

16 The Redy Servant

12: 35 – 13: 21

There is work for us to do as the kingdom of God comes upon us. We are to be redy and active for an event that will bring to its critical moment all the history of Israel, all our history and all the work of God.

Make sure you're dressed and redy for action, your lamps lit, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding feast. Be redy to open the door as soon as he knocks. If you do, he'll be more than pleased. I tell you, he will himself put on a servant's apron, sit you down at table and wait on you. Happy servants, if you're awake when he comes at midnite or in the early hours of the morning.

(12: 35 – 38)

This is not the first time that Jesus relates an ordinary, homely incident (servants waiting to open the door when their master arrives home) but gives it an unexpected twist, to bring home the unprecedented generosity of God.¹ Of course, an ordinary master or boss would not behave as Jesus has sed. He would take it for granted that the servants were there to tend to his needs and only expect that they would be redy for him even in the middle of the nite. But God is no ordinary master, and God's appointed ruler, the Son of Man, when he comes, will be no ordinary ruler. Jesus himself is alre dy showing what kind of ruler he will be.

And just in case we go away with the idea that our part is no more than the passive one of waiting, Jesus has another way to put it. Peter asks the question: "Is this teaching just for us, or is it for everyone?" and Jesus takes the opportunity to elaborate on the image of servants waiting for their master. Now, it's not just servants waiting to let their master in, but senior servants, who have a job to do running the master's household while he is away.

Jesus does not answer Peter's question. He does not set out on that long road of structuring the fellowship of his followers into a hierarchy. Insted he tells them that if they are asking about a special responsibility, this is what it is. The faithful follower of Jesus is being trained to run the master's

¹ Another instance is the parable of the sower (Mark 4: 3 - 9). See "Jesus Messiah" ch. 8

household. Peter need not trouble himself about the difference between the disciples and other believers, but this is the charge laid upon the disciples.

It's not just passively waiting. The picture is now of a household where servants have authority in the absence of their master, an authority they can exercise with responsibility, or neglect, or abuse. What kind of steward is faithful and wise enuf for the job? If there is a role for the disciples, and if it is more than that of the many others who also come and listen to Jesus, it will be this job of service. Jesus pictures a wise steward – a good manager – making sure that the whole household has its needful food at the proper time. Servants like this, if they are any good, will be found doing their job when the master comes, and if they are, he will be pleased with their loyalty and diligence. He will promote them to take charge of his whole estate.

But if the servant left behind to manage things simply takes advantage of his master's absence: "I'm in charge here, I can do as I like," and takes to bullying the under-servants and enjoying his position, living off the best of the property himself – he'll be caught out when the master comes back unexpectedly. He'll get the sack.

Some of us have made much more of the first parable than the second. We talk a lot of waiting for the Lord, and make it a great virtue of faith and patience that we simply wait. I don't deny that there are times when that is all we can do – Jesus told the first parable for a reason – but it doesn't exhaust his instructions. There is a task to be done while we are waiting, and it is nothing less than running the master's household. It is certainly much more than looking after our own souls and hoping to get to heaven. It is even more than persuading other people to aim for heaven. The master's household, where he will come and judge our work, is here.

In fact, when Jesus describes the work of the reliable steward, giving his whole household their food as required, he is quoting a psalm (104) which celebrates the glory of God the Creator in his rule over the whole world. There, it is God who not only establishes the earth, the mountains and the seas, but cares for it all, sending the rain and ensuring that the earth has all it needs. The plants grow, the animals and the birds feed, and mankind has wine, oil and bread. By nite the wild animals come out roaring for their prey, claiming their food from God. By day man goes out, labouring in the fields, all as arranged by God. Even the vast oceans, teeming with living creatures, are the work of God's care. All creatures look to God, and he gives them their food at the appropriate time.²

² verse 27

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I believe that Jesus deliberately made this open-ended reference to the song of God's care for all creation. The charge laid upon the disciples is to be nothing less than caring, as God's stewards, for the needs of all the world. They are to rule it wisely, pending the master's return, when he will not relieve them of their duties but confirm them in an even wider role. We miss the point when we think that the Christian calling can be limited to a "spiritual" or evangelistic role, or that the sphere of purely secular economics and politics which only provides for the "worldly" needs of humanity, stands outside of the concern of Jesus' disciples.

