

Ready to Serve

Date: 7 February 2021

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Stories along the Way (Parables in Luke)

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Luke 12:35-48

About 10 years ago, in the age of Reality TV, in a time before Netflix and Disney+, there was a TV show called Undercover Boss. The premise of the show was this. A CEO would go undercover as an entry level employee in her own company. She would get to know her employees and see how things really worked on the ground. At the end of the week she would call her employees into her office and reward the hardworking ones. Now, I have to say, I can't stand reality TV, and I only ever saw ads for the show, but I thought it would be a great opening illustration for today's sermon.

We all know that temptation to put off that job we really don't want to do just because the boss isn't watching. I'm a slow learner at home. I like to divide and conquer. I tell my kids to tidy up in one room while I do another, but we really only get the job done when I do it with them. Undercover Boss puts on the table that question of motivation. What makes us do the right thing? Is it hope of reward or fear of punishment? Coming from a position of suspicion, do we only perform and conform because we've so internalised the gaze of others that we police ourselves?

We've been looking at the parables Jesus tells in Luke's Gospel as he journeys with his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem. As they walk and talk Jesus teaches them and us what the Kingdom of God looks like and what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, the king of God's kingdom. Today we're looking at a pair of parables that turn on this statement by Jesus in 12:40:

You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

This, Christians believe, is the horizon of our existence, the goal towards which our lives inexorably move, whether we like it or not. The Apostles and the Nicene Creeds, that we say most Sundays summarize what is at the heart of the Christian faith - who God is and what he is doing in the world. They put it like this - *he, [that is Jesus], will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.* The secular culture of Western society likes to believe that this life is all there and after that nothing. Play that out and the only meaning and purpose we have in life are the ones we impose by sheer effort of will. But Jesus says, "No. One day I will return when you least expect it." And that day gives shape to our lives because it is a day when the true meaning of our lives will be disclosed. *You are children of the light and children of the day,* St Paul wrote to our spiritual ancestors in Thessalonica. *We do not belong to the night or*

to the darkness.¹ The motto of the Scouts is “Be prepared”. And we are called to watch, always being prepared for that unexpected day.

Perhaps like me you find remaining in a state of watchfulness rather difficult. To help us Jesus tells 2 parables about servants whose master returns unexpectedly. We’re going to consider each in turn and what they mean for us today. But even as we come to them we find ourselves squirming uncomfortably. Clearly Jesus has in mind that he is the master and that we are the servants. But is that who we consider ourselves to be, servants? Do we not kick against that notion? We are free, slaves to no one. Or at least that’s what we want to be. Justice, we are told, is throwing off the yoke of oppression. Is not the notion that we might be servants, slaves even, a humiliation, an assault on our humanity?

The Master who serves

As so often is the case, it’s worth our while slowing down and paying close attention to Jesus’ words before we draw our conclusion. So turn with me to the first parable. Verse 35.

35 ‘Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, 36 like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. 37 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will make them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. 38 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or towards daybreak.

On a first reading this story seems straightforward enough. The master has gone to a wedding banquet. If he comes home and finds his servants dressed and ready to serve he will serve them. In his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey draws our attention to a number of features we can miss in these words.

The first is that the words “dressed and ready” literally mean “with your robe tucked into your belt”. This is how the Israelites were commanded to eat the Passover in Exodus 12, to be ready to go on their journey to the promised land.

Second, the word translated “return” in verse 36 could also be translated as “separates” or “unlooses”. Instead of the party being over this would suggest that the master has slipped away from the party. But why would he do so?

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5.5

Third, Bailey points out that in a Middle Eastern context the master of a house would never knock on his front door. He would call his servants to open the door. Why would the master knock instead of call? Bailey suggests that calling would alert the whole household to the fact that he had left the wedding feast. Only his servants would know who it was when they answered the knocking.

But why slip away from the feast? The answer comes in verse 37. The master himself will have his servants recline at the dinner table and serve them. It's the middle of the night: Where would he get the food from? Now we see why he has slipped away from the party. All along he has had his servants in mind and has brought some of the banquet to share with them. He could have sent a servant with a portion of the feast. But this is not good enough. He wants to go and serve them himself.

