

Servant Ministry

Text copyright © Tony Horsfall 2013
The author asserts the moral right
to be identified as the author of this work

Published by
The Bible Reading Fellowship
15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700
Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk
Website: www.brf.org.uk
BRF is a Registered Charity

ISBN 978 0 85746 088 2

First published 2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

All rights reserved

Acknowledgments

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised edition), copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica (formerly International Bible Society), and are used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, an Hachett UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica (formerly International Bible Society). UK trademark number 1448790.

Extracts from the Authorised Version of the Bible (The King James Bible), the rights in which are vested in the Crown, are reproduced by permission of the Crown's Patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Scripture quotations from *THE MESSAGE*. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 193, 1994, 1995. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

The paper used in the production of this publication was supplied by mills that source their raw materials from sustainably managed forests. Soy-based inks were used in its printing and the laminate film is biodegradable.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed in Singapore by Craft Print International Ltd

Servant Ministry

A portrait of Christ and a pattern
for his followers

TONY HORSFALL

Contents

Foreword	7
Introduction	8
The Servant's Identity	
1. Behold my servant	12
2. Emptied and humbled	16
3. Chosen and loved	22
4. Servants one and all	29
The Servant's Calling	
5. The Spirit upon him	36
6. Justice, the suffering servant and the law of God.....	43
7. Justice, the compassionate servant and the needs of the world.....	51
The Servant's Character	
8. The servant as leader.....	60
9. Humility, and the danger of pride	66
10. Gentleness, and the temptations of power.....	73
11. Faithfulness, and the challenge of pain.....	82
The Servant's Confidence	
12. The God who speaks	90
13. God's presence to reassure.....	98
14. God's protection to guard.....	105
15. God's purpose to guide	114
The Servant's Attentiveness	
16. Listening and responding.....	124
Appendix.....	133
Notes.....	135
Bibliography.....	137
Questions for group discussion	139

*'Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.'*

*This is what God the Lord says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
'I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.*

*'I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.'*

ISAIAH 42:1-9

Foreword

In September 2010 Tony Horsfall led a staff retreat at Redcliffe College. The retreat was called ‘Time to Stop’, but it took place about five days before the students started arriving, so we didn’t really have time to stop! However, his focus on our identity and purpose, and his unpacking of the resources available to us, allowed us, individually and corporately, to remember during that particularly challenging year, to stop, reflect and re-engage in God’s service.

This book presents a truly biblical view of servanthood—not like being some kind of benign auntie for whom nothing is too much trouble but, rather, being called to live as God intends us to live. I teach a postgraduate class on leadership and I sometimes tell the students that I get fed up with talk of ‘servant leadership’, partly because I see many other scriptural metaphors for leadership but also because I think Christians have misunderstood servant leadership and servanthood generally. Tony, however, has not.

God intends us to live and serve in security. Tony starts with identity and calling. This is vital. We need to know who we are: both our frailty and our status as children of the living God, loved by a Father who delights in his children. He goes on to justice and compassion—two concepts that Christian writers often find hard to hold in tension. Tony, however, does not.

God intends us to live confidently. Servants serve a master (in our case, the Lord), not just every person we bump into. Knowing how God wants us to serve him in each and every situation—whether it demands compassion or righteous anger, clear leadership or wise counsel—is vital to effective Christian living. To be able to do it in confidence because we know who we are, and who we are called to be, allows us to serve effectively.

Tony has served the church so well in the writing of this book. It has the potential to make the church a better bride of Christ and each individual Christian a closer reflection of Jesus this side of heaven.

Rob Hay, Principal, Redcliffe College

Introduction

My computer has a problem with the word ‘servanthood’. It does not recognise it. Every time I use the word, the computer underlines it in red, suggesting it is wrong in some way, but it offers no alternative. Likewise, my home dictionary has no reference to servanthood. I was beginning to think I had made it up until, much to my relief, a quick check on the internet showed that lots of other people also use the word. It does exist.