If anything, we reverse the insight that Jesus gives us. Jesus tells his disciples they will have responsibility for the whole household, referring them to the role of God the creator. That is, they will carry responsibility for the whole order of creation and of civic society, which is its human ordering. And if they're found doing well in their task, they will be given more to do.

We reverse the picture. We say that disciples carry a narrow, "spiritual" responsibility for religion and evangelism, for "saving souls", and that it's the ordinary crowd, those not so particularly commissioned to the Lord's work, who may carry on the responsibility for civic, political, economic affairs, the general care of the world and of creation.

That's because we have set up a false opposition between this world and the "next". We judge such work to be Christian, to be "the Lord's work" and appropriate for churches, as looks to heaven and saves souls by putting them in touch with heaven. It's directed to another life, and affects this life only at the level of moral behavior, or of worship and celebration that shows our faith in Jesus. Every work gets judged by its "spiritual" character, and if a church involves itself in social action, in forming a housing association or a credit union or an advice centre, the challenge is made: "How does this bring souls to Christ?"

We forget the faith of the centurion and the obedience of faith. If the Lord has given us tasks to do in his household, it's not for us to measure them up and decide whether they are "spiritual" enough for us to include in our agenda. Jesus himself healed the sick. Diseased and broken bodies are the concern of the kingdom as it comes among us. The physical, the material and the whole range of need are the concern of the kingdom, and we are to be the servants of the ruler of the kingdom. It's not for us to set limits to his reach or to the work he might give us, but to look after the master's household and to be both diligent and obedient in fulfilling our trust.

We do so in loyalty and obedience to the authority of a master, and that, as we saw with the centurion, is the true context of faith. Faith is not simply subscribing to a doctrine, even if the doctrine is that Christ died for us and saves us. It is not enuf to believe the proposition that “Jesus is Lord”; we are to serve and obey him as Lord. We are to accept our role, whatever the role he gives us in the management of his household, which is the whole world, and to carry it out faithfully.

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In my job as a church community worker, in Blackbird Leys, Oxford, I have become very much involved in setting up and running a credit union. A credit union is a co-operative providing financial services. Like a bank, people can use it for saving, for borrowing, for cashing cheques, for receiving wages or benefits (welfare). In England, credit unions are generally smaller than in some other countries, and the Blackbird Leys Credit Union is very small, with some 700 members in a locality of about 15,000 people.

Blackbird Leys is a “marginalised” area of low income and comparative poverty. There are no banks, other than a facility at the local post offices. Some people live in a basic cash economy for which cheques and electronic facilities cannot properly provide, others are always close to the edge, needing more flexibility than the banks can give them. Many need to borrow, small amounts that the banks are not interested in lending, but which they can get from loan companies at very high interest. In short, their “food”, their resources for living, are not available to them at the appropriate times, when they need them, or only available if they pay a hevy price.

You can blame the banks, which are no longer interested in little people at a local level, but only in the broad mass of account holders, who fit, in their thousands, into a standard pattern of profitable services. You can blame the businesses that employ the poor, and only pay thru payroll services that operate a week or two weeks in arrears and take over three weeks to get started. You can blame the money shops that cash their cheques with high charges, or you can blame the doorstep lenders who keep them hooked on permanent loans at 180% interest. You can blame the insensitive cost-cutting where companies boost their profits and abandon responsibility for their workers by relying more and more on agency, short-time and temporary employment. You can blame the government, which fails to ensure that cash is always available to those who have earned it. You can blame a society that has watched while the powerful strip the workers of rights and protection. You can blame an economic system that counts itself

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a “growth” success, while it dumps people and whole families on the sidelines.

