



Does God still speak to us today?' How can we know what God wants us to do? Does Jesus rule over the church now? Does the church have a prophetic rule in society today? What does it mean to be a servant?

Martin Bleby is an ordained minister in the Anglican Church and has served in country and suburban churches in SA. He is currently Director of Ministry with New Creation Teaching Ministry. In his passion for teaching the Scriptures, he has sought out Biblical answers to these topical questions. In following these through for ourselves, we may find that God is more vocal and active in our community and in our personal lives than we ever thought possible.

These six studies, first given at the New Creation Teaching Ministry Summer School in 1995, are suitable for group Bible study.

# Christ Today in Word and Action

Studies in Jesus Christ  
As Prophet and Servant

Martin Bleby

# **CHRIST TODAY IN WORD AND ACTION**

**Studies in Jesus Christ  
as Prophet and Servant**

*Martin Bleby*

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2003

As each has received a gift, employ it for one  
another,  
as good stewards of God's varied grace:

whoever speaks,  
as one who utters oracles of God;

whoever renders service,  
as one who renders it by the strength which God  
supplies;

in order that in everything God may be glorified  
through Jesus Christ.  
To him belong glory and dominion for ever and  
ever. Amen.

(1 Peter 4:10–11)

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## **PART ONE:**

# **CHRIST, THE PROPHET OF THE FATHER**

## STUDY ONE

### DOES GOD SPEAK TO US TODAY?

A modern novel speaks of spiritual experiences being like “pinpricks of light glimpsed through the veil that separates us from the other world”.

People like to think that our communication with God is scant and difficult, or only available to us through special channels (e.g. the clergy, or mother Mary MacKillop!) This leaves us free for the most part, so we think, to get on with our lives in our own way, without too much unwanted interference from God.

The picture given to us in the New Testament is very different. There we see the veil that hangs between us and God has been ripped wide open, and God’s glory is streaming through to us full bore. At the moment of Christ’s death on the cross, we are told: “*the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom*”—as an act of God (Mark 15:38). The meaning of this is made clear in Ephesians 2:18. We, who have been separated from God and from God’s people, now through Christ “have access in one Spirit to the Father.” We now have full and open converse with God.

*Discuss: Do you feel like you are close to God, or far away? All the time, or only at particular times? Is the prospect of open access to God exciting, or scary? Are we happier trying to keep our distance from God? What comes between us?*

## HOW DOES GOD SPEAK TO US?

The Scriptures nominate a wide range of means by which God communicates or reveals Himself to us.

- *Creation*: Psalm 19:1–4, Romans 1:19–20.
- *Providence*: Acts 14:17, Matthew 5:45, 6:26, 28.
- *The Scriptures*: 2 Timothy 3:14–17.
- *History: The Acts of God*: Acts 17:26–27
- *The Prophets*: Amos 3:7–8, 2 Peter 1:21, Acts 21:8–11.
- *Dreams and Visions*: Numbers 12:6, Acts 2:17.
- *Jesus Christ the Son*: John 1:14, 18, Hebrews 1:1–3.
- *The Holy Spirit*: John 16:13–15.
- *The Church, The People of God*: Acts 1:8.
- *The Law of God*: Psalm 19:7–11.

(Taken from Geoffrey Bingham, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, New Creation Publications Inc., Blackwood, S.A., 1986, pp. 7–8.)

*For Discussion: Check the references above, and recall times when you have experienced God speaking to you in one or more of these ways. Have you encountered God in the creation, in His provision and care, through the Bible, in the events of history or in your own personal life, through a prophetic message, in dreams or visions, directly through Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit, through the Church, or in the commandments of God?*

*Share examples of these with each other.*

## DO WE HUNGER FOR THE WORD OF GOD?

So the word of God is wide open and readily available to us all. But do we long for it? Do we see it as our very lifeblood?

Read these verses from Psalm 119:

Lord your word is for ever:  
it stands firm in the heavens.

My delight is wholly in your statutes:  
and I will not forget your word.

Lord I long for your precepts:  
in your righteousness give me life.

My soul is consumed with longing:  
for your judgements day and night.

Teach me O lord the way of your statutes:  
and I will honour it to the end.  
Give me understanding that I may keep your law:  
that I may keep it with my whole heart.

The law of your mouth is dearer to me:  
than a wealth of gold or silver.

