



Servant Ministry

A portrait of Christ
and a pattern for his followers

Tony Horsfall

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Tony Horsfall



To Rennis Ponniah,
Anglican Bishop of Singapore.

It is a privilege to know you, dear brother,
and count you as a friend. I know this passage of
scripture is one that you love. I also know it is one that
you exemplify in your ministry, for you are
a true servant leader.

May God continue to enable you
and grace you with his presence
as you lead his people
in the footsteps of Jesus.

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'Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.'

This is what God the Lord says –
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
'I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

'I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.'

Foreword

Some years ago, Tony Horsfall came and led a staff retreat for me when I was principal of Redcliffe College. It was just ahead of the start of the academic year and the retreat was called 'Time to Stop', but it took place about five days before the students started arriving – we didn't really have time to stop! But his focus on our identity and purpose, and his unpacking of the resources available to us, allowed us both individually and corporately to remember during that particularly challenging year to stop, reflect and re-engage afresh in God's service.

This is a book that presents a truly biblical view of servanthood – not to be like a nice, benign auntie for whom nothing is too much trouble, but rather to live as God intends us to live. I teach a postgraduate class on leadership and I sometimes tell the students that I get fed up with talk of servant leadership, partly because I see many other metaphors for leadership in scripture but also because I think Christians have misunderstood servant leadership and servanthood generally. Tony, however, has not.

God intends us to live and serve securely. Tony starts with identity and calling. This is vital. We need to know who we are, both the reality of frailty and our status as children of the living God loved by a Father who delights in his children. He goes on to justice and compassion – two concepts that often get separated by Christian writers because they find them hard to hold in tension. Tony, however, does not.

God intends us to live confidently. Servants serve a master (in our case the Lord), not every person we bump into. Knowing how God wants us to serve him in each and every situation in which we find

ourselves – whether it demands compassion or righteous anger, clear leadership or wise counsel – is vital to effective Christian living. To be able to do it in confidence, because we know who we are and who we are called to be, allows us to serve effectively.

I'm now in a new role as head of learning and ministry development for the Diocese of Leicester, developing and supporting those in ministry. But knowing we are servants and not slaves, and learning to serve as Jesus did, secure in the Father's love, remains the call of each and every follower of Christ, even priests!

Tony has served the church so well in writing this book. It has the potential to make the church a better bride of Christ and each individual Christian a closer reflection of Jesus this side of heaven.

Revd Dr Rob Hay
Head of Learning and Ministry Development
for the Diocese of Leicester

Introduction

My computer has a problem with the word 'servanthood'. It refuses to recognise it. Every time I type the word, the computer underlines it in red, suggesting it is wrong in some way, but offering no alternative. Likewise, my home dictionary has no reference to servanthood. I was beginning to think I had made it up until, much to my relief, a quick check on the internet showed that lots of other people also use the word. It does exist.

Even so, it is difficult to find an exact definition, so I have made up my own. Servanthood is the state of being a servant; the attitude of mind, disposition of heart and daily practice of someone who serves. Since this is a book about servanthood, it is important to be sure from the outset that it is a valid word!

Servant Ministry is based on the first Servant Song in Isaiah (42:1-9) and could be described as a practical exposition of this beautiful passage. My intention is to explain the meaning of the text and then to apply its teaching to the biblical theme of servanthood. It will lead us quite naturally to explore some significant topics: the motivation for service and the call to serve; valid expressions of servanthood and the link between evangelism and social action; character formation and what it means to be a servant, especially in leadership; how to sustain ourselves over the long haul in the harsh realities of ministry; the importance of listening to God and being directed by him in what we do, both on a daily basis and over the course of a lifetime.

My basic assumption throughout is that servanthood is for all believers, not just for those in some form of 'full-time' ministry. I hope this comes across clearly because it is vital for the health and vitality of local churches that every member appreciates and understands their

role as a servant of God. At the same time, my focus will be on those in Christian leadership and cross-cultural ministry for whom the call to serve has led to significant life changes that impact them daily.

Inevitably we will cover the topic of servant leadership, and I hope we might grasp the principles behind it in a fresh way while avoiding some of the common misconceptions and distortions. It is my strong conviction that servant leadership is vital for the well-being and effectiveness of any church or Christian organisation in the 21st century. For me, Christian leadership is synonymous with servant leadership.