But most of all, you can face your responsibility as a disciple of Jesus. It is our responsibility not just to criticise a badly-run and insensitive economy, but to try to put something better in its place. We may not be expert economists, or business managers, but if the experts are neglecting the job, we cannot. We have been left in charge of the household, until the Master returns.

With the Blackbird Leys Credit Union we have tried to provide those financial services which are needed in this community, with mixed success. We are none of us trained bankers, but we can recognise and respond to a local need. We can work with our neighbors to manage those needs together, and to build the co-operative spirit in which the community, even a marginalised community, is an asset. And because we are local, we can respond more flexibly than banks, or even larger Credit Unions. (We can, for instance, cash cheques immediately, on the basis of personal knowledge, or, again on the basis of personal knowledge, we can pay out welfare benefits that have been delayed in the system.)

It's not a task that goes under a “Christian” label – Muslims, atheists and others take part with the same dedication – but it is an act of obedience to our master. For the church, and for those like me who are disciples of Jesus Christ, it is a matter of carrying out as faithfully as we can the work that we have been given to do. Other works may or may not be more important. Some other works will be more explicitly Christian. But this particular task is the one we have been given in God's household, and it is a work of faith to carry it out obediently.

Other Christians, other churches, will find they are entrusted with other tasks. Some of them may be the recognised pastoral or evangelistic jobs, but in other cases they will be “secular” works meeting “secular” needs, because those are the needs of the Lord's household. Our response will be an act of faith, by obedience to the teaching of the master. (I put the word “secular” in quotes, because there is in fact no secular. The imminent presence of the kingdom of God has already abolished the category.)

We may do well in our work, or badly. And some may do badly because they don't rightly know what the master wants, and others because they don't do what they know the master wants. All will have to give an account at the master's coming, but those who know the master's will, who have been fully instructed, will be held all the more strictly to account.

The master's will is not a new set of rules (or an old one) but a whole-hearted and public commitment to the kingdom that God is bringing about among us, the kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming everywhere he went. It is the manifesto promulgated at Nazareth, liberation for the oppressed poor, compassion for the weak, healing for the sick, forgiveness for sin; it is the fulfilment of all the Law in total love of God and love of our fellow human being; it is that we should be unafraid in our affirmation of the master's teaching, that we should be children of God, gifted with his Spirit to take, under God, responsibility for the whole world and all its needs.

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Terrible but decisive times are coming. And Jesus himself will be at the centre of trials. They will be for him a baptism, without which the work he has come to do will not be accomplished:

I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already! I have a baptism to undergo and how I am hemmed in until it is accomplished! (12: 49 – 50)

This is one of those critical texts where we are tempted to take away the gospel and replace it with our favourite heresy. We call on the theology of Paul to help us and assume that Jesus is referring to the necessity of atonement: that he must first die to take away our sins, before the anger of God can be set aside and reconciliation brought about.

Now the theology of Paul is right; it is a precious portion of our Christian heritage. It may even be the most profound interpretation of the death of Jesus. But it is not to be found in the gospels, and if it stands alone, without taking cognisance of the gospels (for they too have a profound and important understanding of Jesus' death) it ends up in contradictions and even blasphemy.³

For all his differences with Mark, Luke's understanding of Jesus' death in Jerusalem is that of Mark, the one writer who set the pattern for all the gospels. That clash with the authorities that Jesus had experienced, and which he had foretold for his followers, will reach its climax in Jerusalem whither he is now directed. His great work of healing and teaching, laying the example and foundations of the kingdom, is to be superseded by this terrible baptism, without which nothing can be properly accomplished.

³ cf Jesus Messiah, ch 15

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He has confronted evil in the demonic powers and dismissed them with a word of command. He has met it in sick and broken bodies and has healed it with a touch. He has encountered it in sinners, the weak, the outcast, the shamed, and he has overcome it with the forgiveness of God. And what is more, he has empowered his disciples to do as he has done. The kingdom is under way.