And I find more joy in the way of your commands:  
than in all manner of riches.

How shall a young man's path be pure:  
unless he keep to your word?

I have treasured your words in my heart:  
that I may not sin against you.

(Psalm 119:89, 16, 40, 20, 33–34, 72, 14, 9, 11. Quoted from *The Psalms, a New Translation for Worship*, © 1976, 1977, David L. Frost, John Emerton, and Andrew Macintosh, published by William Collins and Sons, as reproduced in *An Australian Prayer Book* 1978.)

*To think about: Is this where I am with regard to God's word and commandments, or am I trying to make my own 'word', and go my own way?*

## WHEN THE WORD DOES NOT COME THROUGH

When we refuse to hear the word of the Lord, or do not want to receive it and do it, then God Himself will make it so that we cannot hear it and do it:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord GOD,  
“when I will send a famine on the land;  
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,  
but of hearing the words of the LORD.  
They shall wander from sea to sea,  
and from north to east;  
they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD,  
but they shall not find it.

(Amos 8:11–12; see also Isaiah 6:9–10, Mark 4:11–12, Acts 28:23–28.)

This is indeed a fearful thing. It is a judgement on not hearing. But it is designed to bring us to that helplessness and longing for true nourishment that alone is our hope.

This was the experience of the writer of Psalm 119:

My soul languishes for your salvation:  
but my hope is in your word;  
My eyes fail with watching for your promise:  
saying, ‘O when will you comfort me?’  
I am parched as a wineskin in the smoke:  
yet do I not forget your statutes.

I am humbled to the dust:  
O give me life according to your word.  
If I examine my ways:  
surely you will answer me – O teach me your statutes!  
Make me to understand the way of your precepts:  
and I shall meditate on your marvellous works.  
My soul pines away for sorrow:  
O raise me up according to your word.  
Keep me far from the way of deception:  
and grant me the grace of your law.  
I have chosen the way of truth:  
and have set your judgements before me.  
I hold fast to your commands:  
O Lord let me never be confounded.  
Let me run the way of your commandments:  
for you will liberate my heart.

Take away the veil from my eyes:  
that I may see the wonders of your law.

And he says:

It is good for me that I was afflicted:  
so I might learn your statutes.

Before I was afflicted I went astray:  
but now I keep your word.

(Psalm 119:81–83, 25–32, 18, 71, 67; quoted as before.)

*Question: Has God been taking the church and nation of Australia through a “famine of hearing the word”? What are the signs that would tell us that? What hope is there in that for us?*

## STUDY TWO

### WHO ARE THE PROPHETS?

One of the main ways God communicates with us is through prophets and the gift of prophetic speaking. The Bible tells us there have been prophets and prophetic ministry since the beginning of human history. Named among the prophets are Abel (Luke 11:41), Enoch (Jude 14–15), Abraham (Genesis 20:7), Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10), Aaron (Exodus 7:1), Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:19–4:1), Saul (1 Samuel 10:9–11), and David (2 Samuel 23:1–2). Then there are non-writing prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha and others, and the prophets from whom books are named, from Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel through Hosea, Joel and Amos to Zechariah and Malachi. John the Baptist is also called a prophet (Matthew 10:7–15), and prophecy and prophets continue on into the New Testament and beyond (see Ephesians 2:19–20, 3:4–6, Acts 13:1, Revelation 11:3–12).

What does a prophet do? The case of Aaron is instructive. Moses, one of the greatest prophets of all, felt that he was not a very good speaker. He had been given a message by God to present to the people of Israel and to Pharaoh the king of all Egypt, and he wondered how he was going to do it. God said He would get Aaron his brother to speak for him. The way God put it was this:

See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet ... he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God. (Exodus 7:1, 4:16)

So a prophet is simply a mouthpiece of God. True prophets do not concoct their own messages. They receive a word from God and they speak it out.

No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:20–21)

A prophet is one who says, “Thus says the Lord ...”

There are, however, false prophets, that come up with messages not from God; and many are led astray (e.g. 2 Peter 2:1–3, 2 Timothy 4:3–4, 1 Kings 22:140, Jeremiah 23:9–32). Of these false prophets, God says:

For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD  
to perceive and to hear his word,  
or who has given heed to his word and listened?

