The Five Marks of Mission – sermon 3

**To respond to human need by loving service**

*Acts 4.5-12 John 13:1-5 and 12-15,*

**Caroline’s sermon**

I expect many of you will remember hearing today’s Gospel in church very recently – it was the reading set for Maundy Thursday, when we commemorate the events of the Last Supper - but I have suggested that we all hear it again today because I think that it is most striking that, in what Jesus would have *known* were his final few hours before his death, he interrupted his last precious meal with his friends to wash their feet – even the feet of the man whom he *knew* was about to betray him.

Why did he do this? There must have been a very important final bit of teaching that he wanted to make, for foot washing was the job of a slave or a servant, not of a friend, let alone of the most important person at a meal such as a revered teacher or a master…

And the reason for retelling this event today, is that in the 2RMC in the last two weeks we have considered the first two of the Five Marks of Mission –

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers

And today we are looking at the Third Mark - To respond to human need by loving service …

and I can think of few stronger incentives for Christians to embark on loving service than that given by Jesus at the Last Supper.

If God could take on so humble a role, … so can we….

And Christian service does not have always have to be onerous, or tedious.

In a meeting just before I was ordained, my then rector, quoted Matthew 11 28 -30 to me “Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”.

And this is borne out by the author Frederick Buechner, who once defined “vocation” as “…the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meets”…

I expect that many of you are familiar with that heart-singing feeling when you have undertaken some act of kindness, some undertaking for others…and experienced everything falling into place as you carried it out – rather like being on some sort of heavenly travelator…the premises that become available against all odds, the funding that starts off as a trickle and then beings to pour in, the experts that volunteer their services free of charge. Its as if God is saying to your tentative whispered offer of help “*Thank you*. I have been *waiting* to hear you say that. Now I shall be *very interested* to see how you get on with it…and of course I shall help and guide you along the way…”

And he does. Quite surprisingly and sometimes quite alarmingly!

So, for some people loving service is easy, or at least joyful.

But for many others, loving service is neither glad nor joyful, but very, very, hard work. It is service which drains, rather than fulfils.

There are many people caring long-term for a relatives or friends who are severely disabled, chronically sick, dementing or dying slowly.

In these situations, the loving service is deep indeed…and the church family can offer loving service to the *carer* by supporting and upholding them, both practically as far as is possible, and prayerfully, ensuring them that they are not struggling alone.

And many of you are very heavily engaged in loving service already…for we can each serve God and others in different ways…

and the best way for each of us, as I indicated above, is by identifying a need and then by trying to find a way to fulfil it in a way that inspires us.

I wonder whether any of you have heard of the Baking Church. A couple of Christian woman, saddened by the unfriendly and isolated nature of their neighbourhood, decided that as they liked baking, they would set up a baking school to encourage people to get together more often. They found premises above a shop in an arcade in downtown Sheffield – I think it was, I don’t remember the details now. At first only about 2 other woman turned up, but then, week by week more joined…and then some men put their heads around the door and asked whether it was a woman-only group, and were of course invited in…and bit by bit, week after week, a real community was formed as people got to know their neighbours and conversations started on many different subjects…not just the best way to bake a good loaf…And inevitably the women who started it all were asked - “Why do you do this…you don’t charge anything…what do *you* get out of it?” To which the woman replied that they were Christians and wanted to introduce some fun and sense of community into the neighbourhood. And this they had managed to do in a very big way…so much so that people had begun to ask if they could celebrate their birthdays there and then asked about God…and the last I heard a *real* church had formed there with Bible readings, prayers, hymns and baptisms and memorial services.

It became an excellent example of what can happen if we step forward and explore how we can serve God and others.

All we have to do is perceive a need, and then think about what we can do to help fulfil it…what our particular gift or skill is…so please do that …think about what need calls to you most…whether the lonely, the ill, the homeless…those in hospital or in any other kind of need…and then think of what you are good at…what you enjoy…how you could serve in love and joy…and of course, most importantly, *pray* about it. You may be very surprised by what happens next…

I expect you are familiar with what St Paul had to say on the subject of all the members of the Church – all Christians - being part of the Body of Christ…and how we each have a valuable part to play in that Body. He writes about it in more than one of his letters – but in 1 Corinthians 12 it goes –

“There are many different gifts, but it is always the same Spirit; there are many different ways of serving, but it is always the same Lord.

There are many different forms of activity, but in everybody it is the same God who is at work in them all.

The particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to each one is to be used for the general good.

For as with the human body which is a unity although it has many parts – all the parts of the body, though many, still making up one body – so it is with Christ….

Now Christ’s body is yourselves, each of you with a part to play in the whole”

Then there is that lovely bit where Paul goes on to describe how we are all needed and jokes “The eye cannot say to the hand “I have no need of you, nor the head to the feet…”. I like to think of St Paul smiling to himself as he added in that little bit.

I shall leave you with that happy thought, and with the words of St Theresa of Avila…for they sum up why we should each try to engage in loving service on our Lord’s behalf…

Christ has no body now on earth but *yours*, no hands, no feet but *yours*. *Yours* are the eyes with which Christ looks with compassion on the world. *Yours* are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. *Yours* are the hands with which he is to bless us now.

And the questions, or rather the challenges on which we would like us all to focus this week, as mentioned in today’s address just now, are:-

1. Think about the needs of your local community – can you perceive its needs ?
2. What need calls to you most…is it the lonely, the ill, the homeless…those in prison or hospital …?
3. What particular gifts or skills can you and others offer?