

Serving with skill (Romans 12:1-8)

Membership matters (Simon Rea)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 18 May 2008

It's great to be here today to celebrate with Riley and his family. The Bible tells us that Jesus loved celebrations. In fact the first time he performed a miracle was at a big wedding where he turned water into wine. [show 2 litre bottle of water and empty wine bottle].

The Bible also tells us how Jesus used to teach in parables [show Bible] using special stories which helped people understand what he was saying about God's kingdom. He said God's kingdom was like losing and finding coins or sheep, and he said that it was like yeast and like a wedding banquet.

Christians are supposed to follow Jesus, so I thought I'd try that now - unfortunately, I don't think I could manage turning water into wine, so I thought I'd have a go at a culinary parable, too. Except it's going to be about the church of God not the kingdom of God because as part of our series of talks on why membership of the church

matters, we're going to be looking at serving with skill.

The church of God is like unto a TV celebrity chef cooking contest and the celebrity chefs should be serving with as much skill as they could muster. And lo! The participants were in 3 teams. The first cameth on with fire and brimstone on his lips and verily his language was foul. And his name was [ppt Gordon Ramsay] Gordon. And his team was small of size and only one in number. And he cooked up a storm, too [ppt dish]

Then cameth on the second team. And they cameth back from beyond the grave for they were 2 in number and Fanny did truly and heartily dominate the other [ppt Craddocks] and Johnny looked sorely sad and down trodden. And they cooked up [ppt dish] well, it could have been almost anything but this really is what it looked like!

Then came the third team. Ok, so they weren't actually real and they weren't all human but they did cook up something really special: [ratatouille]

And the heavenly jury went out and made their decision, on taste and on appearance and style of cooking and lo! God spake and said "Gordon: Nul points. The church is not a one man show". And he spake again and said Fanny: "Nul points. The church is not for people who want to dominate others for kicks and self gratification." And finally he spake and said: "Linguini, Remy and all the other rats: All the points you need for truly the church of God is like a well run kitchen where all work together at the tasks they are good at and where all members matter. The head chef does the head chef stuff - leading, the chefs de parties organise their own parties to do the different courses, the sous chefs and the commis chefs carry out their tasks and voila, that's what it really means to serve me with skill."

It's not quite the way the Bible tells us but our reading will help us understand how Christians should serve God and each other in the church. If you are already a Christian, if you have made the decision to answer God's call on your life then this reading might help you understand how serving him and his people is actually

part of your worship and if you haven't yet decided to follow Jesus and become part of his church this reading may help you hear how God is calling you to serve him with style and serve him as yourself. Mike is going to come and read it to us now. The passage comes from St Paul's letter to the church in Rome and you can find it on p1139.

READING

In the very first verse of our reading St Paul tells us that we should also offer our bodies as 'living sacrifices'. Worship doesn't only happen in these 4 walls on Sundays between the hours of 9.00 and 10.00 or 10.45 and 12.15 or 18.30 and 20.00. Christian worship doesn't only start when we start singing or stop when we stop praying - although singing and praying are vital parts of our worship. Worship is so much more and it should show itself through serving God's people because God's people are God's church. That service can and should take many forms, there are so many ways to serve God by serving in his church. In the passage ?Bemigho just read to us, St Paul challenges Christians to [ppt]

Serve with style
Serve as themselves
When Christians do that, then they'll
really be serving with skill - just as
God intended them to.

We're going to look at each of these in
turn. You may want to keep your pew
Bibles open at pl139 as we do so. Let's
start with serving with style: What has
style got to do with sacrifice? After all
Paul starts by telling Christians to
offer their bodies as living sacrifices,
doesn't he? We live in a very different
world from Paul and for 21st century men
and women, 'sacrifice' is not necessarily
going to conjure up a positive image.
Sacrifice sounds either too much like
hard work or like what people used to do
to animals before we knew better. But for
1st century men and women the word was
much more special. Sacrifices were part
of the way they did life - whether they
were Jews like Paul or Jesus or gentiles
like the Greeks and Romans. Sacrifices
were made with the best of the best
people could offer, so telling people to
offer themselves as living sacrifices is
a bit like telling them to do the very
best they could - because God is worth

it. For Christians that's especially true
in view of what Jesus did when he gave
his life on the cross, so that they can
have peace with God. That's what Paul is
getting at when he writes about God's
mercy. Jesus gave his life for us, so our
response should be to give the best we
can give - our lives - for him. That's
only logical, isn't it? Paul thought so -
in fact the word translated as spiritual
in vl actually sounds like logical in
Greek. A famous first-century philosopher
put it like this [Epictetus]: 'If I were
a nightingale, I would do what is proper
to a nightingale, and if I were a swan,
what is proper to a swan. In fact I am
logikos [sc. a rational being], so I must
praise God.' ppt man swan. Human beings
were made for worship. It's hard-wired
into our very being, it's what sets us
apart from all other animals. But we do
have a choice: we can choose to worship
God who is the creator - which is the
logical choice and to serve him or we can
choose to worship his creation and if we
worship his creation then that's what
we'll end up serving, too.

