

# *To Serve and not to be served*

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“Then the mother of the Sons of Zebedee approached him along with her two sons, doing reverence to him and asking something from him. Jesus asked her: “What do you want? “She says to him: “Please say that these two sons of mine will be seated one on your right hand and the other on your left hand, in your kingdom.” Jesus responding said to them: “You do not realize what you are asking for. Are you capable of drinking the cup which I am about to drink?” They answer: “We are able.” Jesus says to them: “Of course you will drink my cup; but to be seated at my right and my left — that is not for me to grant; it is reserved for those for whom my Father has prepared those places.”

The ten other apostles were quite annoyed with the two brothers. So Jesus called all of them to him and said: “You know that the rulers of the nations like to lord it over the people and their leaders like to show off their power over other people. It should not be so with your people. But whoever wants to be great amongst you, let that person be a servant of the others. And if one wants to be the chief, let that person be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but on the contrary to serve and to give his life as the price of redemption for many others.” Matt. 20:20-28 (free but faithful translation)

The context of the sons of Zebedee episode is in Matthew 20:17-19, and the parable which precedes is of the house-holder who paid the same wages to those who worked all day from sunrise to sunset, to others who came to work at 9.00 a.m., to yet others who were hired at noon, to some who started at 3 p.m. and even to those who worked only for one hour from 5 p.m. (Matt. 20:1-16). It ends with the curiously unjust principle that God can do with God’s kingdom what God likes. The implication is that God’s justice does not follow the principles we usually attribute to our concept of justice.

The parable of the kingdom ends with two statements difficult to exegete: Friend, I am not unjust to you. Our contract was for one denarius. Take what is yours by contract and go. But it is my will that I will give to these last ones the same one denarius I give you. Am I not free to give what I want to give out of my own? Are you jealous about my being good to these people? Thus the last will be first and the first will be last (20:13b-16).

It is important to remember this. God’s justice follows principles quite different from ours.

It is also important that after having narrated this parable, so offensive to our sense of justice, Jesus was about to “go up” to Jerusalem for the great act of diakonia — that of laying down his life for others. Jesus calls the Twelve aside by themselves and discloses to them: Look, we are going up to Jerusalem. There the Son of Man will be betrayed and handed over to the high priests and law professors; they will condemn him to death, and will again betray and hand him

over to the gentiles, to be mocked, to be whipped and finally to be crucified; on the third day he will be resurrected (Matt. 20:18-19),

Then comes the mother of John and James to plead for special privileges of power, authority and glory for her two sons. She has accepted the requirement that the way to the kingdom was through the cross, at least for the Son of Man, the Messiah. She believed that the Lord Jesus would rise from the dead to rule over Israel. She and her sons were prepared to pay the price, that of drinking the Messiah's cup of suffering with him. She and they accept the Messiah as the crucified and risen Lord. And one of them, John, is the beloved disciple, a special favorite of our Lord's. But she was being fair to her two sons, that both of them should have positions of special privilege, honor and power. She does not want to show any favoritism to one of her sons, as Jesus did. In fact Jesus did something quite special for that one son, the "disciple whom he loved"; Jesus at the cross practically took him away from his own mother and handed him over to Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary in turn to John (John 19:25-27). John took Mary to his own house (19:27), where she must have lived with John's mother. It was for this special son and his brother that their mother asked for special privileges. More or less legitimate, isn't it? At least fairly reasonable. Now, the reaction of the ten other apostles also seems eminently reasonable: "We all know that this young man, John, is a special favorite of the Master. We wouldn't quite be up to questioning the Master about it. Maybe he wants to groom John to be his successor! Who knows? Anyway they had no business dragging their mother into it; and asking for two special positions — that is too much. What do those guys think the rest of us are — mere suckers? We too have worked hard, faced much, suffered opposition, left our family and friends to follow the Master, haven't we?"

So went the discussion among the Ten. It is in this ambience of power-seeking, ambition and jealousy in which all the Twelve are caught up that Jesus drops the bomb: "The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served."

We need to look at the leadership of the churches and the ecumenical movement to see whether we are really much better than the apostles. "We are all Christians (we say), committed and all that. We could all have made better careers if we had gone into secular jobs and vocations. We have made considerable sacrifice to come and serve the church or the ecumenical movement. We are not struggling for power, mind you. All we are asking for is a little recognition."

Nothing has been so divisive of the churches as the ambitions, the jealousies, the power struggles among Christian workers and leaders. Quite unconsciously we fall a prey to that perennial temptation of humanity in the world, the desire for power and position, for worldly glory and honor. And so long as that is our basic orientation, the church cannot be united. There can be neither true unity nor genuine community so long as each thinks of his or her own power and position. Humble diakonia is in fact a central principle of the unity of the church.

