

Sermon 20 October 2024: 21st Sunday after Trinity HSM

Second Reading: Mark 10:35-45

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink, or be baptized with the baptism I am baptised with?"

"We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptised with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Prayer: Lord, open our hearts to your word, and help us to follow you more closely each day. Amen

Many of the things that Jesus said are the complete opposite to the way we normally think and behave. And one of the most surprising comes in today's reading from Mark's gospel:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

We may be very familiar with these words, and so miss how extraordinary they are. We say in the creed that we believe in One Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God... of one being with the Father. And here he is, saying that his purpose in coming to earth was to be a servant. The One through whom the universe was created didn't expect us to fall at his feet or even do the washing up for him ... he came to serve us.

This verse beautifully sums up our role as Christ's followers – not to be served, but to serve others. Seeking the very best for them. Pouring our lives out in love. It is the ideal for medical professionals of all kinds. Serving the suffering, not for gain or prestige, but out of caring compassion.

And it was the verse chosen by Dr. Ida Scudder to be the motto of the Christian Medical College that she founded in Vellore.

I could spend all day telling you some of the ways in which that motto has been lived out in countless ways for more than 120 years. In big projects such as polio eradication and one to one encounters, as medical people trained in Vellore have touched lives and healed the hurting.

But let me focus on just one story that I heard a couple of weeks ago from a young nurse called Keerthi. She was born in the urban slum of Old Vellore. Despite much prosperity in India, and indeed in Vellore, slums still exist where people live in appalling conditions. Her family of five lived in a one room thatched house with no plumbing. They cooked over an open fire. She and her two younger sisters would sleep on the floor in this room, while her parents would sleep outside. When it rained the roof leaked to such an extent that the floor would flood and they would huddle up in a corner, or go to neighbours to try to get some sleep.

They had no savings, so when they were ill they couldn't afford medicines. However the big CMC hospital had set up a little hospital and community

outreach service close to her home, and they knew they could go there for treatment. Once when Keerthi was very ill with suspected TB, her father took her to this Low Cost ward and she was admitted for over a week. She was eight or nine at the time. She had lots of tests done and was given medicines. They even gave her food each day which she found amazing. Everyone treated her with great kindness and love. However, she was very worried that her parents wouldn't be able to pay the bill – she knew it was a private hospital with no government funds. When the time came for her to be discharged she was again amazed – there was nothing to pay. The whole bill had been written off.

Sometime after this experience she was selected for sponsorship through Compassion, who helped with her schooling and ensured she had enough to eat. This was another way in which she became aware of the love and care of Christians around the world.

Over the years she got to know Dr. Sunil Abraham, the head of the Low Cost Unit, who used to visit her home. He is a well-respected senior professor of Family Medicine, in one of the top medical colleges of India, yet he would visit patients in the slums. He encouraged her to study hard and in due course apply to CMC to study nursing. This she eventually did and was successful. She did well in her degree course, and after graduating specialised in surgical obstetrics. It was wonderful to hear her describe her joy in helping deliver babies through complex labour and caesarian section.

Alongside this journey she developed a great love for the Bible, despite coming from a Hindu family. Her parents disapproved of her reading the Bible, so she used to read it secretly. Eventually she took the step of becoming a Christian. She was so compelling in her new faith that her whole family followed her example and joined her in baptism.

Keerthi is one example of a person touched by the Low Cost Effective Care Unit. It was started by a great friend of ours, Dr. Sara Bhattacharji, but it is an expression of the central ethos of the Christian Medical College Vellore, and what it has always tried to do: not to be served, but to serve. Though it is at the pinnacle of medical education and provides some of the best healthcare services in India, its doors still remain open to the poorest of the poor. Indeed it is constantly reaching out to those on the margins, to seek and save those ignored by everyone else.

Every year CMC provides millions of pounds of free or subsidised treatment for those who cannot afford to pay. Friends of Vellore is a UK charity that supports the work of CMC, raising funds and awareness here and sending gifts for patient care and projects there. The patient support fund of the Low Cost Unit enables people needing major surgery or high level medical treatment to be sent to the main hospital, with the fees covered.

We'd love to send a gift for the patient support fund. The good news is that someone has promised to match fund our donations up to £2,000. Every pound you give will be doubled. And we also know first hand how far money can go in India. A procedure that might cost £1,000 here can be done for just £200 or less there. So not only will our gifts be doubled, our money will be put to very good use.

We are going to be collecting funds for this up until around Easter next year. There will be a QR code to enable you to give specifically to this project. We don't want to forget other charities that we support, and in the lead up to Christmas we will be focusing again on St. Mungos and the homeless in this country. But the PCC are also keen that we look beyond our borders and support CMC Vellore as well.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus, thank you that you came not to be served, but to serve. Thank you for all those who have followed your example and dedicated their lives to the service of others in the ministry of healing. Use us also, in our homes, our workplaces and our community to serve others in humility and love just as you did. Amen