Patience when on call

Jesus, teaching about faithful service to God, illustrates with a parable about a slave. "Which of you having a slave ploughing, or tending sheep, will say to him when he comes from the field, 'Come right now and recline to eat'? No, he will instead say to him, 'Prepare me something to eat, dress yourself, and serve me until I have had enough to eat and drink. After that, you can eat and drink'. He doesn't thank the slave because he did these things commanded of him, does he? So you too, when you have done everything commanded of you, say, 'We are unworthy servants and have only done our duty'" (Lk 17:7-10).

Think about that slave. He comes in from a hard day's work in the fields. Now he has to set about cooking a meal. After that, he has to quickly dress himself properly. Then he has to serve at the master's table. Finally, toward the evening's end, he can get himself something to eat—if he's still got any energy! That's a pretty hard ask. That servant would have to be a Jack of all trades. He would have to bear with not having time to himself. Above all else, he would need to be a very patient man.

There are no longer any slaves in Australia. Yet you might feel more like a slave than free. People frequently call upon you to do something for them—as if you haven't got enough things of your own to do. You may be an obliging person, ever ready to drop what you are doing in order to help someone else. Unfortunately that exposes you to being exploited.

In Australia we call such exploitation "bludging". The "bludger" expects others do the work and foot the bills that he should take care of himself.

On the other hand, there are folk who struggle and are overwhelmed. They genuinely need people to serve them. It is unlikely we will be called to such service at a convenient time, when we have nothing else to do. So we need to be patient in serving one another. Remember, the Lord says, "Serve one another by love" (Gal 5:13). He also says, "Love is patient, love is kind..." (1Co 13:4). So when we are genuinely called to serve, we serve with patience.

Patience when criticized

In an ideal world, everyone would "be thankful" (Col 3:15). However people in need of help may be severely burdened and distressed. They cannot help comparing your fortunate situation with their misfortune. So they may take the attitude that you have a duty to serve them, to put right imbalance and injustice. You can see where they are coming from, and they may well have a point. Perhaps we should be thankful that we are only serving them in their trouble, and that we ourselves are not suffering the trouble besetting them. Sometimes it can be petty and petulant to say, "I was good enough to help them and they didn't even say thanks."

In the parable of the slave, mentioned earlier, Jesus said, "He doesn't thank the slave because he did these things commanded of him, does he? So you too, when you have done everything commanded of you, say, 'We are unworthy servants and have only done our duty'" (Lk 17:7-10).

What is really hard to bear, however, is not just the lack of a "thank you" when you serve someone, but actual criticism of the way you did it. You are likely to feel hurt and annoyed at a person who returns your acts of kindness with grumbling criticism. That really calls for patience, and that's when we learn the meaning of the Lord's encouragement, "Do not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary" (Gal 6:9).

Patience when unpaid

Australia has a split personality. Australians reckon "fair day's work, fair day's pay, and if you do a bloke a favour he owes you one". And yet, Australia has a huge volunteer service. Fire and emergency services, meals on wheels to the aged and disabled, and many other services, are run on the basis of volunteer labour. Australian volunteers even go overseas in great numbers to help the third world. All these thousands of essential volunteers are paid little or nothing for their work. Their reward is their satisfaction in helping others and doing a good job of it.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great. You will be sons of the Most High, for he himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Lk 6:35). We therefore should serve even when unrewarded by people —for in the end, we will be much better rewarded by God.