

Sermon
Free to Serve

‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done’ (Lk.17:10).

This is one of those sayings of Jesus that is judged by some to be ‘hard’ because Jesus compares our relationship to him with the relationship a master has to his slave. This can be a turn-off for anyone considering to follow Jesus. The English evangelical Steve Chalke got some airplay during his recent Australian tour and he stirred our conscience about eating chocolate. Not because it makes us fat or fatter but because the confectionary is produced from cocoa, cultivated by workers who suffer economic exploitation on the plantations of West Africa. But let us not allow our disapproval of economic exploitation to kill-off Jesus’ words with a thousand qualifications.

We can do this in an academic way by reasoning that some aspects of slavery in the 1st century were quite unlike today’s economic exploitation on the cocoa plantations of West Africa. Some slaves in the New Testament, particularly in the urban areas, are more like today’s CEOs who manage large organisations. That cannot be claimed for the slave referred to Jesus’ saying. He is a hard working man in a rural setting. After plowing the fields or tending the sheep he then has to cook dinner for the master, before he can eat and rest.

Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending the sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare

supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’?(Luke 17:7-9)

Anyone who wants to take the ‘bad look’ off Jesus might reason that it is hard to split the difference between this slave and a day in the life of working mothers. They work all day in the office and then come home to another day’s work - feeding the kids and cleaning the house.

None of these moderations take the edge off Jesus’ words. They suggest a likeness to or an unlikeness from ‘things modern’ but neither of the moderations weakens Jesus’ inference that we are called to perform thankless tasks because our lives are under the command of our Lord and Master. Now there is the rub. We much prefer to think of ourselves as free and liberated people. The notion of being under command is an unnatural thought for us. But this is the way Jesus describes our relationship to him and however objectionable we find this way of putting the matter give a thought for the slave in the gospel who does his duty without murmur.

He was completely silent. We hear only his master’s voice in the gospel reading. This cannot be said of a few characters in Scripture who refuse to suffer in silence. The ones who come readily to mind are Job who had a gripe or two about the providence of God, or the Psalmist who complained often about his enemies. Jeremiah lamented over the fall of Jersalem. Paul complained much about the shoddy treatment he received from the church in Corinth. Karl Barth once remarked how each of these complainants, who thought they were hard done by, were rehabilitated by the realisation that *‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done’ (Lk.17:10).*

You will not find this unpopular text of Scripture printed on any piece of religious merchandise. This is a shame because the text surprises us by showing the way to freedom. Job, the Psalmist, Jeremiah and Paul all surrendered their freedom to the tyranny of a wounded self; a self that retreated like a bear to lick its wounds. But Jesus' word of command has the power to liberate us from self-oppression because he has restructured our human existence to live under a divine command that frees us from a demanding self that would enslave us.

Nowhere is this curse more stereotyped than in the life of working mums whose lives are torn between competing demands. The demands of children, friends, spouse and employer all come home to roost on the working mum. Her plight is the subject of features articles, television forums, radio talkback and advertisements. One advertisement urges working mums to take 'me- time' by starting their day with a bowl of 'Special K' cereal!

I want no part in trivializing a cultural problem. But the stereotype helps make the point that life under the divine command means that a life of competing demands can never be a Christian's problem. Not because we do not have a list of things that need doing. We can all rattle off a list of jobs that need doing but it is actually the Lord's prerogative to order our lives.

In terms of the gospel text he may bring before us a flock of sheep to tend, or a field to plow, or a hungry family to feed and our obedience to God will be tested by the performance of our duty. We are inclined to mark off time for 'God', or time for 'me' or time for 'family' but none of

this time management belongs to a life that is claimed by Jesus Christ. The whole of our lives is under his command and only he can prosper whatever our hand finds to do.

Perhaps this is why Jesus indulged in a little hyperbole by inferring that his followers are ‘worthless slaves’ because only Jesus knows how God can turn the performance of our duty into gold. Or to put the matter in another way; only God can give the increase to our sowing and watering.

It is sometimes said in social commentary about generation Y that their feeling of being ‘under-appreciated’ is a good enough reason to toss in a job. But what is the difference between ‘Y’ and all the other generations from A to X? Who does not threaten to withdraw services if we are not thanked or appreciated? Jesus Christ calls us from this slavish way of living. He calls us into the freedom of serving the will of God whose prerogative it is to bring to the head of the queue our assigned tasks and, as Paul said in another place, he will give the increase.

Revd Ivan Kirk, St David's, Coopers Plains Qld.