But not everything has gone successfully. Increasingly he has taut and will teach against money, status and power, for these are the most obstinate of sins. They make their stand in hearts and minds that then harden against him, but they are also the very stuff of which government is made, in our broken world. They are the sins that make a sinful society, a wicked social structure; and society so structured encourages the sin in the individual. It is the ultimate vicious circle.

He has come to save and to rule Israel, and to do that he must confront the opposition to God at its most powerful, in the very structures of the nation, its institutions and leaders. He had clashed with them at a smaller, local level in the villages of Galilee and had found them obstinately resistant, for they had their status and their control of society to defend. But now he is going to confront them at the centre of their power: the capital, Jerusalem, the political, cultural and emotional center for every government of Israel. And in that he will be defeated. He will be put to death in Jerusalem.

Far from accepting, in the face of opposition, that his mission is not to the structures and leaders of society, but to private individuals alone, among whom he might continue to seek out the willing, the repentant, the humble, the faithful, to save them, Jesus now declares that the coming confrontation in Jerusalem is the very crux of his mission, without which his rule and the transforming kingdom of God cannot be brought about. That which we, in our heresy, exclude from the mission of Jesus, the challenge to rulers and structures and institutions, that they too must be changed, is in fact essential to its achievement.

And we have seen why. No one can take on human existence alone. We are part of our society, belonging with and sometimes to other people. Our governments, our laws, our social structures and institutions are what we have constructed as a people and accepted as a people in order to be together effectively. They come from human beings, reflecting our character, and they in turn exert influence back on human beings, attempting to direct and rule our characters. If there is sin in us, there will be sin in the institutions and they will entice us or pressure us into further sin.

Jesus is at war with the institutions and the ruling elites of Israel, and especially those he judges to be native to Israel, its self and its character as a people under God. These are the assembly (synagogue) leaders, rich landowners, Pharisees, lawyers and the representatives of the Jerusalem hierarchy, in Israel's constitution the ultimate leaders of the people. These are the ones who have opposed Jesus' message outright, who have criticised, sought to stop him and to discredit him, for they have recognised that the kingdom he proclaims will not confirm the nation as they see it, as the sphere of their influence and privilege.

But they cannot be ignored or by-passed. They are the nation of Israel, as an organised and political community, and they too must be won over to repentance and the kingdom of God. Without that, there will be no kingdom of God, and therefore Jesus must go to Jerusalem where his enemies have all the power.

A crisis is approaching and Jesus is not only its herald; he is in a sense its instigator. For his message is not one of untroubled reassurance for a comfortable life in a quiet and well-ordered society. It will be resisted and there will be conflict, and we are not to avoid the conflict. Families will be divided, one member for, another against him, for the kingdom is at odds with the world and even within the closest relationships people will find themselves on opposite sides.

Now families no longer fall out very much over which church, if any, you go to, and even the most secular and atheistic of modern clans just shrug their shoulders if one of their members "gets religion". Jesus' teaching will only cause the kind of divisions he foresaw, "father against son and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother" if our faith, our conviction and enthusiasm for him, takes us into very unpopular positions of the kind that do divide us: economic and political.

It is not surprising that Jesus, whose teaching contains much that heals and reconciles, nonetheless speaks of division and strife at this moment when he himself goes up to Jerusalem to confront the political, religious, economic establishment that rules in Israel.

We have to be aware of what is happening all around us, not assuming complacently that it's all about some distant, transcendent future. When we see black clouds banking up, we say "It's going to rain." When the weather charts show a wind coming in from the east, we know it's going to be cold (or very hot if we live in Western Australia or West Africa). The coming of

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the kingdom is as visible and recognisable as that, and we should be getting our lives in order for it. Jesus draws the picture of two litigants preparing for an action in court. It's wise, especially if you know you could be in the wrong, to reach a settlement with your opponent before it comes to court, before you incur the whole costs and penalty.