I did not send the prophets,  
yet they ran;  
I did not speak to them,  
yet they prophesied.  
But if they had stood in my council,  
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,  
and they would have turned them from their evil way,  
and from the evil of their doings. (Jeremiah 23:18, 21–22)

So a true prophet is one who has stood in the presence of God, has heard and received God's word, and faithfully speaks it out.

*Discuss: Have you ever heard a message from a preacher or some other person that has been the direct word of God for you? Have you followed it through? Is there false prophecy abroad today? How can we discern it?*

## WHAT DO PROPHETS SAY?

Prophets speak primarily of the plan and action of God in His creation. In this, God has never left himself without witness.

Surely the Lord GOD does nothing,

without revealing his secret

to his servants the prophets.

The Lion has roared;

who will not fear?

The Lord God has spoken;

who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:7–8)

God tells us what He is doing, so we can be a part of it. We are told, then, everything we need to know to do what we have to do. Prophecy is not necessarily predictive, but it can include predictive elements. Often it is simply a recall to covenant relationship with God, in the keeping of His commandments.

*Read and examine Micah 3:1–4:5:*

- *Who is it addressed to, and what are they doing? (3:1–3)*
- *What will God do towards them? (3:4)*
- *What will happen to the false prophets? (3:5–7)*
- *Is there still a continuing witness? (3:8)*
- *What will happen to Jerusalem? (3:9–12)*
- *What is the ultimate promise? (4:1–4)*
- *What is the present exhortation? (4:5)*

God had given His Law on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19ff.), and this was now in written form. It was the job of the priests to teach and apply the written Law. The prophets came with fresh and dynamic proclamation and application direct from God. Their messages also went beyond the immediate situation to include the promises of God's saving redemption. In this way they looked towards God's

central action in Christ (see 1 Peter 1:10-12, Hebrews 11:40).

This is particularly true of John the Baptist (see Matthew 11:7-15). John announced and began to see the fulfilment of all that the prophets had spoken about. If the prophets and John had not announced these things, what guarantee would we have that Jesus was the authentic Messiah of God? But by the time Jesus arrived, the groundwork had been laid, and the time was fulfilled.

From the earliest days of the human race (e.g. Genesis 3:15), God has been constant and faithful in communicating to us, if we will receive them, His purposes and actions and promises of salvation. God has never left Himself without witness. But this witness has not always been received, and has often been violently rejected (see Matthew 23:29-39, Acts 7:51-53).

*Jesus said, "I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town" (Matthew 23:34). Are we warmed and thrilled by the prophetic word, or do we find in ourselves some resistance to it? Where does this resistance come from?*

*Have you ever been in a situation where the word of God was being resisted? Have you ever seen it gain warm acceptance?*

## STUDY THREE

### THE PROPHET TO COME

In the midst of false and occult forms of prophecy, God told Moses and the people of Israel to listen for a prophet who would speak the words of God:

*I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.*

*(Deuteronomy 18:18-19; see the whole passage verses 9-22.)*

There are a number of things to notice about this particular prophet:

He will be like Moses. Moses was already outstanding among the prophets:

*If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the LORD. (Numbers 12:6-8, see also Deuteronomy 34:10-12, Exodus 33:11)*

So this prophet would be at least as great as Moses amongst God's people, with a direct face to face relationship with God. Aaron and Miriam were warned to be afraid to speak against God's servant

Moses, or to challenge his authority. This prophet would be no less awesome.

- He will be “from among you, from your brethren”—he will be fully one of us.
- Whoever will not give heed to God’s words spoken by this prophet will be directly answerable to God Himself. In other words, we are judged by God on whether or not we heed the words of this prophet. A high position indeed—of no other prophet is such a thing said. In quoting this passage, Peter uses words reminiscent of Leviticus 23:29 to make the same point even more strongly:

You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul that does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people (Acts 3:22–23)

## CHRIST THE PROPHET

At the time of Jesus this prophet was still eagerly expected. John the Baptist was asked if he was the prophet, and he answered, “No” (John 1:21). After Jesus had done the mighty sign of the feeding of the five thousand, the people said, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!” (John 6:14) After Jesus had spoken of his gift of the Holy Spirit, some of the people said, “This really is the prophet.” (John 7:37–40) The apostles were in no doubt. We have already seen Peter make the connection (Acts 3). The martyr Stephen also made the same allusion (Acts 7:37; throughout this address Stephen is drawing a comparison between Moses and Jesus). The writer of Hebrews shows Jesus to be even greater than Moses, when he says:

