but an act of love which brings justice and freedom to a world riven with injustice and enslaved to the sins of greed, pride, envy, immorality, and so on.

James and John thought they could do it too. Whatever cup Jesus would need to drink they were sure they could it drink it also, as long as, and here lies the crux, as long as they could get their reward and sit in the places of greatness, one on his left and one on his right. On golden thrones no doubt, waited on by servants.

Little did they know they would indeed experience the cup of baptism into kingdom greatness. James, we're told by Luke in Acts 12:2, was beheaded

by Herod Agrippa, during the festival in Jerusalem, in order to please the Jews who were jealous of the followers of the Way of Jesus.

And John, we're told in Revelation 1, describes himself a brother in the suffering of the kingdom, as he writes from exile on the island of Patmos, where he has this amazing vision of Christ. We can see in that letter that John has got it now. He has a vision of the Lord on his throne, with the seven spirits there - not just him and James, but the whole church, the whole people of God, washed in the blood of the Lamb.

He writes, "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever!" (Rev 1:6).

It's Christ Jesus on the throne. Him alone. John's not thinking now of where he is sitting in relation to Jesus. He's simply worshipping him. He's just interested in giving him glory. And he wants to tell others about this new kingdom with the lamb on the throne.

I wonder if he ever thought back to that day when he and James made that request. I'm sure he did. And I'm sure he was sorry for that. And I'm sure he knew himself forgiven for it. And I'm sure he knew now the path of greatness was through suffering service. Not that he was going out looking for suffering. He was simply seeking to worship God with the life he had. This was his response to the act of liberation that Christ had brought him through his death on the cross and resurrection from the tomb.

The writer to the Hebrews says a similar thing about Jesus not going looking for suffering but that suffering came his way.

In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,
'You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.' (5:5).

Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered (5:8)

He didn't go looking for suffering. Suffering found him and became his teacher. Jesus learned obedience through suffering and was made perfect through it, becoming the source of our salvation.

Suffering has its purpose, to teach us obedience, to turn our lives God-ward and find fulfilment there.

Nobody likes to go through suffering. It can be full of pain. Nobody goes looking for it. But it's unavoidable. It comes to us all at times.

I read something interesting about suffering this week. It was an article by Richard Rohr called Transforming Pain. It encouraged the reader to see their wounds as a way through rather than an obstacle, to make our wounds sacred, in a sense, rather than let them make us cynical, negative or bitter. But the following sentence really spoke to me, "if we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it - usually to those closest to us", our family, our neighbours, our co-workers, and invariably, the most vulnerable, our children."

He goes on to say,

"Unless we can find a meaning for human suffering, that *God is somehow in it* and can also use it for good, humanity is in major trouble. We shouldn't try to get rid of our own pain until we've learned what it has to teach".

When we suffer, can we try to not make our own private pain the only thing we think out? Can we try to see that God is in it. God is *Suffering Love*. God suffers as we suffer. God carries the pain with us as we are hurting. The cross as symbol of our faith, is the affirmation that the God we worship is the crucified God who suffers, and the God who transcends suffering into risen life.

We can't control suffering but we can choose how to respond to it.

Can we lift up the cup as it says in Psalm 116,

So now, what can I ever give back to God
to repay him for the blessings he's poured out on me?
I will lift up his cup of salvation and praise him extravagantly
for all that he's done for me.

If we are able even just to whisper these words in the depth of our being, even at a time when we might not be able to verbalise them, then we will have

taken part in God's transformation of pain and suffering. We will have become partners with God in this transformative experience that we call life.

So when we suffer, or see others suffering, can we wonder what God might be teaching us through this suffering? And can we trust him with it? Can we leave it with him and not project it on to others?

Maybe in that deliberate choice, glory can be given to God and his kingdom comes closer. Maybe we're meant to see true greatness through the cup of suffering. And maybe others will see it too.

Loving God,
through service,
through giving,
through suffering,
Glory to you,
Amen.