At that time some travellers brought news of a dramatic event in Jerusalem. Some Galileans had been engaged in anti-state activity in the temple. (Given the history of Galilee, it was probably some kind of anti-Roman or anti-priest action.) The Roman governor, Pilate, had sent in the soldiers and slaughtered them. Now whatever sympathies people might have had for the Galileans, as against the Roman military, the fact is they had been slaughtered, their blood flowing where the blood of sacrifices ran. That was the end of the matter, and many would have felt that they must have been sinners for God so to give them over to their enemies.

Not an unusual attitude. It's not difficult after the event and seeing who were the losers, to decide who must have been in the wrong. Our politicians and our newspapers are good at it. We can always find reasons why the defeated side were not the good guys. But Jesus rejects the conclusion. He mentions another disaster, when a tower collapsed in Jerusalem, killing 18 people. Were they sinners, that God so punished them? Popular superstition would say they were.

Jesus would not accept the common belief that disasters befall the guilty (and thankfully, this is one part of his teaching that we seem to have learnt well). Those who died were no more sinners than the rest of us. And we are no less sinners than they. But Jesus did affirm that disasters remind us of our vulnerability and our liability, and above all our exposure to the relentless approach of the kingdom. The judgement, the decisive action of God, is imminent, and we should learn from the experience of disaster to be ready for it. It's a matter of being ready for the future, and the future is the kingdom of God. But if we look for the kingdom of God only in the vague, undefined future, it will be too late for us when we find out that it is already with us. To be caught so unready will be a disaster.

There would seem to be a contradiction in the teaching of Jesus. On the one hand, we have no idea when the kingdom will break upon us: "The Son of Man will come when you least expect him." On the other, we have signs and signals of the kingdom all around us; it comes fully announced, heralded by the very events in which we are living. The contradiction is itself the message. Precisely because the kingdom is already coming among us, and all the time from now till the end of history will be marked by the

signs and the experiences of its coming, we will never be able to fix dates in advance. Signs of many kinds, evidence for those who look for it, will show that the kingdom is already making its presence felt, will remind us of the crisis we are in and its demands upon us; but we will never know when the next challenge is to be made or when the project will be complete.

The kingdom is not an ideal or a dream, but the very active reality of God, changing history as God comes among us. If time passes, and nothing seems to happen, we must not be misled. That human history continues, even two thousand years after Jesus spoke, does not mean that the kingdom's impact has been a long way off, or that it has been postponed, or that Jesus was wrong. The adventure and the true reality of history is that it is the breaking of God's kingdom upon the world, and thru all of history we can only be redy for the kingdom of God or be caught out disastrously by its coming.

The right understanding of history is the revolutionary one, and the revolution of God is always breaking out where we least expected it. Revolution in our lives and attitudes and perceptions, this is the repentance God calls for, as is the revolution in our pockets, property and banks, in government and empire and the global order. Just when we think that all is in order, that the right way has been found, that history has come to an end, history breaks loose again and the ground shakes beneath our feet. If we are not redy for it, redy precisely for what we cannot expect,⁴ the revolution overtakes us and we are found wanting.

Just when the pious scholars of mediaeval Europe had settled that the spiritual doctrine of the philosopher Plato was the true home for Christian thinkers, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas discovered thru Islam and Aristotle a new way of grasping the material and the spiritual. While the pope and the emperor strove for the mastery of Europe and its wealth, and the church of a thousand years counted on its eternal monopoly of truth, a string of theses and a printing press undid them all. The Roman church, holding itself the custodian of God's revelation, first ignored Copernicus and then condemned Galileo, unable to see how God reveals the wonders of the universe to those who go looking. The nobles of the Ancien Regime thought that luxury, culture and power belonged to them forever until the

⁴ Recently (February 2009) Gordon Brown offered the excuse that "no one could have foreseen the global economic crisis" that has now erupted around us. In spite of a Christian background, he had not understood that history will never follow our best projected models, but will always challenge us with the unexpected. Leadership has failed if it has not built up the wisdom and the flexibility to meet the unexpected in good time.