Even so, it is difficult to find an exact definition, so I have made up my own. Servanthood is the state of being a servant; the attitude of mind, disposition of heart and daily practice of someone who serves. Since this is a book about servanthood, it is important to be sure from the outset that it is a valid word!

Servant Ministry is based on the first Servant Song in Isaiah (42:1–9) and could be described as a practical exposition of this passage. My intention is to explain the meaning of the text and then to apply its teaching to the biblical theme of servanthood. It will lead us quite naturally to explore some significant topics: the motivation for service and the call to serve; valid expressions of servanthood and the link between evangelism and social action; character formation and what it means to be a servant, especially in leadership; how to sustain ourselves over the long haul in the harsh realities of ministry; the importance of listening to God and being directed by him in what we do, both on a daily basis and over the course of a lifetime.

My basic assumption throughout is that servanthood is for all believers, not just for those in some form of ‘full-time’ ministry, and I hope this comes across clearly because it is vital for the health and vitality of local churches that every member appreciates and understands his or her role as a servant of God. At the same time, my focus will be on those in Christian leadership and cross-cultural ministry for whom the call to serve has led to significant life changes that impact them on a daily basis. Inevitably we will

cover the topic of servant leadership, and I hope we might grasp the principles behind it in a fresh way while avoiding some of the common misconceptions and distortions. It is my strong conviction that servant leadership is vital for the well-being and effectiveness of any church or Christian organisation in the 21st century. For me, Christian leadership is synonymous with servant leadership.

We will approach the Servant Song through two lenses, seeing it first of all as a portrait of Christ and secondly as a pattern for his followers. Jesus shows us through his life on earth what it means to be a servant, and he perfectly fulfils the picture painted for us in Isaiah. He is an example to us of true servanthood, and we are called with God's help to imitate him: 'Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did' (1 John 2:6). Servanthood can never be an optional extra in the Christian life; it is its foundation stone, and all disciples of Jesus must see themselves as servants. Peter says it clearly: 'Live as free persons, but do not use your freedom as a cover up for evil; live as servants of God' (1 Peter 2:16, NIV 1984).

Readers who are familiar with my earlier books may think that the theme of servanthood is a departure from my usual emphasis, since it is about action rather than reflection, doing rather than being. I see it more as a natural progression, because the reflective life that I so often espouse is valid only if it is expressed outwardly in tangible acts of service, and love for God is real only when it leads to love for others. *Servant Ministry* should therefore be an excellent follow-up to *Working from a Place of Rest* (BRF, 2010). Many of the themes I have previously written about will occur here but in a less prominent way. Servanthood assumes that we have a strong inner life, that we are secure in God's love and that we know how to allow God to work in us and through us.

Read the chapters slowly and carefully, ponder the words and meditate on the scriptures that you read. My prayer is that as you interact with these pages, you will meet with God in a fresh way and will be drawn into a deeper place of love and appreciation for Jesus, which will be expressed in joyful service to God and others.

The
Servant's
Identity

1

Behold my servant

Here is my servant, whom I uphold.

ISAIAH 42:1

‘Look this way, children.’

I’m sure we can all remember moments from our childhood when the teacher stood before us and tried to gain our attention. Children’s minds wander so easily and learning can take place only when we are fully focused and concentrating on the matter in hand. Therefore, it is a natural and essential first step in the learning process when the teacher calls for the attention of the class and, often with a clap of the hands, invites them to look in her direction.

The first of the Servant Songs in Isaiah begins with a similar summons to attentiveness: ‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight.’ We are called to turn from what we are doing and to take note of the person who is being introduced to us. It is an important moment, for we are being invited to meet a very special person, at least in the eyes of God—the servant of the Lord.

It was the German Lutheran scholar Bernhard Duhm who first identified the four Servant Songs and sparked so much interest in these passages. In his 1892 commentary on Isaiah he suggested that the sections 42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9 and 52:13–53:12 stood apart because of their lyrical character and their focus on an unidentified ‘servant’ figure. Much debate has since followed, and various interpretations of these passages have been given over the years in order to identify the servant.

