

The Company of Servers 1st Festival Mass: 24th April 2010

Revd Jo Spreadbury SCP

It seems providential that this first Annual Festival of the Company has Servers has fallen in the third week of Easter. During this week we have been asking God, in the words of the collect, for ‘such knowledge of Christ’s presence with us, that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life, and serve you continually in righteousness and truth...’ Our prayer this week of all weeks is about wanting to serve God continually.

I wonder what led you to offer yourself as a server? Perhaps someone asked you and you thought you’d give it a try, perhaps you liked the idea of dressing up in white, perhaps you had friends who did it. The reasons that led you into the company of servers, into The Company of Servers, are probably very varied. But the one thing that you will have found as you take part in the church’s liturgy is that you are very close to the heart of the action. You are near the Gospel, near the altar; you have crosses and banners to process, you have torches to carry and raise. You have vessels to prepare and to bring, incense to offer: you have to be alert for the unexpected.

And though all the jobs that a server does are very practical there is also a spiritual dimension to it all. You may not be aware that the word ‘acolyte’ is derived from the Greek verb to follow, which comes up again and again in the Gospels. ‘Follow me’ says Jesus, ‘acolyte me’. Jesus asks us to be acolytes. So, by serving at the altar and holding the torches around the altar and the Gospel you are being drawn in a very particular way into the company of Jesus. You are coming to a particular ‘knowledge of Christ’s presence with us’....and you are being ‘strengthened and sustained by his risen life’.

When you take part in serving you may feel your part in the liturgy is a small one. But you are the ‘followers’, the acolytes of Jesus, who hold it altogether.

There is a companionship with one another in your mutual sense of purpose, your mutual understanding and anticipation of what is to come - all this promotes what the first Letter of Peter describes as 'genuine mutual love'. And there is companionship, literally, as you share in the broken bread and wine outpoured: in the sacred Body and precious Blood.

You are the followers who hold it altogether. You help the priest to do what only the priest can do. In time you grow sensitive to the way different priests preside at the Eucharist, you learn to anticipate what might be asked and when. And you are sometimes the only people who can keep priests in order when they are eccentric or forget their glasses or forget what happens next or forget what it's all about altogether.

There are some wonderful accounts of just how far off the rails clergy could get in days gone by without the Company of Servers to keep them on track [all described in A.N Wilson's *Book of Church and Clergy*]. There was the incumbent who decided that as he was a neo-Platonist the correct thing to do was to revive an ancient tradition and reinstitute sacrificing oxen to Jupiter. If only he had had servers to guide him and gently remind him ... 'The sacrifice of the Mass, Father.' (This all dates from the days before the ordination of women as priests, obviously!) Another cleric of a country parish - also in the days before women were ordained, I hasten to add - refused to take services but 'clad in a flowered dressing gown and smoking a hookah' merely greeted his parishioners in the churchyard. A couple of members of the Company of Servers could have sorted him out. And I am sure you could have resolved another pastoral breakdown which occurred when a vicar was drove away his congregations, replaced them with wooden and cardboard cut-outs in the pews, and surrounded the vicarage with a barbed-wire fence patrolled by savage Alsatians. You would have kept him in touch with reality, I'm sure! Many of us clergy present today have special cause to be grateful to our servers for keeping us in hand: many of us have probably received some of our best training from you, and are still being trained in a great deal of practical wisdom by you.

Following Jesus as an acolyte is not always straightforward of course and we often need directions. Sometimes if a service is particularly complicated it helps to walk it through to get yourself used to the timing and positions you need to reach and to check that you have what you need in the right place at the right time. It is possible to draw diagrams of how this might be done or to talk it through, but nothing replaces actually doing it, walking it through so that your body knows how to move and where to go. When Jesus says 'Follow me' - acolyte me - he invites you to practise.

Perhaps you have never thought of it like this but the movements and patterns you make in church can be a form of prayer. A four year-old watching a service from a cathedral being shown on television said something very strange and very profound: 'Now I know why the churches are true. The people in them enjoy singing and walking about in patterns' [quoted in David Stancliffe's book *God's Pattern*]. Well, walking about in patterns is what you do, and it was what communicated to that little child. Walking about in patterns points to a greater beauty, and a greater truth: it helps others to see and believe that it is true, that the churches are true, as that child saw. To walk about in patterns is your way of following Jesus. It is the way God can use you to draw others to see him and know his presence - the way God is adding to the number of those who have found their salvation in him. To use a contemporary phrase, it is not just talking the talk it is also walking the walk. Our salvation is following Jesus, walking in his footsteps. Acolyting him.

I think this is very clear from the Gospel story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They are walking together from one place to another. They are troubled and distressed because as far as they know Jesus is dead. They fall into step with a stranger and persuade him to stay with them when they reach their overnight lodging. And then at the meal he takes the bread and blesses it and breaks it. And that is when they know him. What Jesus does is to repeat a pattern; of walking together and eating together, sharing and companionship.

And in the light of that experience they are able to realise that he was with them all the time.

You stand and serve in the place where that pattern is repeated, in your own church Sunday by Sunday, week by week. You will listen to readings from the scriptures, you will hear sermons and pray prayers. But your part in this is to serve, to assist, to make the patterns that make others realise that Jesus is near. There will be times when the readings and sermons and prayers float by. We are not always capable of full attention. But for you there is a special call to pray with your movements and actions. Your feet and hands and eyes do the praying for you. And if you let it, this prayer of your feet and hands and eyes can become the prayer of your whole self, your mind and your heart. And in the light of that experience perhaps you will recall the scriptures you heard read and realise that you have been living them out. You have been called into intimate companionship with Jesus. And if you are faithful as a server this intimate companionship will spill out of the pattern of the service to affect your whole life. You will talk the talk and walk the walk of those who have been with Jesus, not only in the sanctuary but in the everyday world of home and work, friends and neighbours.

So rejoice in your calling as a server and acolyte. Rejoice in the patterns you walk about in as you follow Jesus with your footsteps and with your life. And rejoice in the company you are part of. You will find companions who also know how walking in patterns helps to show the world that it is true, and united, as the Company of Servers, you will rejoice in the companionship of Christ who makes our hearts burn within us and breaks bread among us as he reveals himself in word and sacrament. Strengthened and sustained by his risen life, may you serve him continually in righteousness and truth... and in the most excellent Company of Servers!