

JESUS THE SERVANT AND THE SERVANT CHURCH

New Testament Perspectives

by Joseph Au
translated by Peter Barry

It has always been central to her self-understanding that the Church follows Christ. An ecclesiology, then, follows naturally upon a christology. The two disciplines also may be said to be inseparable: any change in the Church's self-realization will lead to a corresponding change in her christological perspectives, and vice-versa. In recent years a clear example of just such a change has been the appearance, after Vatican II, of the term "the servant Church" and its immediate effect on christology, as Christians turned to a more serious reflection on Christ and His identity as servant.

Jesus saw Himself, and was seen by others, as the Messiah - the Christ - the Anointed One. In ancient Israel, three classes of people were made sacred by the anointing with oil: kings, priests, and prophets. And while we find in the traditional manuals



of dogmatic theology special chapters devoted to lengthy discussions of Jesus as both king and priest, the role of Jesus as prophet still awaits a fuller development, as does His servant role to which it is essentially related. One might assume from this sudden popularity within the Church of the servant concept that it is of more recent vintage than those of Jesus as king and priest. Such an assumption would be false. Biblically speaking, both term and concept of Jesus as servant precede the other two in time. Jesus at birth was neither king nor prophet, (nor, we might add, was he servant). But His whole life was led on the level of a common, ordinary citizen. In His youth He did serve as a carpenter, and in His adult years, as He went about preaching the kingdom of God, He was quite fond of comparing Himself to a servant.

Jesus As Servant

We begin with the account of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples during the Last Supper as recorded in John's Gospel, chapter 13, verses 4 to 17. We select this passage because it belongs to the passion narrative, and the passion narrative is not only at the heart of all four Gospels, it also comprises their earliest material.

Foot-washing was a duty rendered by a servant to a master or his guests, by a son to his father, or by a wife to her husband. It usually took place immediately upon arrival. Jesus, however, undertook the washing of his disciples' feet only after the meal had already begun. Placing this action outside the general norm and in contrast to the customary cleansing ritual gave to it its own deep and symbolic meaning. (vv 13-17). In washing the feet of His disciples, Jesus was not denying that He was master and teacher, but rather, He was affirming His willingness to humble Himself in the performance of a slave's task. It follows from this, then, that the Church, which possesses the spiritual authority of a master, should at the same time take to herself the role of a servant...a Church in service to humanity. She, who is rightfully called teacher, should not be afraid to assume the learner's role...a Church that learns from others.

In washing their feet, Jesus enjoins His disciples

to wash the feet of one another. The act becomes an injunction to follow His example...to exchange willingly the master and servant roles. Parenthetically and by way of a corollary, does this not argue that a system of constantly interchanging roles within Church structures is more in keeping with the teaching of Jesus than one which allows members to rise in authority and power but seldom returns them to the ranks?

The act of Jesus in washing the feet of His disciples was neither an isolated incident nor a theatrical performance on His part. It was fundamental to His being - an expression of His life-long attitude of service and commitment to self-giving that would culminate in His final act of total self-sacrifice on the cross. Only in this context can we begin to understand Jesus' words to the Apostle Peter, who out of deference and respect for his Lord and Master, refuses to have his feet washed. "If I do not wash you, then you will have no part of me," (vv 6-8). Except for some minor differences, the words and content of this text are the same as those found in Mark 8:31-33 and Matthew 16: 21-23, but Mark and Matthew place their accounts outside the framework of the Last Supper and in quite a different set of circumstances.

In Luke's account of the Last Supper, the foot-washing is not included, but the servant theme is certainly there, and Luke 22: 24-27 has many similarities with John 13: 13-17. However, the Lukan passage does not fit well with the general atmosphere of the Last Supper. An argument breaks out among the disciples as to who is to be considered the greatest, and it is difficult for us to imagine that at the solemn moment of the beginning of the Lord's passion, His friends would fall into childish bickering among themselves. Luke's account seems out of place here, and at first glance one might wish that he had, as Matthew and Mark before him, found a more suitable set of circumstances within which to recount the open rivalry of the disciples. But Luke is a craftsman and uses a writer's prerogative to introduce, with deliberate care, this incident into the setting of the Last Supper. The result is the revelation of Jesus as servant along with a dramatic example of His service, something missing from the accounts of Matthew and Mark. "For who is the greater: the one at table or the one who serves? The one at table, surely? Yet here am

I among you as one who serves", (v. 27). In speaking of how authority is exercised in secular society, Jesus is not opposing the commonly acknowledged way of ordering social systems, but rather, He enjoins His disciples to a new way of ordering in direct contrast to those found in ordinary society, and, in effect, it is a reversal of those systems. "The leader among you... is the one who serves", (v. 26).