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egalitarians of Paris brought them to judgement. When the polite world of English literature seemed to have settled that all the proper characters for a novel belonged to the leisured and elegant classes, Dickens gave us Sam Weller, and the underworld of “Oliver Twist”. When European civilisation, rational, moral and successful, thought it had everything to offer the world and the future, it perished in the mud and the slaughter of the trenches.

When I give examples from history, then of course I quote what is famous, but the events that mark the breaking in of God’s kingdom, the stunning irruption of God’s rule just when we thought we had it all settled otherwise, are even more marked and numerous in the unrecorded, unremembered experience of countless lives lived redy or unredy before God. We are always being caught out; it is sometimes funny, and sometimes tragic, and by now we ought to be used to the idea that whatever happens, it won’t be the expected.

The twentieth century that we have just lived thru was an age of revolutions, in science, society, politics and economics. In most cases, the churches, and Christians generally, were unredy, caught off guard and having to catch up after the event, for we have just about lost all sense of the kingdom’s imminence. The world changes, as Hitler captures the disillusioned masses of Germany and Ghandi unravels an empire in India. None of the revolutions turn out to be the kingdom of God, but they are all its signs and harbingers alerting us to the way in which the kingdom itself is taking us. But because we fail to read them, we flounder still, now in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, or in the banking halls and morgage parlours of America, unable to stand and ride the events because we do not recognise the energy that is in them. We have no idea what is our role as alert and faithful stewards of God’s household, because we have forgotten that we are the stewards and will be held responsible.

Jesus told them another parable:

A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, but when he came looking for fruit on it he found none. He said to the vinedresser: “Look, I’ve been coming for three years looking for fruit on this tree and there’s none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the land?” But the man answered him, “Master, leave it one more year. I’ll dig around it and manure it. If it then bears fruit, all’s well; but if not, you can cut it down.”
(13: 6 – 9)

And there was another healing

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue one Sabbath and a woman was there who had been severely crippled for eiteen years. She was bent over double and couldn't stand up strait. When he saw her, Jesus spoke to her. "Woman," he sed, "you are released from your affliction." He placed his hands on her and immediately she straitened up and began to praise God. But the village leader was angry that Jesus had done a healing on the Sabbath and he told the people: "There are six days for working in – come on one of them if you want to be healed!" but the Lord [Jesus] responded to him: "Hypocrites! Any one of you would untie his ox or donkey on the Sabbath and take them out to water. And this woman, a dauter of Abraham whom Satan has held bound for eiteen years, don't you think she should have been released from her bonds on the Sabbath?"

(13: 10 – 16)

As before, the traditional leaders of the assembly come out in opposition to Jesus. They are so bent on defending the Law, the civic and moral code on which their own authority rests, that they fail to see what is happening. They fail to see in the release of a crippled woman the very coming of God's kingdom, with an authority that runs deeper, stands stronger and liberates as no Law has ever been able to do. They are so taken up with their preconceptions about what the authority of God must be – of a kind that reinforces their own – that when it comes they don't recognise it. Those who claimed to know the ways of God are put to shame by their opposition when hundreds see the work of God and rejoice in it.⁵

What is the kingdom of God like? How does it come about? Much has been sed about the drama of the kingdom's breaking in upon history. But that is not the only story. There is much more to the kingdom and its history than the spectacular and the startling. If we wait for the dramatic events, the kingdom will have overtaken us before we notice. Jesus sed:

What is the kingdom of God like? How shall I speak of it? It's like a tiny mustard seed that someone took and planted in their garden. It grew into a tree, and the birds of heven came to roost in its branches. He also sed: To what can I compare the kingdom of heven? It's like a pinch of yeast that a woman kneaded into a mass of flour, until the whole lot was levened.

(13: 18 – 21)

The kingdom of heven will be going to work and growing right in among us, quietly, stedily and relentlessly. Who knows how long that will take and how long it will be remaking our world while we are waiting for some more

⁵ 13: 17

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dramatic manifestation? The entire loaf will be transformed; the peoples of the world, like birds flocking to a large tree, will come to rest in its branches. We need to be ready for the future, and for the present and the past as well.