

## **Growing Together Through Service - Ephesians 4:11-13**

Just a couple of weeks ago, our church family lost one of its heroes - Mrs June McSweeney, who died aged 96.

Already a widow with six children, June started attending St Mark's in the 1980s in the aftermath of a terrible personal tragedy. Her son Michael had taken his own life.

June came from the era where you were a Christian because you were born one. But in July 1983, her son Richard explained to her that she had to ask Jesus Christ into her own life.

And, at the age of nearly 60, she did!

And it's amazing what Jesus did through her.

From that time, she not only became a regular worshipper, but found a new purpose in serving Jesus and his people here. She read the whole Bible 7 ½ times. She was a member of a Bible Study group for the next 36 years. She was part of the outreach team. Taught Sunday School for 14 years. Was on Parish Council. She did Kid's club, was a Pastoral Carer, organised and hosted many dinners, organised an Arts and Crafts day, organised missionary breakfasts, and started supper at the old 7pm service

Today I wanted to tell you the story of June's example of following Jesus because I want to you to be inspired to ask: how could God be calling me to serve? How can I put my faith into action, just as June did?

And I want to show you that God uses people like June, and people like you and me, to accomplish his purposes for the world.

In the middle of a pandemic and possible financial crisis, with the storms of history swirling around us, what are we at St Mark's going to do in 2021?

**We're going to grow together through service.**

First, I want to tell you about the **purpose** of serving. Second, I want to tell you about the **motivation** for serving. Third, I want to tell you about

the **power** we have for serving. And then I am going to get down to the nitty gritty: **what are we actually going to do.**

So, first: what's the purpose of serving? **Our purpose in serving one another is to build up God's people, which is to fulfil the Father's eternal purpose.**

Last week I finally got around to seeing *Hamilton* - the amazing Broadway musical about the life of Alexander Hamilton, the American founding father. And one of the great themes of the musical is the sense of destiny and purpose that Hamilton and the other characters feel.

They sense they are living in, and making history.

As George Washington sings to Hamilton:

*I know that greatness lies in you*

*But remember from here on in*

*History has its eyes on you*

What we've been learning from Ephesians this year is a different meaning of greatness, and a different idea of destiny. God the Father has purposed from before the beginning of all things to make for himself a people holy and blameless in his sight by the blood of Jesus Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace.

And so: to us, the church, God says: *eternity has its eyes on you*. Building you up and sustaining you is where the whole thing is going. You're at the centre of my purposes - *I know that greatness lies in you*.

There are many good and worthy things that you could do in the world. But God's purpose for reconciling the whole world to himself in Christ is going to be fulfilled in and by and for his people. And God the Father says to us: you won't throw away your shot if you give yourself to this purpose. June McSweeney did not write constitutions or fight wars of independence, but she did things in her time, simple and quiet things, that had eternal significance in the plans and the purposes of God.

So, if you're looking for something meaningful to do, serve the purposes of the Father in building up the body of Christ here so that it is more like Jesus.

We have a purpose for serving, but what's our motivation? **Our motivation for serving is that God the Son has served us.**

That unforgettable scene from John's gospel shows us what we need to know. We don't serve from duty. We don't serve to get credit with God. We serve because Christ has served us. He washes his disciples' feet.

The point of the story is not first 'we should wash each other's feet' but 'you need to let Christ wash your feet, and *then* you'll understand the meaning of service'. The prince of the universe, the heir of all things, did not consider himself above the menial and gritty task of washing feet. He was not beyond talking to children. And he served us to the death. As he says, he came not to be served but to serve and - how? - to give his life a ransom for many.

As Christians, we follow a servant, who showed us how to serve.

How does this make a difference? We don't serve for wages, or because we're enslaved, or to impress him, or to get social kudos, or to look holy. We serve out of thanks, because we ourselves have been served. His grace transforms us. It gives us joy in service, because it is Christ we're serving.

That's not to say that serving one another and serving the world in Christ's name isn't often hard. We let each other down. We face rejection. There are difficult tasks to do. Don't forget: Christ's own service led him into suffering. But he choose it freely, for the sake of God's precious people, and for the joy set before him.

At this point, it's worth checking the whole motive question. Let me be clear: I'm *not* trying to guilt you into serving. Nor am I saying you'll spiritual brownie points if you serve. Nor is your membership here conditional on your signing up to some roster.

To appeal to those motives would show that I didn't understand the gospel.

And, if you're already serving, you might check yourself - am I serving because I feel guilty? Am I serving out of a sense of duty? Have I forgotten what Christ has given me freely? If so: you might end up resenting your church family, and maybe even resenting Jesus.

It's really vital that we serve freely, motivated by the love of Christ, just as we have freely been served by him from his great love.

Perhaps you could stop serving and find again your affection for him.

If we have a purpose given to us by God the Father, and a motivation given to us by God the Son, what is our power for serving? **Our power for serving is given to us by God the Spirit, who gifts us and equips us for serving.**

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul says: '...each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift...' And then we find out in vs 11 that God's people are given people who train and equip them for 'the work of ministry'. 'Ministry' is the same word as 'service' - and 'the saints' are all of God's people.

In 1 Cor 12, Paul says more about the way the members of the church have been given gifts by the Spirit of God for use in the building up of his people. And it's a team sport - everyone, no matter how strong or weak in worldly terms, plays their part. We serve differently, but we all serve.

This is one of the beautiful things about the way God has built his church. By his Spirit, he's given us as a community what we need to be healthy and growing. And the secret to our growth is not choosing a few really strong and talented people to do all the work for us, so that the rest of us can watch them. No: what we do is we seek to discover what gift God has given each one of us.

**So:** with the Father's purpose - building the church - and the servant Son's motivation, and the Spirit's power: how could you serve?

I want to invite you to prayerfully reflect on this question, using our new **Serve Booklet** as guide. We've given everyone at St Mark's a copy - and we're inviting you to respond to the survey online. We've given you a

paper copy to look at, and if you can't manage the online survey, please feel free to return the paper version in the envelope provided.

I hope you are delighted, amazed, and inspired by the variety of interesting things that God has us doing here at St Mark's. And I hope you find something here that just says to you 'yes'.

But there's a really big problem with this booklet ... if we imagine that the only ways to serve God are written here! Our booklet is not an end but only a beginning. Each of us needs to look to our own opportunities, and talents, and our capabilities, and our inspiration, and find out how to answer that question best.

Now some FAQs.

If you are saying, but Michael, **I am physically limited and I can't think of anything I could do to serve right now?** Can I say that you can have a **powerful ministry of prayer and presence**. I have been truly encouraged that during COVID there've been several people, physically incapable of leaving their own homes and actually quite unwell, but who have regularly called people up for a chat just to encourage them as Christians and see how they are. Just you regularly being here on Sunday with the attitude of 'how can encourage someone today' is significant in the plans and purposes of God!

You might be saying, **what if I've got an idea that's not on this booklet?** Please let us know! Let's not be limited by this here.

You might be saying, **does serving God have to be at church?** No - if you want to say: I can serve God effectively in my workplace, or by working with another Christian group somewhere else, then great! But please let us know how we can pray for you, back you up, and train you in doing that.

We don't know what 2021 will bring. Few of us have ever lived through such a year as 2020. But we do know that God is working out his plans for the world in and through his people; we know that our Lord, Jesus Christ has served us freely with his very life; and we know that we are

empowered and gifted by the Spirit for building up the body of Christ, 'until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ'.