Luke does not give the cause of the disciples' quarrel, as do Matthew and Mark. According to Matthew, the argument is set off by the mother of James and John, who asks that her sons be placed on the highest thrones of the kingdom at the right and left of Jesus. Jesus ignores the request and turns the thoughts of the brothers in a new direction. He asks them if they are able to suffer along with Him, and He includes all of his disciples in the words He now speaks: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many". Ultimate service, then, is the giving of one's life, and the greatest service Jesus renders to mankind is His offering of Himself in sacrifice on the cross. His sacrifice is a free act of His own will (cf Heb 10: 5-7 and Ps. 40: 7-9). The ransom spoken of is the price of freedom, the sum donated to the temple to liberate a slave. St. Paul underlines this teaching of Jesus when he explains to the Christian community at Rome that those who follow Christ were at one time slaves of sin and passion but now have become slaves of righteousness and obedience, (Rom. 6). The service of the Church to God and humanity, then, should likewise be offered in a like spirit of willingness and freedom as Jesus has taught us.

While Luke abridges his account of the apostles' quarrel, omitting the rivalry over thrones in the kingdom that is its cause, he does, in an unexpected about face, record Jesus' final response to the request of James and John. In verses 28 to 30 of the Last Supper narrative He confers on them the kingdom. As a reward for their fidelity to Him in participating in His trials, they shall eat and drink at table with Him in His kingdom and sit upon thrones judging the Twelve Tribes of Israel. It is His promise to them. In this world, then, His Church is a suffering church in service to humanity; on the Last Day, however,



*They shall eat and drink
at table with Him in His kingdom*

Byli

she will be a Church with a glorious presence sitting in judgment of all living things.

The Early Church Proclaims Jesus As Servant

Jesus in His lifetime demonstrated Himself to be the Servant of God. What, then, was the nature of the early church's response? From a Roman prison, Paul addresses a letter to the Christian community of Philippi, the second chapter of which has for its theme Christ as Servant. To encourage the Christians to be united in love and conviction, to forego all forms of selfishness and any spirit of competition, he offers them two incentives: their sincere love for him, (vv 5-11), and the example of Christ's self-sacrifice. (vv 4-11) It is the latter passage that has the more striking characteristics: it is a hymn - written

in a poetic rather than prose form, and it is doctrine in the form of proclamation rather than moral exhortation. This leads most biblical scholars to believe that the passage belongs to a pre-Pauline tradition already well-established in the early Church.

What is worth noting here is the contrast drawn between being "in the form of God" and "taking the form of a slave". Form indicates nature, and the poet contrasts divine with human nature. Man by the fact of his creation is a slave before God, a state natural to a created being standing before the divine creator. But the poet seems to have more on his mind than abstract distinctions. His thoughts flow in a rush of images. Christ is not only slave before God by virtue of His humanity, but He empties Himself further by becoming the lowest of the low, a slave among men, and, for confirmation of this, the poet draws us to



*He empties Himself
further by becoming the
lowest of the low, a slave among men*

the image of the cross ..the symbolic instrument of a slave's execution. Christ's entrance into the world was highly unusual. It was not enough for Him to be born, His divine nature humbled by His incarnation. Among all the human possibilities, He chose poverty over wealth, a lower class rather than a noble family, obscurity over fame. And all this Jesus still considered to be not enough.

We are not surprised then to find Paul, as Jesus before him, when exhorting Christians to be

united with one another, pointing to the cross, their symbol and model of self-sacrifice. Thus we can appreciate how the early church, arriving at a fuller understanding of Jesus' words and actions in the world, identified Him as Servant.

The Service Of The Servant Church

While His sacrifice on the cross was the highest expression of Jesus' service to God and humanity, His passion and death was preceded by a lifetime of sacrificial gestures. In fact, the whole of His life can be considered as one continual sacrificial offering. Insofar as the Church participates in Christ's redemptive mystery, Christians, when offering themselves and all that they do for others to God in union with Christ, thereby share in His servanthood. No act, no matter how great or small, visible or hidden, lies outside the redeeming mystery of Christ's service.

In Luke 22: 27, Jesus refers to Himself as "one who serves" (diakonon). The literal meaning of this term and its derivatives (diakonein, diakonos, diakonia) is to serve at table, in the style of a waiter or waitress. In a broader context, they refer to service of any kind, but especially service within the Christian community. This service in the broader context can be sub-divided into material and spiritual. The former involves such services as hospitality offered to Christians away from home, helping to defray missionary expenses, contributing to the relief of needy Christians living in poorer areas, and all manner of welfare assistance. The second category of service is much richer and it includes spreading the Gospel message, preaching and writing, expelling demons and curing the ill, prophesying and reconciling men with God, supervising Church affairs and engaging in apostolic work. All these works are accomplished by the power of God through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and have as their sole object the building up of the body of Christ. Therefore, those gifted with such charisms are instructed not to be boastful on their own account, nor should they seek after personal rewards or special privileges. Rather, when they have dutifully fulfilled such responsibilities, they should say humbly and honestly: "We are unprofitable servants; we have done no

more than our duty", (Luke 17: 10).