An obvious starting point is to suggest that Isaiah is referring to

himself in his role as a prophet to Israel, and he is indeed described by God as ‘my servant Isaiah’ (20:3), but there are too many details in the songs that do not fit his profile. The role described in the songs seems to be too large for him and has a future perspective about it, indicating someone still to appear.

A second popular interpretation suggests that the nation of Israel is in mind, again with good reason. Israel was brought into being for the purpose of serving God, and Isaiah bears witness to this high calling: ‘He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour”’ (49:3). However, Israel by and large did not fulfil this calling and was often rebellious and wayward, whereas the servant is portrayed as one who gives perfect obedience and is faithful to God. Furthermore, it seems to be an individual who is in mind, one who suffers vicariously for others (as in 53:4–5) and brings healing through his death. Israel does not fully fit the description of this particular servant.

Not surprisingly, many commentators have seen a glimpse of the coming Messiah, an individual who will fulfil all that Israel was meant to be. Through his obedience and undeserved suffering, he brings blessing to many, but remains anonymous in these passages. Without doubt, we are now moving along the right lines as we seek an understanding of the person of the servant.

It is only when we begin to read the New Testament that the pieces of the jigsaw finally fall into place and we can see the servant’s true identity. These verses speak directly of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the servant described there, and he is the one upon whom we are called to focus our attention.

Matthew, writing as a Jew for a Jewish audience, has no hesitation in applying these scriptures to Jesus and seeing their outworking in Jesus’ life and ministry. He writes, ‘This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah,’ and then quotes extensively from Isaiah 42:1–4, showing Jesus to be the servant (see Matthew 12:17–21). Likewise, when Philip meets the Ethiopian official riding in his chariot on the Gaza road and reading from Isaiah 53, he has no reservation in identifying Jesus as the suffering servant.

‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’ asks the Ethiopian (Acts 8:34). ‘Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus’ (v. 35). The apostles and the first believers seem to have been in no doubt about the servant’s identity: it was Jesus, the one they loved to call ‘your holy servant’ (Acts 4:27, 30).

To further confirm this identification, Jesus clearly saw himself in the role of the servant, both towards the Father who had sent him and towards those he came to save: ‘For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45). The amazing parallels between the suffering servant described in Isaiah 53 and the death of Jesus at Calvary reinforce this conclusion. No one else could possibly have been in mind, for no one else suffered in the way he did, in obvious fulfilment of the scriptures.

The NIV is rather bland and low-key in its translation of Isaiah 42:1. ‘Here is my servant’ somehow suggests a take-it-or-leave-it attitude—a kind of ‘you may be interested in this; then again, you may not’ approach. I much prefer the older translations that use a great Bible word: ‘Behold!’ (KJV). That really is a summons and a call to pay attention. It says ‘Hold before you’ what you are about to see, because it is important and significant and deserves your utmost concentration and careful scrutiny.

Why? Because here we are presented with a portrait of the servant, painted for us by God himself. It is almost as if the Father stands before us and, with pride and satisfaction, says to us, ‘Have you seen my Son?’ We can feel the delight that he has in the Son’s willingness to take upon himself the role of the servant and to do the Father’s will, and he wants to share his pleasure with everyone.

This book is primarily a devotional book. I hope it will inform your mind (helping you to develop a servant attitude) and challenge your will (moving you to act in servant ways), but ideally I want it to touch your heart and cause you to worship the one who is the true servant of God. Therefore, as you begin to read, I suggest you take a few moments to behold the Son who is a servant.

