

Archbishop of Canterbury: Sermon preached at Chaoyang Church, Beijing - 22nd October 2006

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Dear brothers and sisters; it is a great privilege for me to be able to greet you in the name of Jesus Christ and to greet you from all of your brothers and sisters in the Church of England.

They thank God for your witness and they pray for you constantly.

I must also say a word of thanks at this point to all those who have helped us in our two weeks in China. We've been welcomed with great generosity by all; we've been shown many man aspects of the church, so as I began to reflect on what to say to you this morning, I thought about some of the things I have seen in the last two weeks. And it seemed to me to be very appropriate that the readings for today were about Jesus Christ the Servant. I want you to think for a few moments what it is to be a servant of God and to be also a servant of you and me.

In the Gospel reading this morning we heard Jesus say that he had come to be a servant and we should not forget the surprise and shock that this must have been to his first friends. We get some idea of how great a shock it was if we turn to St John's Gospel – Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. You will remember that Peter is so shocked that he does not want Jesus to be his servant. And this morning's Old Testament Lesson reminds us that service and involves the deepest suffering. And once again we are shocked and surprised that God's servant should have to suffer. It is, as St Peter who protests when Jesus says that he must suffer, that I want to say 'This cannot be'.

We are so used to hearing these words, Jesus promising to be our servant. We are used to this picture of Jesus washing our feet that maybe we forget what a shock it must have been. But, day by day, we must remember that this is what is asked of us – we must let Jesus serve. When we let Jesus be our servant then we have the strength to be the servant of others. So now let us think of some of the problems that arise when we let Jesus be our servant. Perhaps we imagine that if Jesus is our servant, Jesus does exactly what we want. This is what James and John say at the very beginning of the Gospel reading. 'We want you to do exactly what we want'. Sometimes we should like to use God for our own purposes. And all through human history, human beings have tried to use God to prove themselves right – to use God to bless wants; use God to bless persecutions – they have used God for their personal pride.

But this is not the way in which God in Jesus Christ serves us. God does not do what we want, God gives us what we need and perhaps this is why we are shocked and afraid when the idea arises that God is our servant.

Perhaps we don't want to recognise what it is that we mean – we would much prefer it if we could say to God 'Do what we want'. But God says 'No, I will do what you need.' Because God is God, he knows what our hearts are like; he knows the truth about us; about us as individuals about our nations and about our world. And he comes in the person of Jesus Christ as a human being to show us that he knows our world from the inside. God does not look at us or our world through a telescope – he looks at our hearts and minds from within. Jesus Christ has the knowledge and compassion of God and the heart and soul of a human being. And so it is in Jesus Christ above all that we see how God knows us, knows our needs and serves what we truly need.

So sometimes he can say to us 'you need more than you think', or 'you need something different to what you think'. In the last book of the bible – the Revelation of St John – Jesus has some strong words to say to the churches. He says to them 'you must come and buy from me what you need' You may think you need nothing, but in fact you need a great deal. So it is not surprising if all of us Christians are afraid or uncomfortable when we see Jesus kneeling at our feet, ready to serve us, to tell us what we didn't know about ourselves that perhaps we didn't want to recognise.

And so when we seek to serve in the name of the power of Jesus we too are called to serve what is truly their need.

So let us think about how this great and central image of the bible applies to our situation.

What we have seen in China is God serving the spiritual needs of millions of people. IN this nation, where there is so much change, so much uncertainty about the future, many people have opened up to their true need of the love of God to wash their feet and to be at their service. We have seen in the last two weeks we have witnessed how those who have let God serve them in this way are also ready to serve others. To see the eagerness of Christians – Catholics and Protestants – at the service of others, we have seen them willing and eager to be at the service of that harmony which is s important in this country. So if this service is to go on growing, to go on

being honestly given in God's name, let me suggest four things that you might mean when you for the church; and when I speak of the church here I mean many of the challenges that face the church every day.

The first principle is this: I've said that Jesus is able to serve us because he knows us from inside. He doesn't see us at a distance, he doesn't take a position of advantage; he is in the midst of us. So serving church is a church which is truly identified with its people, with its context. We are able to trust Jesus because he really speaks our human language. People trust the church when they hear the church speaking the language of real people in a real situation. And the great emphasis which is laid by the church here on independence on being part of the scene that is here, the actual situation; that is one way of thinking about identification.

