

Merely Servants

It is on Sundays like this that you realise how far the Gospels are in time and culture from our day. To me, serving someone is potentially the most graceful and beautiful of realities, and able to carry the highest human significance. It can also be the greatest disappointment and the least pleasant of realities." If you have ever been looked after with real skill, and generosity, and grace, it spoils you for the kind of service that is widely accepted and expected today: ill-taught, indifferent, supercilious or even resentful.

A Difficult Relationship

A servant can easily come to despise his master, and when this happens' it bedevils the relationship. In order to protect himself against a wily and disaffected servant, a master will often be tempted to turn him into a slave; and the secret desire of the enslaver is actually to *annihilate* the slave, to rob him of his dignity and independent, to wipe out his freedom to act on his own, and to subordinate him finally to the will of another. So now we are speaking about a relationship that is a struggle to the death. No human relationship can stand such conditions, nor should anyone have to accept them. They can bring no credit on either participant.

All These Years I Have Slaved For You

These are the words of the un-prodigal son in the Lord's story, and they remind us that we can find the infection of slavery in unexpected places. I wonder whether the father in the story was shocked by his son's outburst. But are these feelings so strange to us? Do not we all find the forces of boredom and exhaustion building up resentment and bitterness in us, as we watch the years slipping by faster and faster, and wonder where the promises we trusted in the past are leading us? How easily we can lose sight of our original inspiration, and end up feeling "used and abused"! How readily, thenceforward, we learn to refuse and avoid and beg off the tasks we once accepted with good grace! What once was a privilege of service becomes a burden to hamper and crush our dignity. We have accepted the condition of

slaves.

No More Than Our Duty

If we read this honestly, we are not likely to fall into the bitter responses that would poison our function as graceful servants. Those quick eyes and ready movements which, in the old English idiom, seek to "prevent" -get there first, and predict what will be wanted before anyone knows what they want, constitute a perfectly dignified attitude in human relationships: there is no indignity in such behaviour. Rather it is the way really human relations should be, and guides us to a kind of courtesy which honours the servant as much as the served.

No Longer Shall I Call You Servants

However, there is a further moment in the Scriptures', coming in a very powerful setting - the Last Supper, after Jesus has depicted his oncoming death as the ultimate *service* - imaged by his washing of the disciples' feet. *I will no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his Master's business. But I have made known to you everything I learned from the Father. So I call you friends.* If we should not confer on ourselves any other role than the servant's, that does not tie the hands of the Lord in whose keeping our reward is hidden. He has the power to bestow a great dignity on us, from his especial love for those who have served him faithfully on earth. There can be few more powerful thoughts than this: that one day the Son of God will sit us down at his table and wait on us. That is only an image; but can you imagine what the reality is to which it refers? To have the love of Christ take us up and comfort, honour, and nourish us: "*at my table in the kingdom*". In this promise lies hidden the truth which we have glimpsed and guessed at in the holiest places of our life: the wordless consolation of our infant years, the moments of fulfilment of our growing years, the welcome and acceptance of our adult years, and the deep questions, the tentative trust to which we are asked to give ourselves in age: not servants, but friends. *Fr Philip*