- To behold is to *see*, to notice, to observe, to give your full attention to something. Consciously turn your inward gaze towards Jesus, resting the eyes of your heart upon him. The writer to the Hebrews says, ‘Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith’ (Hebrews 12:2). If your eyes have wandered and your gaze has been elsewhere, or if your life has become fragmented and scattered, gently refocus yourself upon him. If you have been rushing and hurrying, busy with this and that, pause for a moment and slow down. Let him become the centre of your attention once again.
- To behold is to *study*, to appreciate, to meditate upon. Allow your mind to think deeply about what you read in this Servant Song, and reflect on what you discover about Jesus, as an expert might study a work of art, for this is a portrait in words painted by the Holy Spirit. Ponder the truths that are revealed to you and let them slip from your mind to your heart, taking hold of you in your innermost being until they become part of you and transform you. It is by beholding him that we are changed into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18), so take time to linger and to browse. Allow his portrait to become your pattern.
- To behold is to *gaze* with loving attentiveness, to worship, to adore. If we see Jesus in the beauty of who he is as a person, we will be captivated by him. No one who sees him as the willing and obedient servant, the humble one who comes gladly and submissively to do the Father’s will or the suffering one who gives his innocent life in place of sinful men and women, can fail to be moved to love him in return. This is the heart of contemplation, and, before we begin to follow in his footsteps and move into a life of service of our own, we must first bow the knee in humble adoration. Do not be afraid to enter the temple of your heart and, like King David of old, ‘behold the beauty of the Lord’ (Psalm 27:4, KJV).

2

Emptied and humbled

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight.

ISAIAH 42:1

British people love costume drama. We like nothing better than to be transported back to days gone by, when men behaved like gentlemen, ladies dressed elegantly, people spoke correctly and all was well with the world (or so we imagine). In particular, we enjoy period stories about the upper classes—films like *Pride & Prejudice* and *Sense & Sensibility*, or TV shows like *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey*.

It isn't that we want to return to those days and restore the class system. We idealise them deliberately because they provide a brief escape from the social chaos of our world, but no one today would want to be a servant and live 'downstairs'. My mother was born in 1915 and, like many young girls of her generation, went 'into service' after leaving school. She worked as a maid for a doctor's family and, while it may have provided her with a good domestic training, it was not something she wanted her daughters to take up. She was only too glad to leave and find her freedom again.

How we think about servanthood, and being a servant, is culturally conditioned. In some cultures, to serve other people is an honour and there is pleasure and delight in being able to help or give assistance. Service is offered cheerfully, with a smile, and brings its own reward. In other cultures (and I include my own), being a servant is viewed negatively as the lowest rung on the employment ladder. Service roles are increasingly seen as degrading, to be

avoided or left to others, and, when service is offered, it is given grudgingly and with reluctance. There is a fear of being taken advantage of and a sense that it is demeaning, so serving others is endured rather than enjoyed.

What seems amazing to some of us, therefore, is that the Son of God came into our world as a servant. ‘Here is my servant,’ says Isaiah 42:1. He came to serve his Father, having been sent into the world to do the Father’s will. A servant is one who lives to do the will of another. Jesus fully fitted that description, and did so gladly and without any reluctance. The writer to the Hebrews takes some Old Testament words (Psalm 40:6–8) and puts them into the mouth of Jesus to emphasise this very point:

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, “Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.”’ (Hebrews 10:5–7)

What we notice, first, is the absolute willingness of the Son to step into the servant’s role and to live to please the Father. This was his destiny and he accepted it joyfully. He came into the world for one purpose only, to do the Father’s will. Second, we see that the incarnation was intended to enable him to do this very thing. In the miracle of what we call the virgin birth, the Son of God was given a human body as the means through which he would accomplish the will of God. At the heart of the Father’s purpose in sending his Son was the prospect of our salvation, a salvation that would require the Son to lay down his life as a once-for-all-time sacrifice for sin. It was always written into the job description of the servant that he would be a *suffering* servant, and from this task the Son never flinched, such was the level of his obedience.

So, when the Son of God entered our world, he took upon himself the form of a servant—and this was not just window-dressing. He did not simply take to himself the garments of a

servant and play a part, as children do when they play ‘dressing up’. No, he became a servant at the core of his being, and this amazing transformation is described in detail for us in the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5–11:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!’ (vv. 5–8)

As we read these beautiful words on servanthood, two phrases stand out as being indicative of what it meant for the Son of God to walk this downward way: first he made himself nothing (v. 7, literally ‘emptied himself’), and then he humbled himself (v. 8).