Jesus has been counted worthy of as much more glory than Moses as the builder of a house has more honour than the house. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ was faithful over all God’s house as a son. And we are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope. (Hebrews 3:3–6)

John at the beginning of his gospel says something similar:

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17)

Jesus himself tended to hang loose to all titles. He wanted people to come to their own conclusions. While he did refer to himself on occasions as a prophet (Mark 6:4, John 4:44, Luke 13:33), and others regarded him as that (Luke 7:16, John 4:19, Matthew 21:11), Jesus never said straight out, “I am the prophet of Deuteronomy 18.” But his words and actions certainly comport with this. “He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22)—straight from the horse’s mouth, so to speak. Where the prophets had said, “Thus says the Lord”, Jesus said, “I say to you” (e.g. Matthew 5:21) Some of the things he says about his own words indicate that he is indeed this One:

the word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.

I do nothing on my own authority, but speak thus as the Father taught me.

I speak of what I have seen with my Father. (John 14:24, 8:28, 38)

Is not this the direct face-to-face seeing and hearing referred to in Deuteronomy 18? No less are Jesus' words significant for our eternal destiny:

He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word which I have spoken will be his judge on the last day. (John 12:48)

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:38)

And we sit around in our synods and our seminaries examining whether what Jesus said is politically correct and still relevant for us today!

*What difference would it make if we seriously accepted that God is directly communicating with us in this One? Are there things Jesus has said that we have found difficult, or chosen to ignore? Where do we stand now in this regard?*

### **MORE THAN MORE THAN A PROPHET**

Jesus called John the Baptist "more than a prophet", because John saw the beginning of the fulfilment of all that the prophets had spoken. He was the immediate herald of the King. If John was "more than a prophet", that would make Jesus the Prophet *more* than more than a prophet. He is the very Word of God Himself, the one who has been speaking all along through the prophets.

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son ... (Hebrews 1:1-2)

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:14)

As the writer of Hebrews says, "how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3) Why would we ever want to escape?

### **JESUS THE PROPHET SPEAKS TODAY**

Jesus' announcement in the synagogue at Nazareth was prophetically significant:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)

He was reading from Isaiah 61:1-2. Like the prophets, he spoke not only of the covenant and the commandments, but also of the saving action of God. Here he claimed, however, that he himself was the very fulfilment of that: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21).

John Calvin's comment is interesting:

We see that he was anointed by the Spirit to be a herald and witness of his Father's grace, and not in the usual way; for he

is distinguished from other teachers who had a similar office. And here, again, it is to be observed, that the unction which he received, in order to perform the office of teacher, was not for himself, but for his whole body, that a corresponding efficacy of the Spirit might always accompany the preaching of the Gospel. This, however, remains certain, that by the perfection of doctrine which he brought, an end was put to all the prophecies, so that those who, not contented with the Gospel, annex somewhat extraneous to it, derogate from its authority.

(John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A., 1983, vol. 1 p.427)

It is clear that Christ spoke prophetically as the prophet during his earthly ministry, and that he brought the fulfilment of all that had been spoken through the prophets. But does he still speak as the prophet now? The answer to that depends on how he is now, in himself, and, as Calvin hints, on how he is related to his body, the church.

In Matthew 23:34–36, Jesus says he is releasing into “this generation”, or age in which he lived, “prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town”. In other words, the word would go out, despite opposition. At the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke refers to his gospel book as dealing with “all that Jesus began to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1), implying that the book of Acts is what Jesus *went on* to do and to teach, after he was taken up. Here we see the risen Jesus teaching his disciples after his resurrection. Then he says,

you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses ... to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

On the day of Pentecost, the risen and exalted Jesus poured out the Spirit from the Father to form this prophetic community of the prophet:

I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams;  
yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days  
I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:33, 1718)

Boldness to speak this word came from being filled with this same Spirit (see Acts 4:23-41). This word of the gospel, of repentance and faith in Jesus, was the word of the prophet that was now to be heeded by all Israel (Acts 3:11–26, 5:30–32), and by all the nations (Acts 17:30–31). When Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus, he had a message for him which showed that he was still well and truly operative:

I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles—to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified in by faith in me. (Acts 26:15–18)

In Revelation 1–3 we see Jesus as “the first and the last, and the living one”, who died and is alive for evermore, walking amongst the golden candlesticks, addressing the churches in our age with

prophetic words of encouragement and rebuke. His words come from his mouth like a sharp two-edged sword. He is the prophet now, he is the living head of his body the church, and his voice is to be heeded now.

