

Doing the Stuff - Servant evangelism

Today we continue our series titled 'Doing the Stuff', that explores the aim to live a life in the way Jesus did here on earth. Setting our sights on the model Christ presented for us, in this talk we look at how servant evangelism plays a part in reaching the lost and blessing the communities we serve. Today, as we explore this topic, my challenge to you is that you leave here renewed and inspired to reach out to those around you with simple acts of kindness and as a servant of an almighty King.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Luke 4:18-19

I love this passage. It is first seen in Isaiah 61 and then again we see Jesus use it in the synagogue proclaiming that he is the son of God. I love it because it provides a footprint for how we are to go about our lives, today in the 21st Century. Alongside the great commission it offers us a brilliant instruction manual of what God is asking us to do in our lives. The Isaiah passage goes into more detail, talking about loving justice and hating injustice, and restoring cities that have been devastated for generations. Time and time again it lists characteristics of a world that seems so prevalent of our world and also a message of hope that when the spirit comes all changes, and evil and darkness are defeated.

I passionately believe that being servant hearted and in particular that carrying out servant evangelism or acts of kindness, plays an incredible part in living a life that fulfils the prophecy set out in Isaiah and Luke. When we talk about servant evangelism, what we tend to mean is sharing God's love to people in a practical way, often an act of service or kindness. It can take many forms from, the debt advice centre and child contact centre, to giving out donuts at Roundhay Park fireworks. It can be done personally one to one from friend to friend or corporately as a church. Either way it is the combination of serving someone else, explaining that it is to show that God loves them, and allowing time and the Holy Spirit to work, which makes up an act of evangelism that is simple and accessible for anyone to do.

Without people serving, this church would not be able to do half the things it does so well. Without our fabulous kids workers our children would not be inspired to worship and pray for their friends. Without our small group leaders, discipleship would not take place and people would not have a place to belong and be accountable. Without our trustees we would not have a church that adheres to various legal requirements and excels in conducting itself ethically as a charity. Without those that volunteer with the Debt Advice Centre and Child Contact Centre, people across Leeds would still be in situations of no hope and despair. Terrified to pick up the phone or answer the front door. The list could go on and on, but being servant hearted underpins everything that we do as a community.

As we read the Gospels it is evident that being servant hearted was in Jesus' very nature. Whether it was feeding thousands of people from very little or turning water into wine, (two of my favourite miracles), he loved to serve those around him. We serve because

we are called to serve as his disciples. We serve as a direct result of the compassion and grace poured out upon us when we accept Jesus into our lives.

In Matthew 20:28 it says *“the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve”*. Jesus went about his life serving others, serving people through teaching, through healing, through performing miracles. It is plain, that as we long to live a life modelled on Christ, that at the heart of that, we are called to be servants.

Imagine yourself walking down Briggate. It's a few days before Christmas. Now I'm hoping at this point you are saying, “Don't be stupid Pete, I would not be in town shopping a few days before Christmas, I would have completed all my shopping online weeks ago...” Usually I would be in this camp, but this year I found myself needing to buy all my Christmas shopping with a few days to go. When I say all my shopping what I actually mean is I needed to buy Nomi's present, Nomi had already successfully taken care of the rest of the family. This year I also had no idea what I was going to get, so here I was standing at the top of Briggate looking down on the chaos that lay before me.

If you were a child of the 80's and 90's you would remember the TV show Gladiators. One of my favourite events was the Gauntlet where contestants had to effectively negotiate four walls of gladiators down a tight channel. I stood at the top of my gauntlet and mapped out my route, in front of me were an array of obstacles, I was desperate to avoid. The first and most dreaded were the chuggers, also known as the Charity Muggers. The second was the businesses trying to sell me things, that I definitely didn't want to buy. The third, any students that I taught. I love my job but it gets a little bit embarrassing when you get shouts of Mr Sammons coming from all directions. The fourth and final group were the street preachers whom although wonderfully love God, seem to miss a message of love and grace for those they talk to. I work out the route I take and go from shop to shop managing to successfully avoid any gladiators, and then I see it. The one thing that is going to draw my attention away from the route planned. The promise of a free sample of sausage as part of some food fair. I divert and make a beeline for the sausage, taking the danger and risk of being hit by one of my four gladiators as I have my eyes on the goal. This is a fairly regular occurrence, and much to Nomi's frustration I am always keen to take up the offer of a free sample whether in the supermarket or at a farmers market, especially if the offer is cheese, meat or chocolate. Now in reality this 'free' gift isn't free. You often end up buying the full product at a slightly inflated price to allow them to market the products in this way, but the appeal to get something for 'free' is very attractive.

