

SERMON – 4/9/22
'Five Marks of Mission 3 - Service'

Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37

“With great power the apostles testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them.” (Acts 4:33-34)

Our attention has been understandably and rightly arrested this week by the unexpected death of the Queen and I did consider laying to one side our sermon series on the Five Marks of Mission, actually, but the fact that our theme for this week is 'Service' and the fact that Queen Elizabeth so embodied that virtue throughout her reign made it very easy to conclude that I should continue to take the planned Bible reading from Acts as the focus of our reflections today. Not unusually for me, this week's sermon wasn't written by Thursday night and it has obviously taken a somewhat different direction than it might otherwise have done, but as on the one hand we begin to take in what the end of the Queen's reign may mean for our country, for our world, and for ourselves, and on the other hand we reflect on what we are all called to be as disciples of Jesus and as a Church with a mission, there are many parallels to be drawn.

You may ask what has the life and death of one of the wealthiest people on the planet got to do with a passage that extols the virtue of selling everything you have and giving it to the poor? You may ask what kind of lesson I can possibly learn as an ordinary individual from the particular example of Britain's longest reigning monarch. We all feel a sense of loss this week, but it's not just because we are witnessing the end of an era, the literal close of the Elizabethan age, but because we all have a sense of connection with the monarch – some here have received honours from the Queen in recognition of notable service, or you have been invited to Holyroodhouse or to Buckingham Palace to a Garden Party as a thank you for community service that you thought perhaps no-one had noticed; some of you have been able to face challenges because you have seen how the Queen met those same challenges; some of you have been encouraged in your faith by words Her Majesty has spoken in her annual Christmas message.

I have been reminded in recent days of the very surreal weekend I had in 2004, staying at Balmoral Castle as a guest of Her Majesty and preaching at Crathie Kirk on the Sunday. It was surreal, at least to the extent that I had to keep pinching myself as I sat at table with members of the Royal Family or as I sat in the passenger seat of a Land Rover with the Queen herself at the wheel hurtling along farm tracks on the Balmoral Estate on the way to a barbecue being cooked by the Duke of Edinburgh with assistance from Prince Edward. But actually it wasn't surreal at all - it was *exactly* like spending time with any other family as they caught up on one another's news and shared one another's joys and sorrows, and the after church conversation I had with them was no different at all from the conversations I have with many of you week by week at the church door or over coffee. In a week when floods had devastated the village of Boscastle in Cornwall and landslides had closed major roads in the Scottish Highlands, the Queen expressed appreciation for the message I had given from Psalm 125 about the surrounding presence of the Lord (like the mountains surrounding Jerusalem) even when everything else in life may be shaken.

In our thinking so far about the Five Marks of Mission we have considered the crying need in our time for the proclamation of the Good News about Jesus to a people who have never encountered Him, and the need for a deepening of the faith of those of us who *do* know Christ and acknowledge Him as our Lord. Today I want to highlight the equal importance of 'service' alongside proclamation and discipleship as crucial marks of what we should be doing as a church and of what we should each be part of as individuals.

In the Book of Acts this morning we read of the proclamation of message of Christ's resurrection by the apostles, and the nurture of the fellowship through the apostles' teaching, a sharing in the Lord's Supper and a dependence upon prayer, but we are also given examples of ways in which that focus on the message about Jesus and on the mutual edification of the believers worked itself out in very practical service. In obedience to Christ's command the first followers of Jesus loved one another and that led to them consciously giving up what they had in order that the needs of others might be met.

As a result, we are told, the Christians enjoyed the favour of all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Now, not to put too fine a point on it, we should perhaps not be surprised to find that when the church today is slow to proclaim and slow to nurture and slow to serve it is also slow to find favour with wider society and slow to grow. That's not rocket science so forgive me for pointing out the obvious. How are we different as a church today from the first Christians?

Luke tells us that the believers were 'one in heart and mind' and in the next breath that no-one thought of their possessions as being their own but shared everything they had. God's grace was at work among them so powerfully – in other words they were so open to what the Lord would do among them and through them – and this is a verse that always gives me a start: 'There was no needy person among them.' (Acts 4:34)

In the global context, even the most impoverished among us here are amongst the most fabulously wealthy on the planet. But before we get hung up on economics alone don't let's forget that need takes many forms and we should not only be concerned for those who are in need of material goods (as we most certainly should be) but also for those who are starved of affection, those who are wanting company, those who are bereft, those who are spiritually poor, and the service we are called to give as Christ's followers must have as its goal that there be no-one in need in the sphere of influence where we have the opportunity to make a difference.

Famously Her Majesty vowed in a radio broadcast she made on the occasion of her 21st birthday: "I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong."

In February this year on the Platinum Jubilee of her accession to the throne as our sovereign, she renewed that promise, saying "I look forward to continuing to serve you with all my heart" and signing the letter with the hand-written words, 'Your servant, Elizabeth'.

Less quoted are the concluding words of her 1947 radio broadcast when she said, "I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me, as I now invite you to do: I know that your support will be unfailingly given. God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it."

As I exhort you this morning to share in the work of service in Christ's name, I need to remind myself regularly that the word 'minister' means 'servant'. But although Christian *leaders* are called to emulate the example of our Lord Jesus who came not to be served but to serve, to wash the feet of those who thought that task was beneath them, actually that message is for every single one of us – individually as disciples of Christ and together as members of the Body of Christ, the Church. We are *all* called to serve and it is only truly as we serve our community and our world that we fulfil Christ's mission and begin to be what we catch a glimpse of in the life of the early church that we have read about this morning, what Jesus sought to inaugurate as a foretaste and prefigurement of His eternal Kingdom of justice and joy.

What that will look like in this parish and across the land and across the world is up to people like you and me, which of course includes the women and men who make up the new government under a new prime minister and a new king. Let us each be open to what God in His grace will do among us and through us as individuals and as a congregation in our community and in our nation as we seek to be one in heart and mind under Christ and as we offer whatever service is needed so that others may not want.

At the dawn of a new era let us all seek to serve so that the kingdoms of this world, this United Kingdom, this Kingdom of Scotland may become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.

"With great power the apostles testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them."

May it be so, for His name's sake. Amen.