This is an astonishing reversal of roles. The servants are waiting, dressed and ready to serve. And now here comes the master. Unexpectedly. Dressed in all the finery of the wedding feast. Now he takes the servants place. Hitching up those fine robes in his belt, he urges them to the table so they can share in the feast. And he, the master, serves his servants. If you know the Gospels your mind will immediately go to that upper room in John's Gospel, where Jesus took off his outer garment, hitched up his robe and washed his disciples feet. He feeds them at his table.

This is the astonishing and lavish grace of God to us. We are made to be servants of God. This is our calling as God's creatures. In our pride we kick against this calling and seek to be our own masters and the masters of others. But serving is not beneath God. He meets and overcomes our pride with his humility. "[All our] gods," writes Swiss theologian Karl Barth, "are a reflection of the human pride which will not unbend, which will not stoop to that which is beneath it. [But] God is not proud. In his high majesty he is humble".² He serves us in our humiliation. We who are weak and fearful and anxious. The master serves us in the humiliation of the cross to raise us to the skies. He feeds us with his own flesh and blood. And therefore to be God's servant is not dehumanising, but the greatest honour. As one of those great Anglican prayers puts it - his service is perfect freedom.

Barth draws out that contrast between the humility of God and the pride of Man and all our attempts to grasp for power.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1* S59.1, p159

“The Lord became a servant... the servant of all servants. This is the humility of the act of God which took place for us in Jesus Christ. ... The man for whom He does this only wants to be lord. The power which [man] brings to the necessary thoughts and acts and attitudes is sneaked and stolen and therefore it is not genuine. In accordance with his creaturely nature, and his being in covenant with God, he might well have the power, when he is at peace with God as his Lord, to be strong as the friend of God, and to rule with him even as a servant. But when he alienates himself from God in self-reliance, he foreits this power. ... He can only play the Lord. ... In this way he can never attain the very thing that he wants and seeks. We have only to think of the monstrous caricatures produced by world history: Nero, Caligula, Napoleon, Nietzsche, Mussolini and Hitler. All that they do is to show us how impossible and grotesque is the human enterprise”³

Peter responds to this astonishing parable with a question: is this for us or for everyone? The answer is that it is a parable for everyone. For those who least think that God would serve them. Surely not me. I’ve done this. I’ve failed. I’ve hurt. I’ve screwed up. I’m too bad. Yes, Jesus calls even you to sit at his table that he might serve you.

The Servant who plays the Master

But to remind his disciples of the creaturely calling as servants Jesus offers a second parable of a master’s unexpected return. If we pay attention to this second parable we see it is in fact more directed at those, like Peter, who are given authority in the masters house.

Read with me from verse 42:

The Lord answered, ‘Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

So far so good. Peter clearly took this to heart. In his first letter he quotes these words of Jesus:

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as **faithful stewards** of God’s grace in its various forms.⁴*

All that we have is a gift from God held in trust and we are to use it remembering we are his servants - our gifts, our position, our wealth, our time, our minds, our hands, our feet.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1* S60.2, pp 432-433

⁴ 1 Peter 4.10

But the sting comes in the warning with which Jesus concludes the parable. Verse 45:

But suppose the servant says to himself, "My master is taking a long time in coming," and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk.

With these words Jesus addresses those servants who would play the master. When we grasp power for ourselves and lord it over others we defile the authority we have been given. This is the corruption of leadership, that grotesque parody of which Barth spoke. We may expect it in the world but Jesus gives this warning to his leadership team.

Tragically we do see the Lord's servants who think that because he is a long time in coming they can abuse other servants and live a life of indulgence. I know some of you are deeply distressed by the abuses of leadership you've seen in the church writ large in the media and amplified on social media. Some of you know this first hand. Do hear Jesus' words. He is on your side. Verse 46:

The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

47 'The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. 48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

I know I need to hear this warning from the Master to whom I am responsible for those servants entrusted to my care. This second parable makes it very clear that all Christian leadership is to be modelled after the Lord who serves. And we are accountable to him.

We began with Jesus' exhortation to be ready because we don't know when he will return. How can we be ready? Not by abusing others or indulging ourselves. Rather by using the gifts he has given us in humble service, after the pattern of his own service. And even as we wait that coming day, a day of celebration and feasting, such is his love for us that our master himself has slipped out of the banquet to serve and feed you and me his servants even now. He stoops to wash our feet. He gives his life for us on the tree. He feeds us with his own body and blood, tokens of his love. He invites us to share at his table a foretaste of the banquet to come. If that is how our master serves us even now, will you wait for him, dressed and ready to serve?