That's exactly the beauty of servant evangelism. It is so counter cultural in that the gift and sharing of God's love is completely done for free, with no strings attached. I remember doing an outreach at the Olympics with Duncan Meredith and Diana Smith and having a brilliant chat with some girls whom we had just given some sweets. They were utterly amazed that the sweets were given for free with no catches, and couldn't get over the fact that someone would do this for them, or using their words “nothing is free in London”.

Just hours before his ultimate sacrifice we see Jesus sitting with his disciples about to eat a final meal. At this point Jesus starts to wash the feet of his closest friends. As he

washed his disciple's dirty sweaty feet, he adopted the role as a servant. Foot washing was common in Jewish culture as a daily routine and a gesture of hospitality. It was however, a lowly menial task reserved for servants, and as Jesus began to wash the disciple's feet he took the posture of a slave. In typical fashion, Peter challenges what Jesus is doing, not fully grasping the message that Jesus is presenting. Eventually Jesus explains that, *"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you"*, John 13:15. Not to necessarily go round washing everyone's feet, although if you are that way inclined you are of course welcome to come as you are! But to live a life that serves others that brings about humility and compassion on those we work, live and share life with, rather than expecting others to serve you. One of the things I find most remarkable about this passage is that by now Jesus was already aware that Judas was going to betray him. Jesus knew that he was stooping down to serve the man who was soon to perform a terrible act of treachery. It leaves me challenged as to how do I serve those people I really do not get on with. How do I serve the unlovely and the unkind as a humble servant? Knowing that I will get little thanks or even respect back in return? Yet Jesus adopts the role of the servant, an example of how we are to go about living our lives with our friends and even enemies.

In his book, *Conspiracy of Kindness*, Steve Sjogren uses the following equation to represent how this servant evangelism should be done. He says;

Servant evangelism = deeds of love + words of love + adequate time

Let's explore these in a little more detail.

Deeds of Love

God's love must be communicated from person to person, not just from page to person. If his love could be sent through printed information alone, we could simply flyer Leeds and Headingley with lots of bible commentaries and rest assured we had done our part.

Since Christmas I have been giving a colleague a lift to work and back every day. I do this with no strings attached, picking him up requires little diversion to my journey and it's nice to have some company. In many ways my colleague and I are completely different, yet through our journeys together we have developed a friendship that enables us to speak truth and honestly with each other. However, what amazes me about the experience is how grateful he is for the help. When the offer of money was refused he was astounded and stated that nobody else would have said that. I loved the fact that offering something so simple, seemed to my friend to be so radically different. On another occasion when he needed to stay a bit later than usual I walked into the office to hear him saying to other colleagues that 'oh Pete won't mind, he won't refuse as he is a Christian'... I thought this is brilliant he is even doing the evangelism for me. Now obviously no strings attached doesn't mean we get taken for a ride and we have no boundaries. Far from it, boundaries are essential for us to do this servant evangelism well, but what is key is that as we go to serve people, our expectations of what we get back should be low.

In the gospel according to Evan Almighty, Steve Carell plays a guy named Evan, loosely based on Noah. He asks God, Morgan Freeman, how to change the world? God tells Evan, that's simple, one act of kindness at a time. The reality is that our offer of church and singing songs etc is actually quite strange to most people. Yet the offer of Jesus, the offer of hope and community is so desired. When my sister in law recently had their second child, their church, Chapel A Baptist, provided them with meals for a few weeks. When my brother in law and family came to visit they were blown away by this simple act of community and kindness. At this stage of their lives the idea of church and church services is not one that sits comfortably with them, yet the idea of community was so desired.

Furthermore, my experiences in sharing God's love in a practical way is that it is contagious. This is especially true of non-Christians, as their view of the church is radically changed, and they often want to get involved in serving before learning about and accepting Christ into their lives. Over the last couple of years I have been part of teams who have decorated a number of CAP client houses. Without fail each time I have been to do this, each person we have served have been really touched by the generosity and desperate to get involved in future projects to help others. People see serving others as a good thing. Last weekend a few of us were helping to clear a garden for a family in need, who had be put in contact with the church. A colleague of Phil Hicks happily volunteered a few hours to help, fully aware that we were doing what we were doing as a way to share God's love to others.

There are costs involved in serving, the most pressing being time and tiredness. There were costs for Jesus, and there are for us. When we choose to serve and give up our time for his ministry, we will sometimes get tired. When we actually look at Jesus and the model of him as a servant, we realise that actually that is ok; it's in fact biblical to be tired. In Isaiah 43:22 it says *"to weary ourselves to God"*, that's ok. We also see serving as an act of worship. Mother Theresa said she saw the wounds of Christ as she looked after the sick and saw their wounds. As she served she saw it as an act of worship. Sometimes when we are tired we do need to take a break, but sometimes it's ok to serve till it hurts. In Deuteronomy 10:12 we are called to *"serve the Lord your God, with all your heart and all your soul"*, that is more than just an occasional thing, that is pouring your life out in the service of God.