For ever would I take my seat  
 With Mary at the Master's feet;  
 Be this my happy choice;  
 My only care, delight, and bliss,  
 My joy, my heaven on earth, be this,  
*To hear the Bridegroom's voice.*

(C. Wesley, 1746, 'O Love Divine, how sweet thou art!' Hymns Ancient and Modern No. 195)

*Read Revelation 2 and 3. What is Christ saying to the churches today?*

## AND SO WE SPEAK

St Paul said, "we ... believe, and so we speak" (2 Corinthians 4:13). How can we not speak, when the one we believe in is *the* prophet of all time, and of eternity? We do not speak our own words. Why would we want to, when we have the words of the prophet himself?

As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God. (1 Peter 4:10–11)

When the armies of heaven are revealed in Revelation 19:11–21, there is no weapon in all their hands but the sword which comes from the mouth of the one who is called The Word of God, and that alone is sufficient to destroy the beast and the false prophet, and all

the forces of Antichrist. Let us never attempt to use any other weapon. We speak the word of Christ, the prophet of the Father!

*What things should we as churches be saying now? What things should we not be saying?*

For further reading: Geoffrey Bingham, *Is Prophecy for Today?* (25 pp.) New Creation Publications Inc., Blackwood, South Australia, 1982.

## STUDY FOUR

### PART TWO:

## CHRIST, THE SERVANT OF ALL

### THE HIGH CALLING OF A SERVANT

The moment we hear the word ‘servant’, we immediately think of something servile or demeaning, something we would not choose for ourselves. Think back to the time of “upstairs downstairs”, when all the great houses had servants—do we think of ourselves as the servants or the masters and mistresses? Most of us would have been servants. Yet to be a servant in those days was regarded as a high honour (see e.g. the movie ‘Remains of the Day’, starring Anthony Hopkins—a great privilege, involving deep loyalty and affection).

If we still have some ideal of service, we may still think of it as something we condescend to, rather than something that comes to us joyfully and naturally. Or we may see it as putting the other person in some kind of obligation to us; or we do it because there is something in it for us. The song “Brother, sister, let me serve you” can have overtones of creepiness and self-righteousness. (Don’t ask—just do it!)

The position of servant in the Old Testament was, for the most part, a very high calling. When David was called “the servant of Saul” (1 Samuel 29:3), he was one of king Saul’s top generals. Hushai, the “servant” of king David, was David’s chief adviser (2 Samuel 15:34). We have the same thing in our own government: the ‘Prime Minister’, the highest and most powerful office in the land, simply means the First Servant of the Queen and of the nation. This is worth remembering. In this sense, Abraham, Moses, and David are each called the servant of the LORD (Genesis 26:24, Exodus 14:31, 2 Samuel 3:18)—a high calling indeed. The designation of Israel as the servant of God similarly highlights their being chosen out of all the

other nations to be especially in the flow of God's action:

But you, Israel, my servant,  
 Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
 the offspring of Abraham my friend;  
 you whom I took from the ends of the earth,  
 and called from its farthest corners,  
 saying to you, "You are my servant,  
 I have chosen you and not cast you off;  
 fear not, for I am with you,  
 be not dismayed, for I am your God;  
 I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
 I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. (Isaiah 41:8-10)

Who would not want to be a servant of that order?

Transferring all of this now to Jesus: what does that tell us about the exalted and eminent position he holds in God's universe as Servant of God, and Servant of all?

*To think about: How do I feel about serving? Is it something I am glad to do, or something that comes grudgingly? Am I happy to serve some, and not others? Share with each other about times when serving has come naturally, or when you have been beautifully served.*

## HAZARDS OF BEING A SERVANT

We are going to look at two servants of the royal house of David, to see some pitfalls we need to guard against, if we are to be proper

servants. Their names were Shebna, and Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, and they served during the reign of Hezekiah (about 700 B.C.). They are both subjects of prophecy in Isaiah 22:15-25:

Thus says the Lord GOD of hosts, "Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is over the household, and say to him: What have you to do here and whom have you here, that you have hewn here a tomb for yourself, you who hew a tomb on the height, and carve a habitation for yourself in the rock?"