We will approach the Servant Song through two lenses, seeing it first as a portrait of Christ and second as a pattern for his followers. Jesus shows us through his life on earth what it means to be a servant, and he perfectly fulfils the picture painted for us in Isaiah. He is an example to us of true servanthood, and we are called with God's help to imitate him: 'Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did' (1 John 2:6). Servanthood can never be an optional extra in the Christian life; it is its foundation stone, and all disciples of Jesus must see themselves as servants. Peter says it clearly: 'Live as free persons, but do not use your freedom as a cover up for evil; live as servants of God' (1 Peter 2:16, NIV 1984).

Readers who are familiar with my earlier books may think that the theme of servanthood is a departure from my usual emphasis, since it is about action rather than reflection, doing rather than being. I see it more as a natural progression, because the reflective life that I so often espouse is valid only if it is expressed outwardly in tangible acts of service, and love for God is real only when it leads to love for others. *Servant Ministry* should therefore be an excellent follow-up to *Working from a Place of Rest* (BRF, 2010). Many of the themes I have previously written about will occur here but in a less prominent way. Servanthood assumes that we have a strong inner life, that we are secure in God's love and that we know how to allow God to work in us and through us.

One thing that has become clear to me of late is that there is a great aversion to the notion of servanthood in western society, which spills over into the church. Our aspiration is to be served rather than to serve, and sadly this malaise has infected many congregations too. We would rather pay for people to do ministry on our behalf than be involved in ministry ourselves. We are likely to be consumers not contributors, spectators not participants. A book with the title *Servant Ministry* is therefore not likely to fly off the shelves as the next bestseller, but its message may well be what we most need to hear.

Read the chapters slowly and carefully, ponder the words and meditate on the scriptures that you read. My prayer is that as you interact with these pages, you will meet with God in a fresh way and will be drawn into a deeper place of love and appreciation for Jesus, which will be expressed in joyful service to God and others.

7

Justice, the compassionate servant and the needs of the world

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.

ISAIAH 42:3-4

The first part of the servant's mission is to satisfy the demands of God's broken law and to bring justice by offering himself as a sacrifice for the sin of the world. In this way, God is seen to be just and yet also able to justify guilty sinners (Romans 3:26). This, however, is only half the equation. The second part of his mission is to confront the injustice that exists within society, showing that God cares and will respond.

Isaiah himself knew only too well that God was concerned about the plight of the poor and needy. He found himself, as many of the prophets did, speaking out in God's name against the injustices of his own society and the falsity of religious behaviour devoid of a social conscience:

When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

ISAIAH 1:15-17

For Isaiah, true religion was not about religious practices so much as about compassionate action to help those in need:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

ISAIAH 58:6–7

He considered that serving the poor was not only the right thing to do, but the best way to bring God's blessing to the nation.

Other prophets shared a similar perspective. Amos declared, 'Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream' (Amos 5:23–24). Micah was equally forthright: 'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). Jeremiah contrasts godly king Josiah's compassion with the greed of his wayward son Shallum:

'He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?' declares the Lord. 'But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion.'

JEREMIAH 22:16–17

Given the concern of God for the poor, it is inconceivable that the servant could be anything but interested in their welfare and in correcting the ills of society. Those who have no voice need someone to speak out for them; those who are powerless need someone to champion their cause and those who are without hope need someone to come to their aid.

This great concern must have been in the mind of Jesus as he entered the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry. With all eyes fixed upon him, the passage he chose to read was a declaration of intent, a statement of his mission: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18–19; see Isaiah 61:1–2).

Yes, he had come to bring good news to those who were spiritually poor, bound by sin, blinded by Satan and oppressed by demonic forces, but Jesus was not simply speaking figuratively; he meant it literally. He came to inaugurate a new kingdom that was based on justice and a compassion for the poor and needy. He travelled extensively, preaching the good news of the kingdom, aware that this was his calling (Luke 4:43; Matthew 9:35–36). He summed up his own ministry like this: 'The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor' (Matthew 11:5). This was how he lived himself and how he wanted his disciples to live also.