Some theologians are nervous around the word ‘emptied’ because they fear that in describing the glory that the Son laid aside in being born as a man, we might surrender his divinity, but that need not be the case. Jesus remained fully God but, in becoming fully man, it was necessary for him to let go of some of the privileges and prerogatives he enjoyed as God. Elsewhere, Paul expresses it like this: ‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich’ (2 Corinthians 8:9). Clearly, then, something of significance was given up as he moved from heaven to earth. He left behind the status, honour, worship and adoration that were his by right, exchanging them for the obscurity and vulnerability of birth in a cattle shed.

This emptying is really all about an attitude of heart and mind, an attitude of selflessness that makes it possible for someone to let go of something precious in order to serve another and achieve a higher good. The Son did not cling to the place of equality with God with the tenacity of a person holding on to something for dear life—such as a handbag being grabbed by a snatch-thief. No, he willingly released from his grip all his personal rights as God

in order to fulfil the Father's will. He came into the world empty-handed. Here is the heart of servanthood—the selfless giving of oneself to meet the need of others, even at personal cost.

The Son was born in true human likeness. The omnipresent one was now confined to a human body in a manger; the omnipotent one was now dependent on others to feed and clothe him; the omniscient one now learned to walk and talk, to read and write. As he grew older, he matured physically, moving from baby to boy, from adolescent to full-grown man, subject to all the normal laws of growth and development. When he passed down the street, he looked and sounded like everyone else. There were no distinguishing physical marks, no 'holy glow' that drew attention to him; he came 'incognito'. He was found in appearance as an ordinary Jewish man, and his humanity was his servant's robe.

Yet there were more steps on the servant's downward path. After selflessness, humility is the second distinguishing mark of a servant, and we can see how the Son was called upon to humble himself, submitting himself to the Father's will. As he lived his life, he made God known through his teaching and by his ways, for this was one of the reasons why he came: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,' he said (John 14:9). He was careful to do and say only those things that the Father commanded him, never acting independently but always being led by God: 'For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it' (12:49). Like a true servant, his eyes were always upon his Master, waiting for a word of instruction or to anticipate a need or desire (Psalm 123:2).

Eventually the time came when he was called to move towards the cross, when the step of obedience would lead even lower, to the place of death, and he would humbly place himself in the hands of cruel men. The struggle for obedience to the ultimate sacrifice was real but never in doubt: 'The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my

Father' (John 10:17–18). There was a choice, of course, played out in the agony of the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–36), when his real humanity screamed out for release, but there was only one way he was ever going to go: 'Yet not what I will, but what you will' was etched upon his soul (v. 36).

So, like a lamb led to the slaughter, he gave himself to everything the world, in its hatred of God, could throw at him—trumped-up charges and biased verdicts, intimidation and physical abuse, scorn and humiliation, beating and imprisonment, the desertion of his friends and the rejection of his people, and finally the scandal of the cross. He was nailed and pierced, brutalised and abandoned, stripped naked and hung up to die in public like a common criminal. To all this he submitted himself in great humility as he became 'obedient to death'.

Why? Because, in the mystery of redemption and the need for atonement, it was the will of the Lord to bruise him (Isaiah 53:10). There on the cross, the one who had no sin was made to be sin (taking upon himself the sin of the whole world) so that we might become the righteousness of God—that is, be forgiven and made acceptable again to God (see 2 Corinthians 5:21). In this great act of salvation he was serving not only his Father but us as well, for it was by dying in our place that he enabled us to be forgiven and reconciled to God. His sacrificial death was the ransom that set us free (Mark 10:45).

The work of the servant having been accomplished at Calvary, God then brought him to life again in the triumph of the resurrection, as the Christological hymn goes on to make clear: 'Therefore God exalted him...' (Philippians 2:9). Humiliation leads to exaltation, for, in spiritual terms, the way up is always the way down. There is no other way. This is the path that the true servant walked, and everyone who follows in his footsteps will be called to a life of selfless service and humble obedience to God—but always in the knowledge that the way of the cross leads to life.

