

AMDG Jesus College Oxford – Choral Evensong – 3 March 2019

Isaiah 42.5–12; John 13.1–17

In nomine Dei...

College staff used to be known as “College servants”: cooks, butlers, porters, scouts, and so on; and some less well-known ones too. A couple of bell pushes in the SCR apparently used to be the way (more recently than you would dream) of telling some sort of under-butler – who was always on duty, waiting in a glorified cupboard – that a Fellow wanted a slice of toast. Cuts can be vicious these days in Higher Education institutions... Previous editions of the College statutes show up another kind of cut: even up to the nineteenth century there was the post of “College barber”. Life in Jesus has always been cutting edge.

“College servants” are fundamental and wonderful. They keep us fed and watered, housed and warm, protected and supported. They hide in little back offices or windowless basements working like Trojans. They are often unnoticed, sometimes taken for granted, and most truly living out the seasonal message of “doing the little things” like St. David.

I remember my very first SCR dinner in College. The butlers on duty that night (they were “butlers” back then) were impeccable in calling me “ma’am” and providing for all our needs before we even realised. It took quite some getting used to, to be served so frequently, so perfectly, so generously. But I’m glad they call me by name now.

Despite such apparent grandeur, a College Chaplain has always been a College servant too. The Chaplain is in that amazing set-apart little space of someone who can join in an MCR brunch or pop into the JCR or nip down to the staff room or warm up by the SCR fire; someone who can get to know alumni and

parents, partners and spouses, and connect with the outside of our four walls as well as try and model an interior life within the cloister. It's a privileged opportunity to serve at all levels and in so many contexts even in a college microcosm like Jesus.

Our readings tonight were about service. First, in the book of Isaiah. These verses (p.733 of the Chapel bibles) are an exploration of the "Servant of the Lord", or "the suffering servant of Isaiah". In this section of Isaiah, known as "Second Isaiah", there are four so-called "Servant songs". The first of these immediately preceded our Old Testament reading, and we heard that at the St. David's Day service. Today's verses witness a response to this revolutionary discourse that puts the message of change out there. God's words are an attractive set of promises, or challenges, depending on how you identify with them: opening eyes that are blind, freeing captives, releasing those who are trapped in darkness. Isaiah follows up with the invitation to his people to sing a new song – a song like the servant would sing: a song of good news and praise.

This suffering servant is highly debated. Is he a real historic person, like the Babylonian leader Cyrus, or the prophet Isaiah himself, or Jesus Christ who was then yet to come? Is he the communal people of Israel, the community of God's people? Is this actually all addressed to the readers of the text throughout the ages, to you and me?

Literary scholars love playing with texts, uncovering different readings. Preachers love finding ways of applying Biblical texts to our lives today. But one of the things that my old Classics tutor hammered into us was that although we could have a very good shot at it, we can't know 100% certainly precisely what was in the mind of the author. Or in the case of ancient scriptures, in the minds of the authors and editors and redactors and collectors of the texts...

I also know that, while God calls his people into personal relationships with him, to think that a text is about *us* first and foremost can be a grave error. Yes, we can be inspired by the Scriptures and religious traditions to be servants; but we aren't the one and only servant, the best servant, the one who most matters in the opening of eyes, the freeing of captives, the releasing of those who are trapped. We aren't the soloist; we are one voice in a choir of many.

In the academic competitive lifestyle of the best university (I'll say that while I still dare...) of course we are striving, each of us, to get the first class mark; to be *the pioneer* of our research area; to get *the highest* ranking in the tables; to be *the best* President, partner, or friend; to be *the one* to win the funding bid; and so on. "Doing *our* best" – an admirable aim – all too often slips into the goal of "*being the best*".

And that leads us *away* from, not nearer, the truth. The moment we argue with someone, we are saying our own point of view is better, more important. We are putting ourselves first, and everyone else second. Sometimes that's hard to resist, when we're on the receiving end, and we just let the loudest or most insistent voice win.

The servant of Isaiah is not like that. If you read the whole text, you'll notice the ambiguities, the gaps, even the inconsistencies. There are *always more voices to be heard*. There's *no one single person*, or group, who has the monopoly on God, on doing God's will, on understanding the holy things of our world.

Except – Christians will have said in this Chapel for 398 years – Jesus Christ. That he was a historical person is not currently loudly questioned, there's so much evidence in secular texts, inscriptions and other archaeological stuff.

Christian texts then show how this Jesus was viewed by contemporaries and generations of their students as a leading light in understanding the divine.

We glimpse this mysterious, wonderful, teacher of what is truly Godliness (in our second reading). That extraordinary account in the Gospel of St. John - where, just as he is on the verge of falling into the hands of his enemies, being questioned, tortured, and crucified, he gets out towel and basin and washes the disciples' feet before dinner. They are so confused. Yes, it was their custom to wash grubby sandalled feet after traipsing round somewhere for dinner. But this is what *staff* are for. Or servants, or slaves, in Jesus' context. What on earth is Jesus doing?

I've heard quite a few stories in my time from generations of long-serving Fellows or elderly alumni. Some pertain to Chaplains. I'll tell just one now: of the guest preacher once who got down on his knees, insisted that the then Principal (more perplexed than even St. Peter) disalced himself, and actually did wash his feet during Evensong.

But what is that ancient foot-washing *really* about? Jesus himself says, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

We may not realize in the moment *everything* about our experiences and education here, but our known lack of understanding ensures we continue to think. Perhaps we'll learn their meaning in twenty, forty or more years; perhaps not even in our lifetimes. Being at peace with knowing there are things that we don't yet understand, that we haven't learnt – even in a place like this – means we have space to grow, to carry on learning.

And as for that lack of understanding about Jesus' footwashing: we can at least study the text. The word for foot-washing is *different* from the regular Greek

word for washing, which is what verse 10 unfolds. Foot-washing is not a spa treatment or a luxurious shower in our newest ensuite. Footwashing is to be understood so much more than literally. Footwashing is about hospitality and generosity.

Hospitality and generosity. Things that servants live out, often unnoticed. Things that are done day in, day out, in the life of a community. Servant songs sung over and over again through the centuries in this chapel and in this college. Ancient songs made ever new. Songs that show the real art of hospitality and generosity.

I've been taken aback – and I fear looked somewhat uncomfortable! – at all the public thanks I've been receiving these last few days. But I've been deeply touched at the individual words and notes in cards and in person. I rejoice that this is a community which can give deep and meaningful thanks: to appreciate generosity and celebrate the hospitality of inclusive welcome.

Jesus – in his footwashing and that Last Supper – acted out God's promise and challenge of hospitality and generosity, echoing the Servant Songs, learning and teaching hospitality and generosity.

If there is one thing we all learn through taking part in the life of Jesus, I would hope it is this very art of hospitality, the grace of generosity.

So – cheers to you all. Thank you. May hospitality and generosity be forever renewed as your song, your grace, your toast. *Floreat Collegium Iesu.*