



## Ministry in the New Testament

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### Abstract

Pope Francis has brought a fresh style of ministry, including his own, to the Catholic Church. This reflects the accounts of ministry in the New Testament, which eschews privilege and position, and focuses on ministry on service and sees ministers as servants and slaves.

### Keywords

Ministry, Servant, Slave, Service, New Testament

### Introduction: setting the context

We live in interesting times. We have a new style of papacy,<sup>1</sup> very agreeable to most members of the Catholic Theological Association. Pope Francis is an interesting successor to the ultra-modernist papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and sees ministry in the Catholic Church, including his own, as a matter of service. In saying this, I am of, course, not criticising his predecessors, merely observing that their style was very different, and appropriate to their era. That previous model served the Church well through the twentieth-century, with its two world wars and the cold war. It is just that the papacy has revealed down the centuries an ability to find an appropriate way of operating to fit the times. Pius IX was one example of this, facing a rationalist *Zeitgeist*, and Pius XII another, in a very different world. Note that it does not follow from this that any given bishop of Rome must do what they did, simply that each one's ministry needs to adapt to the questions asked by the times. That, it seems to me, is precisely what Francis is doing in our era.

What I am arguing here is that the idea of service or ministry in the Christian, and especially the Catholic, Church has taken on a

<sup>1</sup> Much of this paragraph and the next owes a great deal to a hitherto unpublished paper by my confrere James Hanvey SJ.

new life today under the leadership<sup>2</sup> of Pope Francis, and for that we must be grateful. Now any ministry in the church needs to show some sort of continuity with what has gone before, and also have a link with the Scriptures, so I am to have the opportunity to consider the question of ‘Ministry in the New Testament’, and see what it might say to our present situation. Roughly speaking, what we see is that there are several biblical terms for ‘minister’ and ‘servant’, but that all of them emphasise the inferiority of the holders of those positions, even when they are cultic posts; they are inferior to God (obviously); but we shall also see that the terms imply that those to whom they are applied do not have any superior status to others in the community. That seems to fit with the line that Pope Francis is taking these days: ministry-language is the opposite of ‘clericalism’, which is a word for what the bishop of Rome regards as public enemy No 1. A quite extraordinary example of this is his apology after getting his handling of the Chilean situation so badly wrong:

As for my own responsibility, I acknowledge, and I want you to faithfully convey that way, that I have made serious mistakes in the assessment and perception of the situation, especially because of the lack of truthful and balanced information. Right now I ask forgiveness from all those I offended and I hope to be able to do so personally, in the coming weeks, in the meetings I will have with representatives of the people who were interviewed.<sup>3</sup>

This is a very new voice, in comparison to what we have been used to, and it may in part be what the cardinals were voting for when they elected someone ‘from the ends of the earth’, and for whom Christ, and the emphasis on mercy and on listening, was absolutely central, not to mention his focus on the poor, and his new, intensely pastoral, way of governing the Church.

### The background in the Old Testament

That being the case, it seemed a good idea to reflect upon what the language of the New Testament might tell us with regard to ‘ministry’, about the background of ‘servant’ terminology (for, of course in Latin, ‘service’ is the meaning of the set of terms from which the English word comes.)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I dealt with some questions of leadership in the Church in *The Helplessness of God: Biblical models of leadership*, Kevin Mayhew 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Letter to the Chilean bishops; and see Mathew Schmalz, <http://theconversation.com/pope-francis-apology-for-abuse-in-chile-would-once-have-been-unthinkable-94958>.

<sup>4</sup> Minister, ministra, ministerialis ministeriarius, ministerium, ministrator, ministratorius, ministratrix, ministrix and the verb ministro.

Then, of course, as we are more aware these days, it is impossible to understand the NT language without inspecting its background in the OT. There are several terms, some of which seem primarily cultic; for example, the root שרת, which is used, along with other words from the same root, for Temple service;<sup>5</sup> but significantly it is used in parallel with עָבָד at Isaiah 56:6, speaking of ‘foreigners who attach themselves to the Lord to become his ministers and to love the name of the Lord and to be his *slaves*’. There is a conceptual link, therefore between the cultic ministry and being servants or slaves of God; in both cases there is emphasis on the inferiority of the ‘minister’. This is the case even at Psalm 103:21, where the term refers to what we call ‘angels’. Interestingly the same is true of Abishag, who is described at 1 Kings 1:4 as ‘[David’s] attendant’;<sup>6</sup> the narrator is very careful not to allow any hint of impropriety by adding that לֹא יָדָהּ; she seems to have been more of a hot-water bottle. The same root gives us the word שָׂר, which is used three times in Esther<sup>7</sup> for the kind of courtier who gets invited to a royal banquet.