It is interesting to see how Paul uses this passage about the downward way of Jesus within the Philippian letter as a whole. One

of his reasons for writing seems to have been to encourage two of his prominent fellow workers, Euodia and Syntyche, to patch up their differences (Philippians 4:2). This may explain why he uses the Christological hymn, because it is prefaced by a call to humility in relationships: ‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others’ (2:3–4). Such behaviour is possible only if God’s people have adopted the mind of Christ displayed in his giving up of personal rights and adopting a humble approach. A servant heart is essential in the tricky business of interpersonal relationships, even in the church.

To add weight to his argument, Paul then mentions his son in the faith, Timothy, who will soon be arriving in Philippi. Timothy has been in a mentoring relationship with Paul, and it is clear that servanthood is something that has been stressed. He has now become a living example of the principles that Paul has been speaking about: ‘I have no one else like him,’ Paul says, ‘who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ’ (2:20–21). Here is a young man who has grasped what it is all about, who has learned how to live outside of himself and is able, when necessary, to place the needs of others before his own.

Timothy will model servanthood for the Philippians because he is a true follower of Jesus Christ, and only when believers (both then and now) learn to serve one another in love will the church really thrive. Jesus has led the way on the downward path and calls us to follow in his steps.

Reflection

- Meditate further on the way in which Jesus first ‘emptied’ himself at the manger and then ‘humbled’ himself at the cross.
- Think about ways in which you are called to be a servant, and consider your attitude towards servanthood.

3

Chosen and loved

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight.

ISAIAH 42:1

In being introduced to the servant, we have been invited to pause to take a good long look at him. Our attention has been grabbed and we have begun to realise that this is no ordinary servant, to be despised and looked down upon. He has a noble calling and serves a noble Master. He brings with him not shame and disgrace but honour and dignity. He walks uprightly, with confidence and authority, because he comes as a representative of the Sovereign Lord. He is one to be emulated.

Through the words of the prophet, God points us to his servant, and we hear him given an amazing assurance as the one ‘whom I uphold’. Here is a divinely stated guarantee that the servant will not fail in his task because he will be ‘held up’ (strengthened, supported, supplied, equipped) in whatever he undertakes for his Lord. All the resources of heaven will be at his disposal, and his feet will stand on solid ground. *THE MESSAGE* puts it like this: ‘Take a good look at my servant. I’m backing him to the hilt.’ There is no chance of his being sent on a mission and then forgotten about or being commissioned and then left to fend for himself. He serves with divine authorisation and everything he needs to do a good job will be given to him.

We will return to this thought of the servant’s confidence later, as it recurs elsewhere in the song in more detail. Alongside the promise of support, though, the servant is given a further wonder-

ful affirmation of the esteem in which he is held, in words again designed to strengthen him for the task: he is 'my chosen one in whom I delight'. There is no sense here that the servant is an unseen nobody, silently performing his duties and hidden from his Master's gaze. He is not despised or looked down upon or disregarded as inconsequential. No, the Master is aware of him, thinks highly of him and feels affection for him. This is communicated in words so that the servant may know it and may value himself and his calling.

The servant is the 'chosen one'. Here is a term that reminds us that a servant must be called to a particular task and set apart for a specific role. From this perspective, people like Abraham, David and Moses are all said to have been chosen (see Genesis 18:19; Psalm 89:3; 106:23). In God's service there are no volunteers (strange as that may seem!), only those appointed by God. This is brought out in Hebrews 5:4-5, where there is a discussion about the selection of the high priest: 'No one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest.' Even Jesus did not volunteer! He was appointed by God to the role in which he now serves (as a merciful and faithful high priest). Likewise, he became the servant because he was chosen; this was the Father's will for him.

