

Civic Service

Well, firstly in my few words this morning, I wanted to thank those of you have come to church today representing different councils, local organisations, or local services.

Some of you are of course in church every week anyway. Others of you are with us less often. Indeed some of you are members of other churches.

But our gathering here today gives us an opportunity to say thank you to you who serve us in your various capacities.

I told a story at the Eynsford Parish Council AGM, which I'll repeat for those of you who weren't there:

A surgeon, an engineer and a politician were sat in the pub having a debate about whose profession was the oldest and most noble.

The surgeon staked his claim, "Well, when God made the first human beings, he made Adam, and then he put Adam into a deep sleep, took out a rib and from it formed Eve. That's a surgical procedure. Obviously surgery is the oldest and noblest profession."

"Rubbish" said the architect. "Even before that, God formed an beautiful and ordered word out of chaos. That's an architectural procedure. My profession is the oldest and most noble".

After a moment's pause, the politician piped up, "and who do you think created the chaos?"

Politicians have taken a hammering over the last few years.

Other professions have recently been in the spotlight too: the police and the press.

As a Christian minister I am not unaware that the church is often in the same boat; under attack when we say or do something people don't like.

Sometimes as a church we are genuinely at fault and we need to say sorry. At other times we have to bear what we feel is unfair criticism, confident that we are doing our best, and for the best of reasons.

None of us are perfect (except perhaps of course me!), but I know that we have in Eynsford and Farningham we have good people running our councils, and services and putting in many hours of unpaid work in our local societies. We are fortunate and need to remember to say thank you.

As churches in our villages, we are keen to play our part in the wellbeing of our communities too. As you know we try to do that in a variety of ways.

As churches one of the more obvious things we can do is to pray.

St Paul wrote to the young Christian leader, Timothy,

“The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well, so we can be quietly about our business”. (1 Timothy 2.1-2).

We pray regularly in our services for the life of our villages and for those who hold positions of responsibility.

If there are things that we can be praying for you, for the different councils, groups and services, please tell us.

The golfer Gary Player famously said, “the more I practice, the luckier I get.”

Those of us who pray may well have noticed a similar phenomenon.

The former archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple said,
“When I pray, coincidences happen. When I stop, they don’t.”

Let me then now turn to our reading for this morning: John 13.1-15.

Here we find Jesus at the last supper with his disciples.

They have been on the road, they are hot and sweaty and they come to sit down for a meal.

It would have been the job of the lowest servant to have washed the feet of guests gathering for a meal.

But here we find Jesus getting out the soap and water, and washing the smelly feet of his disciples.

This must have come as a real shock to his disciples.

Jesus’ disciples had always known there was something special about Jesus. But just recently, they had begun to realise that Jesus was really something else.

As the penny had dropped, Peter had made his great confession: “you are the messiah, the son of the living God”.

And yet here is Jesus taking the place of the lowest slave and serving his disciples.

I do wonder if they were just a little embarrassed – perhaps thinking, “Whoops, I really should have volunteered for this one! Now Jesus is having to do it!”

How easy it is to leave the less glamorous jobs for others.

But rather, Jesus is pleased to take this role of slave to teach his disciples two valuable lessons.

The first of these lessons is the need to serve one another.

Service is not a sign of weakness, but as Jesus models it, it is a sign of love.

If Jesus, who is their teacher and Lord can wash the disciples feet, then they can certainly wash each others’.

And so can we wash each others’ feet.

Mother Teresa, perhaps one of the most iconic figures of our recent past said, “It is a kingly thing to serve.”

I wanted to encourage us all today, to commit ourselves to this “kingly thing” once again – to the service of others.

The second lesson that Jesus intended his disciples to take from his washing their feet, was for them to learn that they needed him to serve them.

Peter, cannot believe that Jesus is going to wash his feet; and he refuses Jesus’ offer.

But Jesus tells him he needs to accept.

If we were to think of examples of people who have served, there are many we might chose.

Mother Teresa would probably be high on many peoples’ list.

Wilberforce, who we thought about with the children might be another.

But there is no better example than that of Jesus.

In the words of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians,
“When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless obedient death – the worst kind of death of all – crucifixion.”

And he did this for you and for me.

St Paul again: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly”.

Jesus served humanity by dying for us, to make it possible for us to be restored to all that we might be, and indeed to become children of God.

This aspect of Jesus’ service was of course unique.

I cannot give my life to make you a child of God any more than you can do it for me.

In this respect, Jesus was unique,

And we each must make up our minds about how we will respond to Jesus.

But there are lessons for each of us to learn from the teaching of Jesus, and the example of Jesus, in how we can give of ourselves for the good of those around us.

Let’s thank each other for the ways we do that.

And let’s be encouraged to do so more.

Prayers

Father God,

We pray for our communities of Eynsford, Farningham and Lullingstone;
We ask that you would bless our school and health centre, our businesses,
social services, our clubs and societies, charities and our churches.
We pray especially at this time for Eynsford Village Hall, and pray for a
successful fundraising campaign and building a new hall.

We pray for our communal life; and especially for all who care for others.
We pray for those who are sick and those who are struggling with the frailties
of age.

We pray for those busy with earning a living, those who have lost their jobs,
and all who are anxious about the future.

We pray for our young people; for their growth to maturity as happy, healthy
and loving members of our community.

We pray for the wider world:

For the government of our own nation and the managing of our economy and
public services,

For the peace and security of the nations; especially in Libya and the Middle
East, the Sudan, and those suffering under oppressive regimes,

For the hungry and destitute, especially those in the Horn of Africa.