Jesus was a man filled with compassion. The gospels describe the emotion that Jesus felt when he saw need, either in the crowds or in individual sufferers, in a way that seems unusual to us. They use the Greek word *splanknon*, which means 'to be moved in one's bowels', to be stirred deeply within and moved not just to pity but to action. This was how Jesus reacted when he encountered a leper, met the widow in Nain whose son had died, saw the lostness of the multitudes, felt the pain of the sick, heard the cry of the beggars and responded to the plight of a broken-hearted father (Mark 1:41; 9:22; Matthew 14:14; 15:32; Luke 7:13). There was within him an instinctive and generous-hearted responsiveness to the needs of humanity. He could not remain aloof or detached; nor could he turn a blind eye and become indifferent. He was compelled by love to do something.

Jesus taught his followers the importance of giving to the poor (Matthew 19:21, Luke 12:33) and the joy of being welcoming and hospitable towards those who are less fortunate (Luke 14:12–14). He rebuked the Pharisees because they neglected justice and the love of God (Luke 11:42). He summed up the law in two challenging statements: love God, and love your neighbour (10:27–28), and illustrated what it means to be a neighbour, through the parable of the good Samaritan (vv. 30–37). The Samaritan ‘took pity’ (*splanknon*) on the man who had been attacked, tending to his wounds, taking him to a place of refuge and paying for his care. A true neighbour is one who shows mercy to others, regardless of nationality, and Jesus encouraged his listeners to ‘go and do likewise’ (v. 37).

Perhaps the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46 best sums up what Jesus wanted to teach his followers. The sheep (who inherit the kingdom) are those who have fed the hungry, helped the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the beggar, cared for the sick and visited people in prison. The goats, by contrast (who do not inherit the kingdom), are those who have not done these things. The sheep have acted unself-consciously and not for reward, because they have done it for ‘the very least’, those who could never repay them. Yet in serving the least fortunate they have actually been serving Christ, for he has identified himself with the poor. It was this amazing truth that motivated Mother Teresa and her Sisters of Charity in their care of the poor and dying in Calcutta. She said, ‘Jesus makes himself the hungry one, the naked one, the homeless one, the sick one, the one in prison, the lonely one, the unwanted one, and he says, “You did it to me”. He is hungry for our love, and this is the hunger of our poor people.’⁷

It should be clear from all this that those who have been justified by faith will express that faith through their involvement in the issues of social justice. Grace should make us just. This has not always been the case: for some evangelical Christians, the fear of losing the message of the cross in a plethora of social action has meant

they have shied away from such involvement. Gradually, however, over the last 30 years or so, they have come to realise that the proclamation of the gospel and the demonstration of the love of God belong together. A turning point was the Lausanne Congress of 1974, and one of the main architects was John Stott. Stott believed that there should be a synthesis between evangelism and social action, and that this was possible in the servant role. 'If we truly love our neighbour, we shall without doubt tell him the Good News of Jesus,' he said. 'But equally if we truly love our neighbour, we won't stop there... Love... expresses itself in service wherever it sees need.'⁸

The needs of the world have never been greater than they are today. The poor and needy, the marginalised and victimised, the abused and exploited, the deprived and neglected, the hungry and the thirsty still cry out for help. The plight of women and children, of refugees and displaced people, of the illiterate and the homeless, of orphans and widows, of AIDS sufferers and the victims of war, does not go away or decrease. Millions are trapped within social, political, cultural and economic systems that imprison them in poverty, sickness and despair. They are oppressed and powerless. Are we aware of their need? Do we care enough to get involved? How should a servant respond? The great injustice of the 21st century is that so much of this suffering is unnecessary. We have the resources and technology to make a difference, if we have the willpower.

One writer has expressed the challenge we face like this:

There is much at stake. The world we live in is under siege – three billion are desperately poor, one billion hungry, millions are trafficked in human slavery, ten million children die needlessly each year, wars and conflicts are wreaking havoc, pandemic diseases are spreading, ethnic hatred is flaming, and terrorism is growing. Most of our brothers and sisters in the developing world live in grinding poverty. And in the midst stands the Church of Jesus Christ... with resources, knowledge, and tools unequalled in the history of Christendom. I believe

we stand on the brink of a defining moment. We have a choice to make.⁹

That choice, of course, is whether or not to get involved. Even when we have a servant's heart, we may not always get the point. Many Christians in the developed world are trapped in affluent lifestyles, living for our careers and following our own dreams of success both for ourselves and our children. We don't want to be inconvenienced, let alone suffer, and we do not take the demands of the gospel seriously. We give as little as we can and are so focused on ourselves that we remain blind to the real issues of the world. If we are honest, we often feel that the poor are poor because they are lazy; that people have AIDS because of their lifestyles; that the sick should take better care of themselves in the first place. We have much to repent of if we are to live out true servanthood.