The reality of this chosenness came as a gradual realisation to the boy Jesus. His understanding of who he was and what he had come to do was an unfolding revelation, for, as we have seen, in his humanity he had to develop in normal ways. By the age of twelve he was already beginning to sense his divine destiny. He astounded the temple teachers with his wisdom and insight, and surprised his parents by reminding them that he must be 'about my Father's business' (Luke 2:49, KJV). Doubtless, as he grew older, this awareness grew stronger, coming to fulfilment in his baptism when he presented himself to the Father for the work he was called to do.

The word 'chosen' also contains a sense of affection and special-

ness. Only once in the Gospels is Jesus called the Chosen One. It is used rather scornfully during the crucifixion as a description of the 'so-called' Messiah (Luke 23:35). Peter, however, uses it quite positively, comparing Jesus to a living stone that the builders have rejected but, in God's sight, is chosen and precious, one that becomes the cornerstone of the building (see 1 Peter 2:4–8).

This sense of affection and appreciation for the servant naturally spills over into the words that follow: he is one 'in whom I delight'. When we look closely at the life of Jesus, we see how important it was for him to know that he was loved by the Father. He seems to have lived within the orbit of that love, and took his sense of identity from it. It was the motivation for his life of service, the source of his confidence and joy. The apostle John, the most intimate of his companions, highlights this in the fourth Gospel: 'The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands' (John 3:35); 'For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does' (5:20); 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you' (15:9); 'Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world' (17:24).

Matthew also draws our attention to the Son's awareness of being loved by the Father. I have already mentioned how he quotes quite fully from the first Servant Song to describe the ministry of Jesus. In repeating Isaiah 42:1, however, Matthew makes a subtle change to the wording—which, I guess, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he was allowed to do! His version omits the expression 'whom I uphold' and says this: 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, *the one I love*, in whom I delight' (Matthew 12:18, my italics). Nothing could be plainer than that. No wonder, then, that Paul speaks of Jesus as being 'the One he loves' (Ephesians 1:6) and 'the Son he loves' (Colossians 1:13).

It was at his baptism that Jesus stepped on to the public stage in his ministry and consciously took upon himself the role of the servant. Not only did the Holy Spirit come upon him but a voice came from heaven, confirming him in his identity and calling

out, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’ (Matthew 3:17; see Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). It is impossible not to see here an echo of Isaiah 42:1, the opening of the Servant Song. As he began his ministry, Jesus in his humanity needed to hear such powerful words of affirmation deep in his own soul, and to sense the presence of the Spirit empowering him for all that lay ahead. Notice, too, that this affirmation was given before he had done anything. The love of the Father was in no way conditional upon his performance or productivity.

In a similar way, shortly before he went to the cross, the Father spoke to him again on the mount of transfiguration. Out of the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’ (Matthew 17:5; see Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). The other Gospel writers slightly vary the words they use on this occasion, but Matthew records exactly the same words as he did in his account of the baptism. Again, we sense the Father upholding his servant, strengthening him by words of reassurance at a crucial moment in his ministry. How important that must have been for him—and how important for his disciples to be reminded to listen to him!

We have dwelt at some length on the fact that the servant is made aware of his being loved, because genuine self-esteem is vital to true servanthood. Only those who know themselves to be loved can give the kind of love from which true service flows. Servanthood is not for those who demean themselves or consider themselves inferior to others, thinking that they must serve because they are worthless and deserve nothing better. Nor is it for those who feel unloved and think they will be appreciated more if they pamper to the needs and wishes of others, denying any needs of their own in order to bolster a fragile ego. No, servanthood in the biblical sense is for those who have a clear sense of their identity, who know they are loved by God and are aware of being called to a particular task; it is for the strong, not the weak.

One of the clearest demonstrations of the servant heart of Jesus is seen in his washing of the disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17). They

are about to celebrate the Passover meal together and are gathered in the upper room. Everything has been prepared for them and they are sitting around, sharing relaxed conversation. Only one thing is amiss. A bowl of water and a towel have been set out for the customary foot-washing, but there seems to be no household servant present to perform this menial task.