### Cultic servants in the New Testament

In the NT there are three terms with a cultic whiff about them, namely λειτουργός, ὑπηρέτης, and διάκονος.

#### a) Leiturgos

It may be worth looking to see how they are used: λειτουργός is clearly a term for cultic service. The verb is so used at Hebrews 10:11 and, slightly differently, at Acts 13:2, here in relation to what ‘prophets and teachers’ get up to. At Hebrews 8:2 the author is developing his very original notion of Jesus as the ‘high priest’, who ‘took his seat at the right hand of the throne of majesty as the *minister* of the holy things and of the true tent’. And at Romans 15:16 Paul describes himself, in a welter of cultic metaphor (indicated here by italics) as the ‘*minister* of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, *doing the sacred work* of the gospel of God, that the *offering* of the Gentiles may become *acceptable, consecrated* by the Holy Spirit’, trying to capture the reality of what he is doing.

#### b) Hyperetes

Then there is ὑπηρέτης. This term, which can be translated as something like ‘minion’, ‘helper’, or ‘assistant’, has a clearly cultic sense at Luke 4:20, referring to an official in the synagogue who

<sup>5</sup> See Joel 1:9 13, for example.

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew phrase is שָׂרָה לְדָוִד.

<sup>7</sup> 1:3; 2:18; 5:11.

handed Jesus the Isaiah scroll, which gave him the text for his sermon in Nazareth. There is a different sense of the term at Luke 1:2, where it is apparently those who first proclaimed the gospel. At Mark 14:65 it is ‘servants’, apparently of the High Priest, who ‘received [Jesus] with slaps’.<sup>8</sup> It is used also in John’s account of the Passion Narrative to refer to the ‘servants of the Judeans’ who arrested Jesus (18:12), the servants of the Pharisees and High Priests,<sup>9</sup> and in John 18:22 at the same event as in Mark, and, in the debate with Pilate, to the kind of ‘servants’ that Jesus might have had if he had been a ‘king’ of the kind that Pilate imagines (18:36). They are also the ones who shout ‘crucify, crucify’ along with the High Priests.<sup>10</sup> At Acts 13:5 John Mark is a ‘minion’ of Barnabas and Saul, though later on that would lead to a quarrel between the two.<sup>11</sup> Acts 5:22, 26 presents them as servants of the Temple authorities; but at Acts 26:16, in the third account of Saul’s Damascus Road encounter, he is told that he is to be a *ὕπηρέτης* and a ‘witness’ of Jesus.

### c) Diakonos/diakonia

The use of *διάκονος* is interesting: Paul employs it at 1 Corinthians 3:5, where he is trying to sort out the tension between followers of Paul and those of Apollos, by identifying both these figures, so important in the Corinthian church, as ‘servants’, and then expanding in the following verses with metaphors from horticulture (planting, watering, growing, verses 6–8) and architecture (laying a foundation, building, verses 9–15). The alert reader will notice, of course, that in both metaphors Paul is clearly given the priority.

Paul uses metaphor again at 2 Cor 3:6, to deal with the conflict between himself and the Corinthians immediately after describing that church as ‘a letter served up by us, written not in ink but in the spirit of the living God’ (3:3), when he says that ‘God has made us fit to be servants of the New Covenant’. Once again, the focus is on God, and those who are called ‘ministers’ are clearly to be regarded as inferior to God and to their divine task. At 11:15 Paul is still aware of the conflict and, after stating that ‘Satan is transformed into an angel of light’ (11:14), he speaks of ‘[Satan’s] servants transformed into servants of righteousness – their end will be in accordance with their works’. So it is possible to be a servant of more than one power; and that may serve as a useful reminder that, in all of our scriptures, we are involved in a battle between the powers.

At Ephesians 6:21, Tychicus is commended for being ‘a beloved brother and a faithful servant in the Lord’, so it is clear that he

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also Mark 14:54//Matthew 26:58; John 7:32, 45f.

<sup>9</sup> John 18:3.