Yet there are those who give themselves sacrificially to bringing justice to the needy, burying themselves in the broken places of the world in obedience to Jesus. Indeed, for me, it is one of the great affirmations of the truth of Christianity that wherever in the world there is need – because of natural disasters, famines, wars and so on – there you will find God's people, quietly and unobtrusively caring and serving. God is at work through them, meeting the needs of those who suffer, bringing justice to the nations.

Richard Stearns was CEO of an American tableware company with a successful career. Married with five children, he lived in a large house, drove a Jaguar and travelled widely, always first-class and staying in the best hotels. Respected in his community, influential in his large suburban church and generous in his charitable giving, he was the epitome of a 'successful' Christian – or so he thought. Out of the blue he was invited to become president of World Vision, a Christian organisation dedicated to working with families and children and to tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. He felt inadequate and unqualified for such a role and resisted the opportunity until God showed him without any doubt that this was the job for him.

The move meant a change of location for his family and a huge drop in salary, but more significant was the impact it made on his faith. His first trip abroad (to Uganda) completely took him apart, showing him at first-hand the suffering of AIDS victims, especially children. Overwhelmed by what he saw, his tears began to flow. He describes the moment like this:

‘Forgive me, Lord, forgive me, I didn’t know.’ But I did know. I knew about poverty and suffering in the world. I was aware that children die daily from starvation and lack of clean water. I also knew about AIDS and the orphans it leaves behind, but I kept these things outside of my insulating bubble and looked the other way. Yet this was to be the moment that would ever after define me... My sadness that day was replaced by repentance. Despite what the Bible had told me so clearly, I had turned a blind eye to the poor.¹⁰

Stearns recognised that there was a ‘hole’ in his gospel, a blind spot in his understanding of Christianity. He began to see that being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, requires more than just having a personal and transforming relationship with God. It also entails a public and transforming relationship with the world. If our faith has no positive outward expression, then it has a ‘hole’ in it. As the apostle James put it, ‘faith without deeds is dead’ (James 2:26).

Mei Ling (not her real name) was attending a retreat in Malaysia, taking a few days out to listen to God and to mull over her future. A social worker for the Singapore government, she had worked with delinquent girls for more than 13 years but was considering an invitation to go ‘full-time’ and become Director of a Christian charity that ran a halfway house for women prisoners and drug addicts. Not having had theological training, she felt inadequate for the task, and it would also mean a big pay cut. However, as she pondered the Servant Song in Isaiah 42:1–9, she was struck by the promise of verses 6–7: ‘I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant

for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.’

That was the confirmation she needed: Mei Ling left the retreat with the assurance that God was calling her to this work and she should step out of her comfort zone.

These stories recount the experiences of just two individuals who have looked at the needs of the world through the eyes of a servant and felt compelled to respond. All of us who take seriously the claims of Christ upon our lives and seek to walk the path of servanthood must consider carefully how we can integrate compassion for the poor into our discipleship. In what way can we be involved in bringing justice to the nations?

It is not easy. I am writing this chapter in the run-up to Christmas. We have stocked up with extra food (the freezer is full), bought our presents (what do you give to someone who has everything?) and are looking forward to ‘spoiling’ our grandchildren (who already have more than enough toys and games). I am resisting the temptation to buy a more up-to-date TV in the January sales and am debating in my mind if I should buy a new iPad. At the same time, I am writing about poverty, starvation and child mortality. Hmm... perhaps there is a ‘hole’ in my gospel, too.

Reflection

- Meditate upon the compassion of Jesus for those in need, thinking of some of the examples given in this chapter.
- ‘Grace should make us just’ (p. 62). How is this being worked out in your life?



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