

Servant of the Lord

Sunday 12 March 2017

Introduction

Lord, may your Spirit of truth and love fill our hearts, so that we may recognise the power of your Word and truly live our lives to your praise and glory. Amen

Over the next four or so weeks leading up to Easter we are going to be looking at the so-called servant songs of Isaiah. It is widely accepted that Isaiah lived between 742 and 687BC and that chapters 1-39 of Isaiah reflect his prophetic work in Judah. The later chapters of the book, 40-66, were more likely written in the time of Cyrus of Persia (around 539 BC) and later. Some draw a distinction between chapters 40-55 (so-called Second Isaiah) and chapters 56-66 (Third Isaiah). I certainly found all of this terribly confusing when first studying Isaiah as a theology undergraduate.

The point to take away though is to understand that the Servant Songs of Isaiah were written over a hundred and fifty years after Isaiah's time, in a period in which Israel had been suffering terrible oppression and sense of abandonment by God in the Exile. The people would have looked back through the Scriptures, taking comfort for example from the stories of Moses leading his people out of slavery from Egypt. They would also have remembered Isaiah's own writings which foretold the coming of a Messiah and a time of peace and justice on the earth.

This morning we are focusing on the first Servant Song which focuses on the person of the Servant and his commissioning, if you like, by God. Keep in mind,

though, this context of the contemporary reader – a sense of abandonment by God, living in oppressive surroundings, as if in captivity, with little hope and little by way of consolation for impending change. So it is perhaps unsurprising that for those early readers, the ‘Servant’ could be interpreted as being an individual or referring to Israel as a nation. Let’s look at the passage first in a bit more detail from the perspective of those early readers.

The opening words of the Song bring huge reassurance: ‘here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight.’ The Servant is specially chosen by God. Israel are God’s chosen people and so logically if chosen then unlikely to be abandoned or forgotten forever. It is not Cyrus the king who is God’s chosen one but the people of Israel.

‘I will put my Spirit on him; and he will bring justice to the nations.’ The word for Spirit in Hebrew here is ‘ruah’ which is the same word used in Genesis ch 1 v1 to describe creation – the Spirit of God (the ruah Elohim) was moving over the face of the waters (to use the RSV translation). In other words, this selection of Israel and God’s conferring of his Spirit is the same creative force and power at the beginning of the world. The ‘Spirit’ of God, God’s electricity you might say, is involved both in creation and in empowering his chosen people. And secondly, the Servant of God will bring justice to the nations. In Hebrew there are no abstract nouns, so the word here is much more an active sense, bringing people into a right relationship, doing just deeds.

The writer continues by giving some of the characteristics of his liberating Servant; quite different from what one might have expected from a Liberator. ‘he will not shout or cry out or lift his voice in the streets, A bruised reed he will not break, a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.’ This is not the image of an all-conquering saviour from the past, laying waste to the enemy. It is a

complete reversal of contemporary notions of power and kingship. Rather than might, show of force, imposing will; the image is of gentleness, sensitivity, tenderness and care.

But nevertheless the result, the mission is the same: 'in faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged til he establishes justice on the earth.' For Israel as a nation, as the Servant of the Lord, such words must have brought incredible comfort but also challenge. The message is clear – the Servant will not give up, will not cease striving to fulfil his mission until it is accomplished and justice is over all the earth.

The second section of the Song gives a little more colour to what justice means in this context. Again the section opens with a strong reference back to Genesis: 'this is what God the Lord says, the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people and all those who walk on it.' In other words, this is the same God, our God, the God of Creation, the God of our forefathers who is commissioning us as a Servant nation.

And then, reinforcing the sense of selection, of being chosen: 'I the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take your hand.' Even if you believe that you are lost, even if you believe that you have been abandoned, even if you believe there is no hope in the Exile, I am with you. I have called you. These words cut through the despair, the depression and isolation of Israel to bring them back into a right relationship to God. And what does this look like? What is justice on the earth? The writer continues: 'I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and release from the dungeon those that are in darkness.' The people of the time would have had no doubt that these

words were speaking directly about them, that these verses precisely captured their situation. When reading or listening to this passage they would have remembered the earlier prophecies of Isaiah, in particular Isaiah ch 9 – ‘the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness.’

But of course for us as Christians, this Servant Song has a very different application. Not one that we have ascribed to the Song, but rather one that was redefined by Jesus himself when he picked up the scroll in the Temple at the start of his ministry. Remember that by the time of that occasion, already Jesus had been identified with this Servant Song at the time of his baptism. Matthew, Mark and Luke all refer to the opening line of the Song ‘this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.’ From his baptism in the river Jordan, Jesus is expressly identified as God’s chosen One, God’s servant. These words would have resonated very deeply with the Jews of the Gospel times. They would have been very well aware of the significance of the Servant, the identification of the Servant with the Messiah, the anointed one, the Chosen One of God.

In that sense the events described by Luke in ch 4 (v18-20) have even greater implications. Not only is Jesus God’s beloved Son as identified by others, but here in the Temple Jesus claims this for himself. He deliberately chooses this passage from Isaiah for his reading. It is not that others say this about him, but much more powerfully, he is effectively saying it about himself. As Luke writes, ‘there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book,

and found the place where it was written, The spirit of the Lord is upon me – he has send me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind and set at liberty those who are oppressed.’

There would have been no doubt in the minds of Luke’s audience. This Jesus is God’s chosen one, God’s servant who will not falter, or be discouraged until he had brought justice to the nations. And if anyone were uncertain, Jesus’ final sentence makes it absolutely clear: today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

This simple Galilean, born far from Jersuaem, the place where Kings and liberators were supposed to come from, this carpenter of all people is the Servant of the Lord who will bring people out of darkness, out of slavery, out of imprisonment to be with God.

So for us, several thousand years later, how different is our reading of this passage? Some would argue (possibly with good reason) that contemporary society is not so different from the images of abandonment, oppression and widespread injustice from the time of Israel’s exile. Some look for a liberator in the form of a powerful populist figure – and there is no shortage of wannabes in that particular category around the world at the moment. Others might prefer to focus on the signs of the Servant (if I can put it that way), concentrating on what this passage tells us about the nature of God and the characteristics of the Servant, about the implications for us from Jesus as God’s servant.

In that context, I believe, this passage is extremely rich for us as Christians, endeavouring to live as faithful disciples of Christ in a tumultuous, challenging and often oppressive world. We can learn, I think, from the representation of

power in vulnerability, of strength through tenderness, of force through vulnerability. It is not about shouting from the rooftops, of rushing about like a bull in a china shop, or imposing one's will that will hasten the coming of the kingdom.

Rather, as we preach Christ crucified, we should take care not to break bruised reeds, or snuff out smouldering wicks. In other words, 'tread softly' as Yeats so beautifully put it. As we engage with others, helping them to understand the inexhaustible love of God, the power of his Holy Spirit, and the saving grace of his Son, let us work with humility, with openness and with compassion. The Servant of the Lord shows us that example and may we faithfully follow it all the days of our life.

So let me end with a prayer from Richard Gillard:

Brother let me be your servant,
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant too
We are pilgrims on a journey
And companions on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load
I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the nighttime of your fear
I will hold my hand out to you
Speak the peace you long to hear
I will weep when you are weeping

When you laugh I'll laugh with you
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through

Sister let me be your servant
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant too.