What is Shebna doing here? How is he misusing his position of servant? In what ways do we seek to make a name for ourselves? (See also Genesis 11:4, Habakkuk 2:9, Haggai 1:2-4). What will God do to Shebna?

"Behold, the LORD will hurl you away violently, O you strong man. He will seize firm hold on you, and whirl you round and round, and throw you like a ball into a wide land; there you shall die, and there shall be your splendid chariots, you shame of your master's house.

So it seems that Shebna is not going to get to use his splendid tomb after all, but will die in a foreign land, as a prisoner of war.

I will thrust you from your office, and you shall be cast down from your station. In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open and none shall shut; and he shall shut and none shall open."

A position of great power as chief servant—control of everything that opens and shuts! So God says Eliakim is going to take over from

Shebna; and when the two of them appear again in Isaiah 36 to negotiate with the invading Assyrian army, guess who is over the household now! Eliakim; and Shebna at this stage has been demoted to secretary. But Eliakim now needs to be wary:

“And I will fasten him like a peg in a sure place, and he will become a throne of honour to his father’s house. And they will hang on him the whole weight of his father’s house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons.”

In other words, his whole family will move in, and they will take advantage of his position. It’s called nepotism, or ‘jobs for the boys’ (or girls); favouring some over against others. That, too, is an abuse of the position of servant, and of course is not sustainable. So:

“In that day, says the LORD of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a sure place will give way; and it will be cut down and fall, and the burden that was upon it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken.”

‘Eliakim’ means ‘God is setting up’; but Eliakim too in the end did not live up to his name.

*Question:*

- *What situations of service am I in where I am in danger of making the same mistakes?*
- *What is the underlying attitude that leads to them?*
- *What is its corrective?*
- *What will happen if these issues are not addressed?*

## STUDY FIVE

### THE TRUE SERVANT

It is hardly surprising to find in Philippians 2:1–11 that when Christ Jesus emptied himself of his heavenly glory, and of his heavenly immunity, to be born as man, he took “the form of a servant”. This was no comedown for him—the high position of servant is what came most naturally to him. As the servant, he did humble himself to become obedient to death on the cross. That is something he took on freely and willingly, and not under any sense of grim obligation. That was his high work as the servant of all, and it was in this that he was exalted by the Father.

So here, in contrast to the false servants who serve only themselves, we see the true servant who does nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility puts others before himself, and our interests alongside his own.

*According to Philippians 2:7, to be “born in the likeness of men” is to take “the form of a servant”. Do we see this as a demeaning or condescending thing for Christ, or as a high and natural honour? Does this affect the way we see ourselves in our serving function as human beings?*

### THE WILL OF THE SERVANT

Christ’s whole approach to life and death is summarised in these words from Hebrews 10:5–10 (quoting Psalm 40:6–8):

when Christ came into the world, he said,  
 “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,  
 but a body you have prepared for me;  
 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.  
 Then I said, ‘Lo, I have come to do your will, O God,’  
 as it is written of me in the roll of the book.” ...  
 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the  
 body of Jesus Christ once for all.

What is the relationship between the old sacrifices, the will of the offerer, and the offering of Christ on the cross, and what does that tell us about being a servant? P. T. Forsyth can help us greatly with his final chapter in *The Cruciality of the Cross* (1909, reprinted 1984 by New Creation Publications Inc., Blackwood, S.A.).

The Old Testament sacrifices were never intended to buy God off or earn his favour in any way. On the contrary, they were a gracious provision and gift from God:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and *I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls.* (Leviticus 17:11)

So the sacrifice was, first of all, the offering of something that has already come from God. “It is given *by* God before it is given *to* Him” (p.185). So also our service must come first from God, and not from ourselves. Forsyth goes on to say:

the material sacrifice was, and was meant to be, but an outward symbol of the real inner sacrifice, which was the offerer’s self-oblation. The victim, or the gift, signified the inward and hearty submission of the donor to God’s prior gift and provision. It was the living symbol of a life, *i.e.* of an obedient will ... It was not the worshipper’s invention; it was

God’s prescription; the initiative was His. It was not a gift to God, but an appropriation of God’s gift in the institution itself. (pp. 187–188)

How often do we go off to do our own thing, thinking we are serving God, when that may not be what God has for us? Whereas Ephesians 2:10 speaks of “good works, which *God prepared beforehand*, that we should walk in them.” We need to find out what these are, and do them.