Then, to the surprise of everyone, Jesus stands up, takes off his outer garment and wraps the towel around himself in the manner (or 'form') of a servant. There is a moment of shocked silence as the disciples watch him take the bowl and begin to wash their dirty, dusty feet. They are embarrassed and ashamed, but Jesus has not acted in this way to show them up; it is an act of love on his part, and, because he has the attitude of a servant, it is a spontaneous response to an observed need. Status and position are no barrier to him in doing what needs to be done, however menial and lowly it may be.

Jesus is able to do this because he is secure in his relationship with the Father: 'Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God' (v. 3). This security provides the backdrop to his action, for he has no fear of losing face or reputation by serving others. Further, he can meet the needs of his disciples because he truly loves them: 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love' (v. 1) His love for them was unending because it was actually the Father's love welling up within him. Knowing himself to be loved, he could love others freely and deeply—even the slow-to-learn disciples, and even his betrayer, Judas (whose feet he also washed). This is why I say that true servanthood is possible only when we are operating out of a strong sense of our own belovedness.

The washing of the disciples' feet provides the context for some important words about relationships. As Jesus prepares to return to the Father and send his disciples into the world, he wants them to know that, among his followers, servanthood is to be the norm: 'Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you

also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you' (vv. 14–15). This will be important for the future when the church comes into being, for Jesus is aware of the human tendency to want to get to the top and be served rather than to serve. By washing his disciples' feet he has not only modelled humility but also demonstrated true leadership. Real leadership is servant leadership. Power and authority are not to be exercised in a despotic way, but from a servant heart that seeks to benefit others and not burden them. As their Teacher and Lord, Jesus might well have asked them to wash his feet, but he chose rather to serve them. He did not exercise his rights but laid them aside (an echo of his original self-emptying).

Here is an example for the disciples of a principle that must undergird all Christian leadership: leaders must be willing to serve those they lead, even at personal cost. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' Jesus asks (v. 12), and it is a pertinent question for us as well, for it points us to a style of leadership and interpersonal relationships that is alien to the world but expressive of the kingdom of God, where the humble serving of one another is a core value.

The washing of one another's feet is a custom still practised in some churches today, and I have experienced it myself among a group of mission partners in Singapore. It is a moving and disarming experience in itself, but what matters is what lies behind the action—the willingness to serve humbly, to become involved in the nitty-gritty of practical care for one another. 'Washing the feet of the saints', in the early church, became a synonym for showing hospitality and offering kindness, especially to strangers (1 Timothy 5:10). However we practise it, it will require a servant heart, and that is what makes Christian leadership, as well as relationships among Jesus' followers, distinctive.

Reflection

- Meditate further on Jesus' need to know that he was loved and chosen by the Father, and how that knowledge enabled him to serve others humbly in love.
- What do you personally learn from the way in which Jesus washed the feet of his disciples?

To purchase this book, visit www.brfonline.org.uk

ORDERFORM

REF	TITLE	PRICE	QTY	TOTAL

POSTAGE AND PACKING CHARGES				
Order value	UK	Europe	Surface	Air Mail
£7.00 & under	£1.25	£3.00	£3.50	£5.50
£7.01-£30.00	£2.25	£5.50	£6.50	£10.00
Over £30.00	FREE	prices on request		

Postage and packing	
Donation	
TOTAL	

Name _____ Account Number _____
 Address _____
 _____ Postcode _____
 Telephone Number _____
 Email _____

Payment by: Cheque Mastercard Visa Postal Order Maestro

Card no

Valid from Expires Issue no.

Security code* *Last 3 digits on the reverse of the card. Shaded boxes for
 ESSENTIAL IN ORDER TO PROCESS YOUR ORDER Maestro use only

Signature _____ Date _____

All orders must be accompanied by the appropriate payment.

Please send your completed order form to:

BRF, 15 The Chambers, Vineyard, Abingdon OX14 3FE

Tel. 01865 319700 / Fax. 01865 319701 Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk

Please send me further information about BRF publications.

Available from your local Christian bookshop.

BRF is a Registered Charity