21 October 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity
Isaiah 53: 4–end, Hebrews 5: 1–10, Mark 10: 35–45
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“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave of all” (Mark 10: 43–44) – that is the challenge of today’s Gospel. A simple message at the heart of Christian faith but one that countless hearers over the years have sought to avoid or reinterpret.

It is in the heart of sin to twist things. And this saying has all too often been twisted in support of precisely those church leaders who seek to “lord it over one another”. But it has also been more subtly twisted to keep people in their place, to insist that the weak and the marginalised stay weak and marginalised – to glorify the abstract ideal of the service and hard work at the heart of so many people’s daily life and existence, in order to avoid more challenging calls to revolution or social change. Christ may have “learned obedience through what he suffered” and had his prayers heard “because of his reverent submission” (Heb. 5: 8, 7) but those are not paths to be imposed upon others simply in the name of the Church.

In a few moments’ time we will commission Paul, our new Dean’s Verger, to a servant ministry: to the work of welcome, administration, organisation, and logistics; to the unglamourous job of moving chairs and setting up for services; of leading people to their places and ensuring everything is in order. Our Dean often compares the vergers to Swiss army knives, ready to deal with anything, but the reality is more that they are Christ-like in their service – ready to answer the requests and needs of all. However, this Christ-likeness must never become an excuse for not respecting the worth of others or valuing their work. A servant heart must not be taken for granted but rather treasured in its gifts.

This week we have been celebrating St Frideswide and her courage in the face of the pressures of seventh-century power and politics. As I’m sure many of you know, the young Frideswide had committed herself to a fledgling community of prayer here in Oxford, when the Mercian king, Algar, demanded to marry her and even tried abducting
her against her will. The twelfth-century legends do not recount precisely what was said to the young princess but no doubt many will have impressed upon her the sense of duty to her people and the realm, to follow the Gospel by making herself least of all and accepting marriage in the cause of peace. Yet the will of God for her life was something different – neither lording it over others through the greatness of her birth, nor meekly submitting to a prince’s will out of obedience to her calling as a servant of Christ. Instead she fled to Bampton and Binsey and her disobedience was supported not only by the care of the local villagers but by miracles from God himself. She may have felt a ‘slave’ and ‘least of all’ hiding in pigsties but it was a radical, empowered, and challenging sort of service.

Some centuries later, the rather different figure of Hildegard of Bingen gives us another example of a woman living out her Gospel calling to service but again in ways that challenged the status quo and the presumptions of the religious and political authorities of her day. Hildegard became famous as a twelfth-century abbess, scientist, musician, writer, herbalist, and spiritual director but she began life as a tenth child, tithed to the Church at the age of eight and sent to live as a handmaid to the anchoress Jutta near the monastery of Mount St Disibode. The life of an anchoress was an unusual one to say the least: withdrawing into solitary confinement, walled up by their friends in a small room or two with minimal access for food, hoping to die to the world, that they might be closer to God, at the moment of confinement they were given a full burial service; and yet in this living death, they were not forgotten about by the local community but rather became a spiritual focus, sources of prayer, solidarity, inspiration and even advice.

Hildegard’s years of physical service for Jutta prepared her for the servant-leadership as abbess, first in Disibode and then in Bingen; and throughout her life God blessed his servant with mystical experiences, culminating in a life-changing vision:

“And it came to pass ... when I was 42 years and 7 months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming... and suddenly I understood of the meaning of expositions of the books...”

And yet Hildegard nearly didn’t share this gift with others. She had little formal learning. It was the twelfth century and women weren’t really supposed to use their brains much. As she says herself,
“But although I heard and saw these things, because of doubt and low opinion of myself and because of diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time a call to write, not out of stubbornness but out of humility, until weighed down by a scourge of God, I fell onto a bed of sickness.”

The twisted sense of what it meant to be a servant of God and slave of all almost kept Hildegard from her true vocation. Only the scourge of God in the form of illness made her question a lifetime’s social conditioning in how to read the Gospel.

But question it she did; and in her writings and music we find a different form of service, a different understanding of our mutual inter-dependence, and above all a different sense of the God whom we call. One of my favourite passages runs like this:

“Listen: there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around Him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honour. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God.”

Our Gospel calls us not to be proud or boastful, not to lord it over one another with the depth of our faith or number of our titles, but rather to be feathers on the breath of God – to fly, not because of anything in ourselves but because the air bears us along. This is a different sort of humility – one more about open-ness than lowliness, about attention to others, rather than submission. As Hildegard poetically puts it, “Like billowing clouds, like the incessant gurgle of the brook, the longing of the spirit can never be stilled”.

And that is our Gospel challenge today as we think about the Christian call to service, as we commission Paul to his service among us here. Let us all have servant hearts but radical ones, full of the longing of the spirit, not willing to be trampled into the ground, but rather taking flight as feathers on the breath of God.