<sup>10</sup> John 19:6.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 15: 36-41.

knows his place. Ministry-language, let me repeat, is the opposite of clericalism, and refers to those to whom it is applied not as dominating bosses, but as servants at the disposition of God and of the Christian community. Compare the reference to Epaphras at Colossians 1:7 ('our beloved fellow-slave, who is a faithful servant of Christ on your behalf'), or Tychicus at 4:7.

### Diakonia in Mark

Perhaps closer to the understanding of Pope Francis is the use of the root *diakoneo* in Mark's Gospel. We start at Mark 1:13, where Jesus is 'forty days in the desert, being tested by the Satan . . . and the angels/messengers *served* him'. Then at 1:31, the mother-in-law of Simon is described as *servicing*, after the fever has been sent packing (in an age when there were no antibiotics, a fever could spell death. It comes again at 10:45, when the sons of Zebedee have made their bid for ecclesial power, and have to be reminded that 'the Son of Man came not to be *served*, but to *serve*', followed by the challenging expansion 'and to give his life as a ransom for many'. Finally it appears at 15:41, where, quite unexpectedly, the women appear after Jesus has died, in a context that suggests that they have always been there, 'following and *servicing* him'. The noun, *diakonos*, appears at 9:35 when the disciples have been arguing (after the second Passion Prediction) about who was 'Mr Big': 'if anyone wants to be Number One they are to be last of all and *diakonos* of all'. Then it comes again at 10:43 where, after the third Passion Prediction, James and John, and the rest of the disciples who have got cross with them for stealing a march by asking Jesus for ecclesial promotion, all have to be told that 'whoever wants to become Big among you shall be your *diakonos*. And whoever wants to be Number One among you shall be your *slave*'.

### Ministry as slavery in the Old Testament

This last term, *δοῦλος* in Greek, leads neatly into our next section, where most interesting of all for our purposes is the pair of terms, one Hebrew, one Greek, that should for the most part be translated into English as 'slave', but are too often disembowelled and turned into 'servant'.<sup>12</sup> These terms are of course *עַבְד* and *δοῦλος*.

<sup>12</sup> See BDAG Greek-English Lexicon ad loc., pp. 259-60 and (obviously) Colossians 3:22; 4:1; Ephesians 6:5; 1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:9.

The word is common enough in the OT, applied as it is to Moses<sup>13</sup> and to Joshua,<sup>14</sup> to Samuel when Eli gives him a tutorial on how to pray;<sup>15</sup> the prophets who are to be avenged by Jehu are also so described.<sup>16</sup> The word also functions as a technical term for prophets,<sup>17</sup> and Abijah is so described at 1 Kings 14:18, as are Elijah<sup>18</sup> and Jonah ben Amittai.<sup>19</sup> In Second Isaiah the vindication of such ‘slaves’ is foreseen<sup>20</sup> in God’s good time, when Jerusalem is restored.

### Ministry as slavery in the New Testament

This is the kind of background that we should take with us when we read the word *δοῦλος* in the NT. We start with Paul, who is the first of our NT writers, and who flaunts the ‘slave’ word as a kind of badge; he describes himself proudly as ‘slave of Jesus Christ’ in the first lines of Romans, perhaps his most influential letter, and Philippians, certainly his most joyful.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, in the irritable opening of Galatians, which can be understood as offering freedom over against slavery,<sup>22</sup> he insists that ‘if I were trying to please human beings, then I should not be Christ’s slave’,<sup>23</sup> which is all that he wants to be. And of course, Philippians 2:7 makes no sense if Jesus, here presented as a model for the quarrelling members of the community is just a ‘servant’ rather than a ‘slave’; and the rhetorical effect of Philemon 16 depends on the word meaning ‘slave’. Paul makes a similar point at 2 Corinthians 4:5 when, defending his ministry to his opponents in Corinth, he describes<sup>24</sup> his work as a *diakonia*, and goes on to insist that he and his fellow-apostles are ‘your slaves, on Jesus’ account’. This is exactly what Pope Francis is saying to us; but it is quite the opposite of what Paul’s opponents in Corinth were teaching.

The point of all this slavery talk is that ‘ministry’, if properly understood, means that it can never be an excuse for domination; tempting though it may be for ministers to regard their education as

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 34:5.

<sup>14</sup> Judges 2:8.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Samuel 3:9.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Kings 9:7; cf. Psalm 113:1; 134:1. In both these instances, the words are addressed to cultic servants. See also Jeremiah 25:4; Amos 3:7; Daniel 9:6.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, 2 Kings 17:13, 23.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Kings 9:36.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Kings 14:25.

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 54:17.