Contrary to what many in the media would
have us believe, being a Christian is not

about coming to church and leaving your brain outside the door. No, it's about letting God change our minds and make them more like his as he changes our lives and makes us more like Jesus. V2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

The heart of the matter is a renewed mind. That's the logical choice and that's what will make Christians different from non-Christians in what they think and what they do and how they think.

Christians are people who know know the hope to which [God] has called [them], the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (Eph 1:18-19).

That's why Christians shouldn't look at life in terms of this world, the world of sin and death from which we have been transferred by God's power (see 5:12-21), but in terms of the new world to which we belong, the kingdom of God ruled by righteousness, life and the Spirit. God has given us his Spirit, to to change our hearts and minds from within, so that our

obedience to God might be natural and spontaneous (7:6;8:5-9;Je.31:31-34;2Cor.3:6-7;Eph.4:22-24) and God has given us his word, the Bible so that we can start to understand what his good, pleasing and perfect will looks like.

And the more we do that, the more we will become like his Son who came into to world to shine like a light in the darkness, so we can shine like stars for him, too. That means they'll be showing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in their lives while so many in the world around them show sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like in their's. That's what happens when first our mind is renewed by the Word and Spirit of God; then we are able to discern and desire the will of God; and then we are increasingly transformed by it. That's why it so important to study the Bible regularly and come to church. Christians need to know God's style and then they can serve in the same way.

That's what it means to be serving with style.

Now, what about serving as ourselves?

It's great to see everyone here today but I wonder if you all realise how many people make these Sunday morning services possible? It's so much more than the 2 people at the front who speak and lead, read and pray or change over the OH transparencies. More even than the truly wonderful music group who meet on Thursday or Friday to practice and then bless us and God as they lead sung worship. It's even more than those brave souls who lead the children's groups across in the parish centre. Or those members of our prayer ministry team who are there to share your joys and sorrows in prayer at the end of each and every service. And it's even more than the sidespeople who make sure everyone is sitting comfortably and then collect the money or the welcomers who are there with a smile as you come in. And then there are those who enable the church to show hospitality by manning the tea bar. Don't forget the teams who do the flowers, clean the church, count the money and

those who help when we have a work party to clear the church yard and do small repairs on the building... I hope I thought of most people in that list - and they're only the ones who make these Sunday morning services possible. So many different tasks done by so many different people with so many different talents. There's teaching, encouraging, giving, organising, showing mercy (to those who don't like working with kids or cleaning floors...)

It's a bit like a big successful commercial kitchen, I suppose, to return to the initial image from my parable. But in this passage and in other places in his writings, St Paul paints a much more powerful picture to show us how Christians should work together. It's such a powerful picture because it helps us to understand what that wonderful slogan 'unity in diversity' might actually look like and it's an image that every human being can start to understand, too: What is it? What is Paul's powerful picture?

4 Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not

all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

He tells us that that when Christians come together as God's church, they should be like a body, a beautiful, fit body working out God's purposes together in God's world, not unfit and flabby or suffering from heart and lung disease.

Paul's goal at this point is to encourage each Christian to use his or her gifts energetically and properly and not to worry about the gifts others may have, or the way in which they may be using them. That's one of the reasons why he insists that Christians should think of themselves and others in the right way: not putting themselves above others but like Jesus who made himself like a servant, even though he is the ruler of the universe.

The first part of v6 is the key to understanding what Paul wants to say: 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. That is actually more important here than working out exactly what he means by the things in the list

which follows, as if things like leading, governing, teaching and prophesying were the only important gifts for Christians. Yes, of course they are important but they're not the only gifts and this is not the only list that Paul gives. (1 Cor. 12:7-11, 28; Eph. 4:11), and a comparison of these texts reveals that he is not seeking in any of them to give a comprehensive list but it does highlight some of the many different ways there are to serve God! God has given each of us different skills and different ways we can worship him by using those skills to serve him and each other. Many people in Christ Church have found the way God wants them to do this. But if you haven't, now is a great time to ask God how you can show your gratitude to him by serving in the way only you can because God has made you unique. God wants each of us to serve him in the way only we can

Perhaps find your own way to serve God