

What does servanthood look like? My early sense of servanthood was shaped by Victorian depictions of tedious repetition of menial tasks and anxious obedience to harsh, arbitrary masters — not the sort of thing that many people would aspire to. Later on, I got a different sense of what servanthood looks like in the example of the impeccable team of *Downton Abbey*. An English country estate in the early twentieth century, *Downton* can only function with the work of a small army of housemaids, footmen, cooks, valets, ladies' maids, all under the butler's watchful eye. For many people today, these proud and dedicated professionals epitomize the concept of the faithful servant, seemingly always ready to accomplish any necessary task with alacrity, courtesy, competence, and discretion, from preparing and serving elaborate banquets to removing the body of a Turkish diplomat from her ladyship's bedchamber in the middle of the night.

*Downton Abbey* shows us that while servanthood encompasses many things, boredom is seldom among them. The fact of servanthood infuses even quiet and ordinary work with dignity, for these smaller tasks are also essential to a very profound enterprise. By the same token, Holy Scripture and the lives of the Saints show us that being a servant of God is an adventure that demands all we have, gives us direction and purpose, binds us together, and brings out the best in us.

Servanthood seems to be very near the heart of God. God sent Jesus to be among us as one who serves, and his divinity was revealed in moments of servanthood. Sometimes Jesus was serving others, feeding crowds and washing feet. At other times, Jesus was being served as a dinner guest or being anointed with precious ointment. Through it all, God uses personal interactions to reveal and accomplish cosmic plans. It seems that God wants us never to forget how profound a power we have in our choices, how every moment of life is full of wonderful possibilities, how much we can glorify God even in small gestures.

God's approach to servanthood also helps us understand the nature of faith. The servants of *Downton Abbey* are, by and large, a faithful bunch. But no one would say they are faithful simply because they believe that their employers exist. They are faithful servants because they have chosen to put the well-being of that family ahead of their own immediate concerns, sometimes at great cost. And they are faithful because they continually try to improve their capacity to serve. For their part, the Crawleys, the "upstairs" family, reciprocate by looking after the needs of their staff.

The head of the Crawley family, Lord Grantham, sets the tone by emphasizing that his role in the estate is that of a steward, responsible for a sacred trust and the sustenance and well-being of everyone associated with *Downton*, from the poorest tenant farmers to his closest kin. They do much more than pay their wages and offer room and board, but also take care of them when they can't work, uphold their relationships, and intercede for them when they suffer. Even when Gwen decided to leave service, and the family, to work for a telephone company, the family comes to her

aid with comfort and support.

But that's where the comparison breaks down. There are plenty of other places to make a life for oneself outside of Downton Abbey, but there is no alternative to the realm of God. We depend upon God alone for all our needs no matter how far we wander, no matter how far away God may seem to us. God knows where we are and what we need, and makes provision for us to dwell with God in eternal joy. But like any good servant, God makes ready out of our sight, preparing splendor for all God's children in secret.

God reveals certain knowledge to us so that we can prepare ourselves right now for eternal life in harmony with God and all creation. Even as God prepares a place for us in heaven, we can prepare a place for God within ourselves on Earth. The only question is, what sort of place will we make for God? Will we give God the place of honor, the center of our identity and the top priority in all our choices? Or will we relegate God to an out-of-the-way corner, where we will only see God when we feel like it, and God certainly won't interfere with our grand ambitions and clever schemes? The choice is one we must make every day, and we won't always get it right.

To be clear, I don't think the point of Jesus's sayings in today's Gospel is about earning our way into heaven or avoiding punishment. The images of paranoid servants and thieves bursting into houses can certainly stoke our anxieties, but remember that the first thing Jesus said was, do not be afraid. Remember also that while the characters of Downton Abbey are fictional, even non-Christian scholars are confident that Jesus was an historical figure. And Christians further believe that Jesus was the perfect servant of God. In his words, his example, and his very being, Jesus is showing us a better way to live, a way that will reward us because it brings to us the things that actually make us happy in a deep, enduring way, not the things that promise happiness but inevitably disappoint us.

As much of an improvement as there is from Victorian clichés to Downton Abbey, that difference is insignificant compared to the improvement from fiction to reality, from humanity to God, and from our notions of servanthood to God's. As kind as the Crawleys tended to be, God is far more gracious and merciful. Human masters can and do dismiss servants who crossed certain lines. But even when we forget God, God remembers us, with favor and mercy, forgiving our faults and calling us back, calling us to a better relationship, a happier and more satisfying life than we could design for ourselves. Even when we turn against God, God still loves us. God remembers that we are created for and worthy of greater things than we would attempt for ourselves. And so God equips us, guides and directs us, to love one another and serve our neighbors.

Living out of love, which is God's good work of service, elevates our hearts to heaven, where our whole beings will join them when our service in this world is complete. Until then, choose to live faithfully and you will find the joy of being connected to God at all times, and in all places. In this way, being a faithful servant, looking always

to God for our cues as to how we live, is not a burden, but a way of life. In the light of holy wisdom, we can see this life for what it truly is: a precious gift.