<sup>21</sup> Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1, cf. Titus 1:1.

<sup>22</sup> Galatians 5:1, for example.

<sup>23</sup> Galatians 1:10; cf. Colossians 4:12; Ephesians 6:6.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:1.

allowing them licence to control what goes on, that is not what Paul and other NT writers have in mind. Any gifts that Paul's Christians have are to be seen as Spirit-given, for the building of unity. See the important treatment of 'difference' and 'unity' in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, and 27-28, for example, and the very similar passage at Ephesians 4:11-12 that should be linked with Ephesians 2:20-22. In both cases the key is that ministry is meant to serve the cause of unity.

Another context where it is important to understand both the Hebrew and the Greek term as 'slave' rather than 'servant' is that of the four Songs of the Suffering Slave from Second Isaiah,<sup>25</sup> the last of which sees the Slave as bringing redemption through suffering. This idea was clearly important in the New Testament, helping Christians to understand what had happened at the crucifixion, possibly as early as Jesus himself, and is picked up, for example, at Mark 1:11, Matthew 12:18-21, and Acts 8:32-35.

### Slavery in the Synoptic Gospels

The contrast between a 'slave' and a 'Kyrios'<sup>26</sup> is very frequent in the New Testament, and once you admit that at the back of most uses of the latter term there is the idea of God, and perhaps also the Emperor, then clearly Christian teaching is thoroughly subversive of an important element in Roman-Greek society,<sup>27</sup> especially the remarkable teaching where (in response to yet another *bêtise* by his leading disciples) Jesus patiently teaches them, as we have seen, that 'whoever wants to be Number 1 among you will be the *slave* of all'.<sup>28</sup>

Luke's Gospel seems to emerge from the society of the bigger Greek metropoleis, where slaves and free regularly rubbed shoulders, and you find the same emphasis there: indeed at 7:2, he insists that the person cured by Jesus was a 'slave', whereas in the parallel passage in Matthew<sup>29</sup> it could be a son. We also draw in a sharp breath at the very severe teaching we find at Luke 17:7-10: 'Which of you who owns a slave who does the ploughing or shepherding, when they come in from the farm, will say to them "quick - come and lie down to eat!"'. Won't they tell him, "Make me something for supper, and put on your livery and serve me, while I eat and drink - and then you are to eat and drink after that". Is he to thank the slave because he has done what he was told? So with you - when you do

<sup>25</sup> Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

<sup>26</sup> At Matthew 6:24; 24:45-46; Luke 12:37; 16:13, for example.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Mark 13:33-35.

<sup>28</sup> Mark 10:44; Matthew 18:23.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 8:6.

everything you have been told, you are to say, “We are unprofitable slaves – we have done what we ought to have done”.’ This is chilling teaching; and it is at its sharpest for those who think that position in the Christian community might give them status.

### Slavery as a metaphor for service in the Fourth Gospel

John’s Gospel is likewise well aware of the contrast between ‘slave’ and ‘free’. This is evident in the discourse to ‘the Judeans who believed in him’, who insist that ‘we are children of Abraham and were never enslaved to anybody’, we hear Jesus insisting on the slavery of sin: ‘Amen amen I’m telling you, everyone who does sin is a slave of sin. But the slave does not stay in the household for ever; whereas the son remains in the household. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free in reality’.<sup>30</sup>

The idea of slavery and discipleship recurs in that great Johannine creation that is the Last Supper Discourse, as the darkness presses in from the outside on the tiny group huddled together, with the sad question hanging over them of how they are to survive Jesus’ absence. The most radical innovation of this discourse (and here I make the assumption that the evangelist expects his hearers to know the Synoptics, or at least Mark) is John’s placing at the start of it, not the institution narrative, but the prophetic gesture of the washing of the feet. So at 13:16, Jesus interprets what he has done to them: although he is correctly styled ‘Teacher and Lord’, he has performed a slave’s task for them, and they are to do the same: ‘Amen, amen I’m telling you: a slave is not more important than his Lord, nor the apostle [‘one who is sent’] more important than the One who sent him’. So the slavery that is ministry is for John a matter of fitting into the profound structure that goes Father-Son-Spirit-disciples.

