“The greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves.” (Luke 22:26)

Tonight’s Gospel is usually the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, taken from John’s Gospel. (John 13:1ff) In our community reconciliation service earlier tonight we had the ceremony of the Washing of the Feet, and so we felt a need for a different Gospel tonight. Tonight’s Gospel covers similar territory to the more usual one, in that Jesus portrays himself as the one who serves. (Luke 22:27)

Jesus says to his disciples, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as ‘Benefactors’; but among you it shall not be so.” (Luke 22:25-26) In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus day the way to get ahead, to advance to high office, was to gain a reputation for philanthropy by sponsoring games and spectacles and by building public parks and temples. Such people were given the title of ‘benefactor’. While there were some examples of real generosity, mostly this practice was inspired by political self-interest. Thus the title of ‘benefactor’ was conferred more as an honorific, than being for actual selfless service. Then, more often than not, these ‘benefactors’ demanded the submission of those whom they allegedly ‘helped’. As Jesus would put it: “I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward.” (Matthew 6:1-4) These ‘benefactors’ were the upwardly-mobile amongst the establishment. They were often minor rulers or governors in some out of the way place. Where they wanted to be was in Rome, the centre of power. To get there, they financed their reputation as a benefactor in the more important centres through the ruthless taxation of those under them and through other corrupt practices. Their benefaction was no blessing on those under them. And so Jesus says to his disciples, “It must not be so among you.” For the Kingdom of God is not a kingdom of this kind. (John 18:36)

Jesus spoke in parables; it was not always obvious what he meant. (Matthew 13:10) This applied as much to his deeds, as it does to his words. Thus his ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey last Sunday was a symbolic way of proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come. (Matthew 21:7; Mark 1:15) It applies also to what Jesus says and does at meals. Meal invitations were a way of getting ahead. You always invited someone who was little ahead of you in the social stakes, so that they would have to invite you to a meal at their place in return. Thus you would gain entry to a better class of society. So Jesus says, “When you hold a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” — those who can’t repay you. (Luke 14:13) He himself used eat with sinners, those who were shunned by ‘decent’ people; his deeds matched his words. (Luke 5:30) Jesus’ way is not a way to get ahead. In Roman times, masters ‘reclined’ at table with slaves waiting on them. Palestinian Jews adopted this practice at their feasts, in imitation of their overlords. But Jesus says, “It shall not be so among you. … For who is greater: the one at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one reclining at table? Yet here I am among you as the one who serves.” (Luke 22:26-27) That there be no misunderstanding, or any possible way of watering down what he meant, in his story of the Last Supper St John says, “He got up from table, removed his outer garment and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing.” (John 13:4-5) Jesus, the host
of the meal, graphically behaved as a slave/servant, and then said to them, “If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done for you.” (John 13:14-15)

In tonight’s Gospel, Jesus says, “No, the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves.” In the society of Jesus’ day, where age determined rank, the youngest had little respect, and slaves were powerless and had no social status; they were nobodies. Jesus wants us to be nobodies; he is not interested in having us climbing social ladders. Greatness in the Kingdom is attained by aspiring to be least, that is, by aspiring to serve everyone else. (Luke 9:48) So, says St Benedict says to us, “No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else.” (RB 72:7) In this we follow Jesus’ own example. (Matthew 20:27)

Jesus is not really holding up to us a career in waiting. In John’s Gospel story of the Last Supper, Jesus goes onto say, “I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the one who sent him.” (John 13:16) Serving and being sent as messenger are put on the same plane. In appearing to his disciples after his Resurrection, Jesus says to them, “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” (John 20:21; Matthew 28:19) In telling us to be servants, he is speaking of us as being sent as messengers, bearers of the Word; this is to be our service. Picking up on the fact that a child has as much prestige as a slave or a servant, that is, no status at all, Jesus take a little child and tells his disciples to be as a child. Then he says, “Anyone who welcomes this little child, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” (Luke 9:48) Or, as St John has it more plainly: “Anyone who welcomes the one I send, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” (John 13:20)

Being child, being servant, being sent are all the same thing. In the power-relationships of this world ours is to be the least. In a power-relationship the temptation is for the stronger to abuse the weaker. So Jesus says, “It must not be so among you.” Nevertheless such abuse happens. So, in being a servant of Jesus Christ, a messenger sent by him, we can expect that, like him, we shall have our own trials in trying to do what he has sent us to do. (John 18:15-21; c.f. Luke 22:28; 20:10ff) To us he says, “Which of you, with a servant ploughing or minding sheep, would say to him when he returned from the fields, ‘Come and have your meal immediately?’ Would he not more likely to say, ‘Get my supper; make yourself tidy and wait on me while I eat and drink. You can eat and drink yourself afterwards’?” (Luke 17:7ff) We must expect, as servants, to be treated as servants, and not to feel put down by the experience. One way to avoid feeling put down is to be mindful of who we are in the Kingdom: ‘You will eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones to judge.’ (Luke 22:30) In the Kingdom we are all kings; our place is at the high table! Those who put us down cannot change this.

Jesus’ advice to us is: “Gird your loins and light your lamps and be like servants who await their master’s return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks.” “Blessed are those servants,” he says, “whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them.” (Luke 12:35-37) In Jewish literature, the Kingdom was often portrayed as some future time when Israel would sit down to a banquet prepared for them: ‘You set a table before me in front of my enemies,’ says the Psalm, for example. (Psalm 23:5) So here Jesus is referring to that future eternal banquet of the Kingdom. Our reward (here, as it is in tonight’s Gospel) for
doing what we are sent to do, is in being able to take our place at the Lord’s Table in his Kingdom with our Lord waiting on us, to use table imagery. (Luke 22:30) This imagery here, though, is what Our Lord actually did at his Last Supper — there he did gird himself, have his disciples recline at table, while he proceeded to wait on them, as a servant would. The Lord’s Last Supper, then, was itself a parable, and more than a parable, of the Kingdom that has come, for those that have eyes to see. Jesus might well have said, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21)

Elsewhere Jesus said to us, “The secret of the Kingdom of God is given to you, but to those outside everything comes in parables.” (Mark 4:11) The secret of the Kingdom is that it has come. As Jesus put it to the Pharisees who asked him when the kingdom of God would come: “The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, ’Look, here it is,’ or, ’There it is.’ For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:20-21) The Kingdom is here among us as we gather in his name. You do not ‘see’ it? When we gather in his name and take our place at The Lord’s Table — doing as he did in serving one another — we, too, are proclaiming that the Kingdom has come, that it is here already.

In describing the community meal St Benedict captures the idea perfectly: ‘As they eat and drink, the brothers should serve the needs of one another so that no one need ask for anything.’ (RB 38:6) That as we eat some of us will have to get up from Table and gird ourselves for service should not cost us a second thought, for we are all servants of our serving Lord, doing no more than we are bid, doing no more than he himself did. Thus does The Lord wait on us as we sit down at his Table in his Kingdom. What prevents us from abusing those who serve us is our recognition of who it is who is serving us: “LORD, are YOU going to wash MY feet?” In true humility we should join with St Peter and say, “Never shall YOU was MY feet.” (John 13:6, 8) Of course, for us to proclaim the Kingdom as come, we have to let The Lord-in-our-midst serve us in what we do for one another, but we know full well ‘it is The Lord’. (Matthew 18:20; John 13:7, 34; 21:7; Luke 24:31) Our meal here tonight really is the eternal banquet of the Kingdom; here, as we gather in his name and doing as he did on that Holy Thursday night, we have come into his Kingdom. So do we proclaim, as he did, that ‘the time has come and the Kingdom of God is at hand.’ (Mark 1:15)