Matthew 27:55 tells us that the mother of the sons of Zebedee was one of the people who used their own money to serve Jesus. See Luke 8:1-3, where we are told that these women were serving Jesus as well as the needy out of their own wealth.

The mother of Zebedee was thus already engaged in diakonia when she asked Jesus for the special favor of positions of power and glory. Is that temptation still not with us — that in our very serving we seek power and position?

The missionaries of a previous generation were in that situation. They served the people of the mission field sincerely, and in so far as they did that they had a social position, power and prestige which they would not have when they went back to their own people.

The new missionaries of the interchurch aid empire are in a worse situation. Some of them are stationed among the people whom they serve, but most are only periodic visitors. And they are welcomed so warmly and specially by the people who locally handle their hand-cuts. In return for their diakonia they get to sit on the right hand and on the left hand of the powers that be. And if they are not properly received and feted by project-holders, the projects may suffer. There is something radically wrong with that sort of diakonia.

Let me enumerate four necessary conditions of authentic diakonia. Later I hope to show how Jesus Christ is the true deacon, the server, the Son of Man who came to serve and not to be served. I hope the word study will make it clear that the model for Jesus' messianic ministry itself was the four oracles in Second Isaiah about the Suffering Servant, the 'ebed-Yahweh. The four necessary conditions of an authentic Christian diakonia are the following:

- a) the willingness to suffer with those whom one serves and to give of oneself;
  - b) humility as opposed to superiority about oneself, and respect as opposed to condescension towards those to be served;
  - c) not using diakonia as an occasion for domination, privilege and rank;
  - d) willingness to identify with the served to the point of laying down one's life for their sake.
- a) Authentic diakonia should involve more than the giving of money or goods or services, more than the "sharing" of resources and personnel. It demands taking upon oneself the suffering of others. It demands laying aside the sense of self-sufficiency of the server, in order to feel and take on the sense of helplessness and need experienced by the served. The foreign missionaries of an earlier generation were better placed in this regard than the new interchurch aid and donor agency missionaries. The latter do not live among the people they serve, and only from a distance feel the pinch of the need of the poor. Their representatives in the field — those who handle "projects" and "programs" — are usually much better paid than routine church workers, serve out of their abundance and live lives far removed from that of the poor whom they are to serve.

We need a diaconic structure based in the people of the local church, rather than in the donor agencies or the project-holder networks they have created in their “field”. Only then will the church in the locality be able to exercise its diakonia function, hugely financed from the resources of the local church people, mill largely involving the local Christians themselves suffering with and serving the poor.

The present money-and-project based interchurch aid should thus become more marginal, in order to permit the local church to exercise its diakonia of suffering with people and giving of oneself.

b) Attitudes are all-important in authentic diakonia. The server must respect the served. If diakonia comes out of attitudes of superiority it generates the most unpleasant and unhealthy reactions from the served. If service makes them feel inferior and dependent, such service cannot be regarded as Christian, for instead of mediating the healing love of Christ, it simply generates resentment and negative feelings of wounded pride. Christian service has no right to anticipate feelings of gratitude or ties of obligation and dependence. The present attitudes create resentment in other cultures, for they force them to sell their dignity for the sake of paltry sums of money that people desperately grab.

c) Diakonia is today often used as a means of domination by creating relations of dependence. Interchurch aid does not quite do what international aid does — namely use aid to capture markets and to exploit people in such a way that many times more than the aid flows back to the aid-giving economy through unjust trade relations. But interchurch aid is used in much the same way as international aid to create “spheres of influence” mid areas of economic, political and cultural domination and dependence. This is particularly true of bilateral interchurch aid, but ecumenical aid is not much different, in so far as it represents aid from a sector of the Western Consortium which dominates and exploits two-third world economies.

d) Willingness to lay down one’s life for the sake of those served seems to be an acid test of authentic Christian diakonia. At present this seems an extremely remote possibility in the context of international interchurch diakonia. It makes much more sense in the context of the service of a local church to the people around or the people of that nation. Diakonia involves (the element of confronting the oppressors of the people whom one wants to serve. This can hardly be done by international interchurch aid, but can be done more effectively by the churches in a locality mutually supporting and reinforcing each other in the struggle against injustice. At this point outside aid can at times be very counter-productive. If Christ our Lord is the model for authentic diakonia, as we shall see later, then a diakonia which involves no cost to oneself, beyond “sharing money or personnel”, can hardly be authentic.