So God does not need our sacrifices:

I will accept no bull from your house,  
 nor he-goat from your folds.  
 For every beast of the forest is mine,  
 the cattle on a thousand hills.  
 I know all the birds of the air,  
 and all that moves in the field is mine.  
 If I were hungry, I would not tell you;  
 for the world and all that is in it is mine. (Psalm 50:9–12)

What God wants is our wills engaged with His; fully, freely and in love.

The sacrifices were consecrated by self-sacrifice. It was the offerer’s will that lay on the altar. What was precious was not the thing, not the elements, but the act. (p. 189)

But our will is the one thing God does not have. It is the last thing we let go. It is the one place we where can hold out against Him—the last citadel of the self.

It was true that sacrifice by blood meant sacrifice of precious life. But our will is our dearest life, the thing we cling to most and give up last. Our will alone is our ownest own, the

only dear thing we can and ought really to sacrifice. The blood as life means the central will, the self-will, the whole will, in loving oblation. (p. 192)

That is the one thing we have not given, and now cannot give, of ourselves. (Like Frodo the Hobbit in *Lord of the Rings*: by J. R. R. Tolkien, when the crunch comes, he finally cannot give up the ring he has carried so faithfully through three tortuous volumes—something must happen to take it from him.) To capture that citadel, and to do it wholly by the only power that can—the power of love—must take a mighty act on the part of God. It took nothing less than the whole of the Incarnation and Atonement wrought in Christ.

So Forsyth goes on to speak of the death of Christ. “The whole will, in loving oblation” is not what is in us, but it is what is in God, in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And on the cross, what is in God entered into the realm of our human flesh:

But when we speak of the blood of Christ we mean that what He did drew upon the very citadel of His personality and involved His total self. The foundations of His great deep were broken up. His whole personality was put into His work and identified with it; not merely his whole interest or ambition. The saving work of God drew blood from Christ as it drew Christ from God—and not from God’s side only but from His heart. Christ’s work touched the quick of God; as it touched the quick also of His own divinest life, and stirred up all that was within Him to bless and magnify God’s holy name. He poured out His soul unto death. God, in His insatiable holy love, was exigent even on Him, and spared not His own Son. Man’s sin drew upon all God’s Son, and taxed the Holiest to the height. It made call upon what is most deep in Christ and dear to God—Himself, His person, His vital soul, His blood. The Love of God is only shed into our hearts in the shedding of that most precious blood. (p. 195–196)

I am not sure that I understand all of that. But I sense that He has poured out for me all that I have held back, and I am to know no other love but His.

*Has Christ captured our will for God, and made it humbly and gladly His? Or are we still holding out against Him, despite our protestations to the contrary? Is there another holy love like His?*

## THE DEATH OF SIN

Forsyth does not stop there. He reminds us that blood was shed, not only in temple sacrifice, but also in criminal execution. The judgement of God on human sin was present in the cross—how could it not be?—and Jesus bore it.

Dying as man, Christ placed His whole self beside man under the judgement of God. He was beside man in court, but on God’s side in the issue, confessing God’s holiness in the judgement, and justifying His treatment of sin. Justifying God! (p. 213)

Seeing that, we can never again excuse or mollify sin, or ourselves as sinners. We have seen what sin attempts to do to God, and we have seen what God does to sin. We are well rid of it, and glad to be free.

These things are indeed demanding, but unless we hear and receive them, we will settle for something less than all the love of God, and we will be unworthy servants.