Motivated by the words and actions of Jesus, the apostles and their associates were frequently referred to in the early Christian communities as the "servants of God", or as "the servants" or "slaves of Christ".

The service of a servant Church today is multifaceted. In substance, however, it may still be divided into spiritual and corporal. We are familiar with this terminology from our study of the catechism as children, where they are referred to as the "seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy".

Given the complex conditions of modern societies, with their diverse historical, cultural, economic and political backgrounds, different members within the Church will naturally respond in different ways to the Christian call to service in the world. At times questions are raised about priorities, and where the emphasis should be placed: social work? pastoral work? direct evangelization? Any practical response surely must take into account local conditions, and, always sensitive to Divine inspiration, a careful assessment must be made of the diverse talents, abilities, and resources of the local Christian community. In judging the relative importance or weight of the many forms of corporal and spiritual service (mindful that for a Christian the two are not to be considered mutually exclusive of each other), it may be helpful to recall some basic biblical guidelines.

First, the four Greek words - diakonein, douleuein, leitourgein, and latreuein are all used at one time or another to translate the one Hebrew word 'cbd'. Diakonein, and douleuein refer to service rendered to people, while leitourgein and latreuein are technical terms reserved to describe service in the temple and are used only in reference to the worship of God. In the New Testament, however, it is quite common to find Old Testament technical religious terms filtering into the world of human relations. Some examples of this are leitourgia, eulogia and charis, all of which are given an alternative meaning of giving to charity or relieving the sufferings of the poor. This makes it clearly evident that for Paul and the early

Christians, social service is an act of worship.

Another point for further reflection is to be found in Revelations 2: 19 where diakonia (service) is mentioned together with good deeds, faith, and charity. In the second chapter of the Epistle of St. James, especially in verses 2 to 4, faith and good works are not only linked but James points out that faith without good works is of no use. Here we find clear affirmation of the Christian principle that the love of man, and, service to God and service to man must complement one another.

Chapter six of the Acts of the Apostles is another passage well worth the deeper reflection of Christians on the nature of Christian service. Here Luke recounts the gradual evolution of service in the early Christian communities. In the beginning, all authority was concentrated in the hands of the Twelve. There was no distinction between spiritual authority and authority over material goods. As Christians multiplied, along with responsibilities and duties, the apostles felt it necessary to choose helpers who would share with them the ever increasing burden of work. From among the Christians, they picked seven, who "had the confidence of the people", to supervise the daily distribution of food (that is, to relieve the needs of widows). Thus the apostles would have more time to devote to prayer and preaching the Word. What is worth noting here is that the work of the chosen seven and that of the twelve apostles is equally referred to as diakonia. At first glance it might seem that the two kinds of work were mutually exclusive, but in actuality it was not so. All work within the Church has a spiritual dimension, and there was a very close relationship between serving food (originally "table" service) and serving "the altar", for according to the custom of the early Church, the Agape-meal was held before or after but always in conjunction with the Eucharistic meal. Surely it follows from this, then, that Christians entrusted with ministering to the communities' material needs, those assigned the task of administering finances for example, should not look upon their service lightly, nor should those assigned to the "care of souls" see in their more "spiritual" service-role an occasion for arrogant disdain of those involved in answering the community's



*All work within
their Church has a
Spiritual Dimension*

more material needs. We must remind ourselves that in the context of a servant Church, motivated by the example of Christ, service is to be judged by the willingness of the servant to sacrifice himself, as Jesus did, in service to others, and not by the terms of the individual service. There is a world of distinction between a business-man equipped with a degree in economics furthering his career in a secular world, and a Christian dedicating his time and talent, equipped with the motivation of Christ's love, to building up the kingdom of God. The qualifications of the seven entrusted with "table-service", as given by the apostles, were far from secular: a good reputation within the Christian community, filled with the Holy

Spirit, and possessing the gift of wisdom. Their role was conferred on them by prayer and the laying on of hands, and their appointments were like in kind with those given to Paul and Barnabas, those two most eminent of early Church servants (Act 13: 2-3). If later in the Acts, we observe these seven preaching the Gospel everywhere, like the apostles, there is no reason for us to assume they have somehow moved beyond the terms of their original duties or graduated to a higher role in the community. What we are witnessing here, then, is not a change in profession, but the realization that preaching the Gospel is the duty of each and every Christian. Perhaps the reason some scripture scholars have difficulty in reconciling the variety of service activities recorded of Stephen and his co-workers is due to our present tendency to assess division of labour in the restrictive and legalistic terms of modern job descriptions. Such an attitude was missing from the early Christian church, nor is it to be encouraged in today's Christian communities which proclaim universal salvation and liberation through identification with Jesus, the Servant.