

Sometimes being the special helper to someone important can make us feel important too.

When I was in primary school, many years ago, I had a teacher that I liked a lot – her name is quite memorable too, it was Miss Partridge. One of the things I loved to do was carrying out special jobs for her in the classroom. I was always asking if I could help her hand out papers or take messages to the school office. I think I must have asked her an awful lot – but it made me feel special to be her helper.

Then one day something happened that I still remember all these years later. Our class were doing some maths problems and I finished doing mine faster than most of the other children – not necessarily correctly, just faster! So, as I often did, I got up from my desk to go to ask the teacher if I could help her with any special tasks.

Unfortunately, I picked a bad time to ask - because at the time she was actually crouched down next to the desk of one of the other pupils helping him out. When I interrupted to ask if I could do a job for her, she told me she was in the middle of helping my friend and that I needed to go to sit down. But then, as I was walking back to my chair, she called my name and she told me that if I really wanted to help her that I should go and see if I could help another one of my classmates who was maybe having trouble with their work.

And I learned something that day that changed the way I saw Miss Partridge. She was telling me that she didn't NEED a helper – she WAS a helper herself. That was her job, to make sure that we each had what we needed. After that I understood that the best way to be her helper was to do the same thing she was and look for ways that I could be helpful to others.

I tell you this story because something very similar happens in today's Gospel passage. James and John come to Jesus, and they tell him they want to be his special helpers and occupy special seats next to him in heaven. Jesus answers them by explaining that he doesn't need helpers for himself – and that he was here, on earth, to serve (or be a helper) to others. And he tells them to do the same.

Now, I don't know about you, but unlike James and John, I don't believe that heaven is the kind of place where God has kept track and your assigned 'seat' depends on the score you have accumulated over a lifetime on earth. And even if this were so, probably every one of us can think of numerous people who we are certain deserves that special place of honour at Jesus' right hand more than we do ourselves.

It is also so that even as James and John spoke, they were probably not thinking of some kind of afterlife. No, we can be pretty certain they were imagining a time in the then not too far distant future here on earth where they might just be rewarded with seats of honour for being among the first to follow after Jesus.

As well as my primary school teacher, Miss Partridge, I have very fond memories of a very dear lady, an elderly spinster, long gone now, a family friend, who I and many of my childhood friends referred to as Auntie Clara, and who was exactly what Jesus calls us to be.

She lived not far from us. I remember her bathing my grazed knees after a fall on a Sunday School outing. I remember her delivering hot meals to our house when my mother was poorly. I remember her delighting in volunteering at our school and listening to the children read. I remember her teaching me at Sunday School and telling us about Jesus with the certainty I recognise now as her deep personal faith. She had a kind way in

everything she did, always accompanied by a gentle smile. Indeed, as you can probably tell, I was the recipient of her devotion many times. From my own experience I knew that she made children and adults feel safe and loved. She followed Jesus with the simple gifts and ordinary life she had been given. And in doing so, she simply served. Indeed, as you can probably tell, I was the recipient of her devotion many times.

Not that it was probably as easy as she made it appear. She was an intelligent lady who, I learned when I became an adult, completed the Telegraph crossword everyday in under an hour. And this despite the fact that she had been forced to leave formal education at 14 years old when her mother died suddenly. She became the main carer for her two younger siblings and looked after all the household tasks whilst her father continued to be the family breadwinner in a job that didn't pay well.

I have no way of knowing this for sure, but don't you think she would have liked to have at least finished high school? Don't you imagine there were days when she wished she didn't have to work so hard to get her brothers ready for school or her father's work clothes clean, or the meals on the table? Or that he had a job which paid just a little more so that the family could afford some help? Don't you think she thought from time to time that she deserved more? Perhaps she even wondered if it wasn't about time someone started serving her.

Maybe Auntie Clara thought all these things at one time or another --- even as James and John appear to be doing in the reading today. Maybe she carried those disappointments deep in her heart. All I know is they never showed. She must have learned to let them go. For all my family and old friends remember of her is that she loved us well. Indeed, over time and again when looking at today's gospel reading, it has occurred to me, Clara became exactly the sort of follower Jesus calls us to be today.

Perhaps it is, like James and John, that you and I are only at the beginning of understanding the demands of this call to follow Jesus. And no, maybe none of us will ever get it completely right. At the same time, we are so blessed to have in Jesus the perfect model of what this journey looks like at its most faithful. And yes, some of us are also fortunate to be able to look back on our lives to see others like Auntie Clara, who were wonderful witnesses to their faith in the Lord and embraced what it was to serve.

And so I wonder now:

Who is your Auntie Clara? Who taught you what it is to serve?

What other examples can you offer of those who have 'drunk the cup that Jesus drank or were baptised with his baptism'? How does their witness inform your life?

How do the words of Jesus in the passage from Mark's gospel now shape your understanding of what it is to follow him? What will it mean to you to be baptised with his baptism or to drink the cup that Jesus drank? How will you be his helper by being a servant?

See if you can find some opportunities, maybe even this coming week, to be a witness to Jesus by serving others.