## QUESTIONS

- *Do we see God as He is, and so abhor sin?*
- *Or do we still attempt to excuse it, in ourselves and others?*
- *Are we then doing them and us a favour?*
- *Do we honour God in His judgements, or do they still rankle with us?*

## STUDY SIX

### THE SERVANT AND THE SERVANTS

As those whose wills have been captured, and whose sin has been put away, we can begin to understand what Jesus said in Mark 10:42–45:

*“You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them.*

In other words, they are meant to be servants, but they serve only themselves. Jesus went on:

*But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*

He is not turning things on their head, or making tricky paradoxes. He is not telling us to put ourselves down for the sake of humility. Rather, he is calling us to the high office of servant. And he is the one, by his high action as the servant in all God’s universe, who has made it possible for us.

*For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

A ransom is a high cost paid to set people free.

It follows that we are not serving people well if we are not first helping them to that place where their wills are made captive to the

love of God, and their sin is taken away. Otherwise we may be supporting them in their wilful resistance to God; we may be working against God's judgements in their lives; we may be making it harder for them to repent. Forsyth commented:

There is no weaker feature in much current kindness or affection than its impatience of judgement, of real criticism, and its lack of courage to bear, or to exercise, it in a helpful and saving way. Very few, for instance, of those who love the people nor would see them wronged, love in such a way as implies courage to tell their clients to their face of the things in them which are more fatal to their progress than all disabilities. (pp. 201–202)

I don't think things have changed much since 1909. St Paul says:

For though we live in the world, we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3–5)

No one else will do it. Only the church has the vision, the mandate and the gifts and graces of God to carry it through. So that must be our first priority—perhaps our only one.

By the same token, if we know our frailty, our moral powerlessness, and the forgiveness and kindness of God for ourselves, we will not be quick to judge others, or be harsh on them. We need together to learn to be a church of the feeble people. I give one example. In a biography of St Martin of Tours (A.D. 315–397), there is a description of a congregation in which the mentally ill are present and cared for. This was without treatment by drugs and

hospitalisation that is available today, so it was probably quite disruptive. But they were there.

When Martin as a child of ten first entered the building and was shown where he was to stand in the vestibule of the church, his first sight of the Christian assembly must have fired his already awakened imagination, for he would find himself packed in among an extraordinarily assorted crowd. The strangers and catechumens were together, men and women of all ages and a number of children: rich man, poor man, beggar man, mixed up in a way that could be seen nowhere else in Roman society. On the other side were the “energoumenoi”, the mentally sick, some sitting dumbly, others grimacing, others shouting so that they had to be removed, a sight that likewise was to be seen nowhere else. At first it must have alarmed him, but as he watched the men called the exorcists working among them, he must have been deeply impressed; for in later life it was the one role in the church that he was prepared to undertake of his own free will, and his skill in the treatment of the mentally disturbed betrays a special vocation experienced when young, during his long catechumenate. (Christopher Donaldson, *Martin of Tours*, 1980, p. 18.)

Mental illness is perhaps still the least glamorous and most neglected area of need in our community, and I wonder what it would mean for our churches to be something like that today. Not the ideal picture we are presented with of a strong and growing church that has got it all together. But one perhaps that would fit well with Christ, the Servant of all.

## QUESTIONS

*What motivates us most as a church and church members: serving, or being served?*

*What priority does our church give to helping people to repentance and faith in Christ?*

*How is the life of Christ the Servant manifested in our church's life?*

## **HOW CAN WE KNOW WHAT WE SHOULD OR SHOULD NOT BE DOING?**

1 Peter 4:10–11 says:

*As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters the oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*

We see that God supplies strength in great abundance, far beyond our own. How are we to know that we are setting out on something, or carrying it through, in His strength and not our own?

Here are some guidelines we use in our Parish Council. You may find them helpful.

### Discerning the will of God

- (a) Prayer in the Holy Spirit.
- (b) Living in the written word of God (the Bible).
- (c) Remaining in the One who has justified us and brought us freedom from sin in the gospel.

(d) 'Seeing our way clear' to something happening, or not happening.

(e) Working in concert with others through the channels of right authority that God has set in place.

(f) Assurance, peace and freedom from anxiety accompany the decision and the actions that result, as a sign that God is in it.

## **QUESTIONS**

- *Tell each other about times when you have been led into something by God.*
- *How have you known?*
- *Has it always been clear-cut?*
- *What complicates the issues?*
- *Use the same questions to talk about times when you have found that you are on the wrong track.*
- *Address yourselves to some issue that confronts you now.*
- *How do we discern the calling of God to us in this?*
- *How in this may God be glorified through Jesus Christ?*

*To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*