The church here has worked hard to make itself understood as part of China, its culture, its history, its hopes. It is no longer true, if it ever was true, that to be a Christian is to stop being really Chinese. And so we are encouraged to see a church that is trying to find its own way forward honestly – find a language that really belongs in this place. It is no kind of imposed Christianity, whether conservative or Liberal, that will answer the questions of China. It is the Gospel itself in its glory, taking root here. So there is the first principle - service begins with identification.

Here is the second principle; if that is true, the Christians must develop an inner freedom – a freedom that allows them to see the truth about themselves and the truth about the society they live in. In prayer and reflection, inner freedom grows and when there is such inner freedom the Christian will be able to see what the real questions and the real needs are. So often in these two weeks we have seen the Christian Church here responding to the questions people are not asking – meeting the needs other people are not noticing. As the society changes so fast, some become much more prosperous; as the nature of community alters it is very important that there are people in this country with that kind of freedom; people who are able to say 'the question is not only about economic prosperity, it is about human dignity. And if growing prosperity meant that some, the elderly or the very young or the sick are left behind, the church needs to have the freedom to say 'No, there are the real needs.' The church must have the freedom to say, 'there is no harmony without truthfulness about these things'.

And here is the third principle – Jesus calls others into his world of service. Although he is God on earth, yet he calls human beings to join him in his work of transforming love. And so it is that the church draws others into the words of the good news, as the church lets itself be drawn into cooperation with others.

All over this country there is a new culture growing. In recent years attitudes have changed enormously, it seems, to the work of NGOs and of charitable organisations. Again and again, we have seen how a small local group can see a need and respond to it. And some of the most moving and important experiences we have had have been to see how people have responded to the needs of children, especially of orphans. We have seen wonderful work being done with children whose parents are in prison or who have been executed. Somebody has seen that there is a gap and how to fill it. In the years to come I can see enormous possibilities for the church and groups like that to come together more and more and in more and more places. The Church has the vision and the capacity to work with so many different kinds of groups – to work for a harmony that is real and inclusive of all.

And my fourth principle rests on this. In this society at the moment there is what for many Western people is a surprising level of debate about public matters. It seems that there is a recognition by many people that harmony does not mean the absence of tension or difference, and I'm told that there is a Chinese proverb to that effect.

Harmony is difference working together and in a healthy and flourishing society there will be what I shall call 'responsible disagreement' – people who are thoughtfully exploring different solutions to problems and choices that are around. Over the last two weeks, I have read in the China Daily and had conversations with many people in national and local government. Reports and conversations which have discussed some of these areas where there is responsible disagreement. What are the best solutions to the environmental crisis? How do we respond to a society that is growing older, with a greater percentage of older people? Even more difficult and delicate matters have arisen. We have seen and we have heard discussions about the limits of censorship. And we have had some very searching discussions about the application of the death penalty. All of these are matters which can be discussed and thought about by responsible people. And there is great opportunity for Christian leaders and Christian intellectuals to play their part in these responsible discussions. It has been a great encouragement to see that such debates are beginning to develop. Here is surely a recognition that harmony does not mean everybody saying the same. Harmony means moving together with all our differences towards a common goal of justice. I say again; in this process at this extraordinary important moment in China, the church has a crucial role. Here is the possibility of real, vital service for the sake of truth and harmony. The church has the vision and the capacity and the energy to move into this new phase of the country's life.

I shall go back to Britain thanking and blessing God for the fact that so many doors are opening; that there is an growing spirit of openness in society. As this grows and develops, it will of course bring with it difficulties and risks – service in the name of God always brings risks. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is never to be safe - it is to be loved, it is to be endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit; it is to be given dignity – that is much more important than just being safe.

God's will is for the life in abundance, the welfare and the harmony of all that he has made; God's will, his wisdom and justice. It is his power and nothing less that has brought us together here; it is his power - the power of his wisdom and justice which is making the church grow in this land.

God is determined to be the servant of this nation – to meet its true needs and to make his justice flourish. I pray that his church here may walk with him towards that justice and that peace. This will be my prayer and this will be the prayer of all of us who have been your guests in China. And I ask for your prayers for all of us as we go back to a country where we face the same problems about identification and freedom and cooperation and peace.

We wish on the basis of this visit to set up a lasting friendship – friendship which we may learn from one another and serve one another. And this will happen, to go right back to where I began, this will happen when all of us open our hearts to the service of Jesus Christ himself.

When all of us let ourselves be served, washed, healed forgiven by our Lord and Saviour. May he guide church and his world by that service.

Amen.

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