Deeds of love allow us to sneak into the hearts of people we serve. They are not enough on their own to bring someone to Christ, but they do open the door to share the gospel with them.

Words of Love

The deed of love often opens up conversation, as they ask why we are doing what we are doing. People seem far more receptive to hearing about God after they have been served.

Sharing God's love in a practical way can break down some barriers, especially in high risk situations. If I was to ask you to go over to Costa look around, ask God for a word about someone and then deliver it, I would suspect most people, if they are like me,

would melt inside with fear. If I was to act in a kindly way, by perhaps giving them a free gift first then I have a way in. Likewise by giving my friend a lift into work it has broken down barriers that enable conversations to start. Please don't interpret what I say to mean those high risk encounters are wrong, not at all, and there are times where it is appropriate for us to take big faith building steps, yet servant evangelism removes some of the initial barriers. These acts give us the baby steps we need to gradually walk into others' lives. With each step a little more courage seems to come our way and we grow steadily in our ability to interact with nonbelievers.

When we do speak it is important to speak in a language that the receiver can understand. This is the cognitive or conscious element of the evangelism that is taking place. I would really recommend listening to Ben's talk from last Sunday to see how we go about this. But it is important that the person realises the reason behind our act of kindness. That we do these things because we want to share God's love with them. Otherwise they will only know that we are nice people, not that God loves them.

Adequate Time

We need to allow time for deeds and words of love to have their effect on the hearts of people. If we are allowing the Holy Spirit to do his work in his way and in his timing we cannot expect instantaneous results.

One of the biggest critiques I hear people say about servant evangelism is that it sometimes costs a lot and doesn't directly speak to those it is reaching. We give out 2000 donuts and maybe have one or two significant responses. However, according to some commentators, for most people it takes up to 25 significant encounters with God's love, before giving their lives to Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 3 verse 5 and 6, Paul writes to the Corinthian church about how they had been following their human teachers, in this case himself and another evangelist called Apollos before God. He says;

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

It is important that as we go about or sharing God's love in a practical way, we realise that we are merely part of the process and not a project itself. In many cases our acts of kindness and servant evangelism may just be one of many seeds that need planting, or watering, but we may never see the harvest. Sometimes however, we have the joy of being the harvester, and our simple act of love is the last part of the journey for that individual.

Moreover, we tend to find ourselves adopting some persona of an evangelist, focused on the result and carrying out a project that has been successful by someone else, without considering who and how God has made us. God has made us so amazingly and uniquely different for a reason that it's hard to believe that the way we should evangelise should be the same. Sharing God's love in a practical way allows us to love

people in ways that are natural to us, it embraces Gods creation, and doesn't have to be feared. For me this means I wouldn't be the best person to offer to do someone's ironing, but I can help paint a room or even do a simple thing like give a lift to a colleague to and from work every day.

To conclude, servant evangelism is a very accessible way to reach out to those around us. For most Christians the thought of evangelism is like going to the dentist: no one really enjoys doing it but it has to be done every once in a while. Servant evangelism doesn't have to be this way. When we combine Deeds and Words of love and allow time for them to grow, giving them back to God, people encounter a God of love and his compassion for the world. As with all evangelism it is essential that it is done full of grace. It is only when we pray and ask for Gods spirit to show up that we can expect amazing things to happen. The beauty of servant evangelism is that it is low risk and high grace. It's completely accessible for all, yet when done well can reveal the overwhelming love that God has for his people.

Wouldn't it be great if Leeds Vineyard became known for humbly serving the people of Leeds? For radically changing a community, person by person, act of kindness by act of kindness? For being a completely counter cultural message of love, that proclaims good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners and sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour? Wouldn't that be incredible? This is such an exciting part of being a disciple of Jesus and is what we, in Leeds Vineyard, are committed to do.

Let's stand.

As I was preparing this talk I felt God prompt me to a few groups of people who it would be great to pray for:

- Firstly – There are some people who as I talked about the washing of Judas feet you quickly identified people in your lives that you just struggle to serve. It may be family or colleague or friends, but God wants to intervene and fill you with compassion for that person. So let's pray for you in a moment
- Secondly – This stuff just really excites you. The idea of blessing people in this practical way. I just want to pray that you are filled with the Holy Spirit and you leave this room ready to pour out your life in service.
- Finally – There are some people here who really struggle with the words and time element of the equation. That you never quite know what to say, and that you feel down when you don't see anything happen. Let's pray for you too.

Pete Sammons

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