This theme receives a further twist later in the discourse, when, in the context of the ‘True Vine’, a graphic account of precisely that structure, whereby Jesus is the Vine, his Father the Vine-dresser, and the disciples who ‘remain’ in him are the branches, slaves are invited to go deeper and become ‘friends’. So at 15:15 we hear, ‘I am no longer calling you “slaves”, because the slave does not know what his Lord is doing; I have called you “friends”, because everything I have heard from my Father I made known to you’. But they still have to wash each other’s feet, of course. A few verses later<sup>31</sup> the same idea recurs: ‘A slave is not more important than his Lord’, here as a way of predicting that they will have to suffer the same hostility

<sup>30</sup> John 8:31-36.

<sup>31</sup> 15:20.

that Jesus has experienced at the hands of the ‘world’. That is what ministry does.

### Slavery as an expression of ministry in Acts

Acts is quite clear about this, so when in the Pentecost discourse Peter quotes Joel<sup>32</sup> to explain what is going on: ‘I am pouring out some of my Spirit . . . on my men-slaves and my women-slaves’, and adds the phrase that is not in the scriptural text ‘and they will prophesy’. That is what God’s slaves do. The same idea recurs as the small group of Christians pray, a couple of chapters later, ‘Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your slaves all confidence to speak your word’.<sup>33</sup> Once again, you see, God’s ministers are slaves. When the infant Church reaches Ephesus, a ‘little slave-girl’, who clearly knows exactly what is going on, describes Paul and his companions as ‘slaves of God Most High, who are proclaiming the way of salvation to you people’.<sup>34</sup> So we see that, yet again, the job of ministers is aptly described as ‘slavery’.

### Slavery in the Catholic Epistles

There is not much to go on in the Catholic epistles, though we notice that at James 1:1 the author describes himself, after the manner of St Paul, as ‘slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’, which sets the scene for the very striking letter that is to follow. The same idea, offering the same context, appears at 1 Peter 2:15-16: ‘it is the will of God that we should do good and muzzle the ignorance of foolish mortals, as people who are free, and not those who regard freedom as an excuse for evil, but as slaves of God’. This is, you will observe, in the context of exhorting his hearers to obey the will of the imperial authorities, so it is delicately subversive.<sup>35</sup>

### Slavery in the Book of Revelation

The last book of the Bible is nothing if not subversive, and is well aware that the Roman Empire required the institution of slavery for its political and economic survival. Like the rest of the NT, the elder John turns this upside down, so that his audience are addressed as

<sup>32</sup> Acts 2:18.

<sup>33</sup> Acts 4:29.

<sup>34</sup> Acts 16:17.

<sup>35</sup> There is a similar contrast of slavery and freedom at 2 Peter 2:19.

‘God’s slaves’,<sup>36</sup> which is a very different sort of thing; and that portion of them that inhabit Thyatira are warned against the wiles of ‘the woman Jezebel’ (we have no idea who she might be, but John is not terribly impressed by her) who ‘teaches and leads astray my slaves to commit fornication and to eat food-offered-to-idols’.<sup>37</sup> At 7:3 his hearers are invited to watch as ‘the slaves of our God’ are sealed on their foreheads to protect them from destruction; and in good biblical fashion, the prophets are described as ‘God’s slaves’,<sup>38</sup> as also is Moses.<sup>39</sup> In the liturgical hymn-singing that follows the victory over evil,<sup>40</sup> the judgement over the ‘Great Whore’ is celebrated as precisely a vindication of ‘the blood of God’s slaves from the hand [of the Whore]’. There is, therefore, discomfort in this ministry, but, looking ahead, the victory is assured; and it is worth noticing that that the slaves are described as ‘those who fear God, the little and the great’. So the range is wide (and note a similar expression at 19:18). Our last view of the ‘slaves’ comes in the final chapter, when they are described as worshipping the ‘throne of God and of the Lamb’<sup>41</sup>. And there you have it.

### Conclusion

At the end, therefore, of this gallop through the NT language about ministry, we see that the language of ministry in the Church carries with it the ineradicable notion that those who have a position in the Jesus community must think of themselves as ‘slaves’, persons of inferior status. This is not a euphemism, but precisely what Pope Francis is asking of us when he asks shepherds to have the ‘smell of the sheep’, precisely what the Pope does when he apologises to those who had suffered abuse in Chile for his mistake in handling one particular issue. We are living in a very new era, under a very new kind of papacy.

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<sup>36</sup> Revelation 1:1.

<sup>37</sup> Revelation 2:20.

<sup>38</sup> Revelation 10:7; cf. 11:18.

<sup>39</sup> Revelation 15:3, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Revelation 19:1-5.

<sup>41</sup> Revelation 22:3, 6.