

‘How do we serve?’

18th Sunday after Trinity, Yr B, Benefice Service – Welland Fosse Group of Churches; Sunday 30th September 2018

*Homily by the Rev'd Dr Mike Kirby, Liverpool Cathedral Chaplain (SSM);
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James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

May I speak now in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

How do we serve? How do we serve? It is such a delight to be with you all again – although I struggle to believe that it was nearly 18 months or so since I last had the honour and privilege to share some thoughts with you....one says it's a sign of age when time passes so quickly! But it is great being back with Chris and Gerry, and in this beautiful part of our country. Thank you once again for the privilege of being here.

Although in Chris's own efficient manner, this opportunity was booked almost an equally long time ago, logistically it coincided extremely well with my having to be in London these last few days. As you may recall, my professional work is within the field of cancer therapy, radiotherapy to be more exact. And it was in terms of discussing national radiotherapy provision and ideas that I was down here Thursday and Friday; a meeting that I had set up to discuss the development of radiotherapy services for our patients nationally; to share ideas and experiences, well established and newly drawn up, because my previous clinical work for the Christie in Manchester was to set up a wider provision of its service to patients in different parts

of greater Manchester. It is nearly 10 years on since those two centres started treating patients – so I invited colleagues from across the country to discuss their experiences (good and not so good) and also share, discuss and debate about our current provision and the challenges which are there for those developing new services right now. It was an excellent meeting, with a very wide range of points shared, and a common directive to use all means possible to let people know of the successes of radiotherapy and the increasing need for our patients – alongside the stark realities of the lack of equipment and staff that we presently have nationally. Going forward, it is a tough task, but one we should all be engaged with, to highlight to government the needs we have – outside and beyond the huge Brexit debate.

For me personally, it is a continuation of my life's work – in developing and engaging with the science and the services of cancer therapy for our patients. As a person of faith, I firmly believe it is my calling, my vocation – as you may recall, alongside my priestly role. It is how I am called to use the small skills and talents I have from God, to serve others. It is a way of discipleship in itself – that we love our neighbour as we would wish to be loved; that in order to do so, we serve our neighbour with all our capacity and ability.

Our scripture readings today help us look afresh at service and discipleship. The first from James, is one which is very poignant for Chris and myself, in highlighting the gift of healing ministry – something we set-up together whilst at Blackburn, and a ministry close to my heart which I have been part of at both Chester and Liverpool cathedrals. The ministry of healing, through the laying on of hands and anointing with oil – the latter of which has been the basis for physical healing for thousands of years. For both of us, the emphasis is very much not on the individual, but on the healing

power of Jesus Christ – exercised in groups in the laying on of hands, it allows all people to come forward for prayers for themselves or for others; the action of approach being highly symbolic in itself, in reminding us all about coming closer to God and Jesus Christ for the power of healing, for all our needs – prayers which are always answered but in many different ways; in as many different ways as the types of healing possible – spiritual, emotional, psychological as well as the obvious physical. Interestingly, our modern medicine has developed along similar lines over the last few decades – that healing disease requires a holistic approach. I learnt very quickly in my early years of training, as clinical attitudes changed, that our work was not just to arrest the disease, but to help nature along the way in healing of the whole person...for which traditional medicine and techniques must sit alongside a range of other services which are all important to the person, since it is healing of the whole person we are looking for.

Our faith enables us to look for, and have confidence in, healing of all kinds; from the skills and talents of our healthcare professionals and the ways we keep on pushing forward the boundaries of modern science and medicine, alongside our prayers and the spiritual care that we can all bring to each other, especially in a community of faith like this one. We know that illness and sickness will be ever present until we are finally together in the kingdom of God; but we can all serve each other by caring and working towards that heavenly kingdom by what we can professionally and spiritually achieve ourselves in the meantime – to help those in need and especially ones less fortunate than ourselves. James emphasises that fact in special prayers and actions which allow each of us to bring our needs closer to God and Jesus Christ, for the healing that only Jesus can bring – in consort with the power of faith in our lives in all our

professions which have this common goal – of serving others through healthcare.

But the scriptures are clear too in the focus for us as disciples of Christ – of always being mindful that the power, the gifts, the talents are from on high, and we have them with the purpose of serving others – not in the gain of power and status to be served and lauded by others. My meeting over the last two days showed that beautifully; as we came together as a group of healthcare professionals from our many disciplines – the disciplines which are all necessary to achieve what we presently can in treating our patients with radiotherapy – and that collaboration, communication and an appreciation of all are needed if we are to move forward our branch of medicine to help serve our patients better and better.

In Jesus' time, and indeed even now in our own society perhaps, it is a reversal of values held in many parts of our contemporary society – going against the accumulation of power, wealth and status (when gathered purely for the sake of those things) compared with developing and furthering ourselves in order to serve the needs of others. In the gospel, this is emphasised in the highlight of children – whom, at that time, were regarded as the lowest and least esteemed in society. It would have been a complete anathema for the disciples at the time and those listening – to seemingly take steps backward from what people had achieved and worked for, to then become the servant of all. Perhaps that's why here, some extreme analogies are used – in illustrating the perils of going down a different path. To not serve others is to take a path which is so poor, that having a millstone hung around ones neck or losing a hand, a foot or even our sight would be thought of as better alternatives. Extreme analogies indeed!

But the shock tactics are there for illustration, for persuasion, rather than perhaps pejection. The choice is always ours, and Jesus invites us, rather than compels us, to make that choice – in order to serve God and others better. As faith itself is a gift, given freely (rather than something which is achieved), so too our allegiance to Jesus and to his teaching is one of choice, that we can freely make.....because we want to, not because we feel we have to; because we want to serve others in need – for some of us, especially those who may be sick or ill. The choice is always ours – to serve others by the many different gifts and talents we have, which illustrate beautifully how there are many different ways in which we all can serve.

So the key point is that we continue building up our own communities, by nourishing and strengthening ourselves through prayer and the sacraments, so we can develop a life of service to others which gets better and better. As a community of faith especially, these are the things we are each called to do; large and small, many different things and in a myriad of ways - so that we recognise and develop the ways in which we serve those around us....in Jesus' name.

Amen.