

The passage from Isaiah is the third of the four Servant Songs we are looking at in Isaiah. This passage may be titled The Good and Faithful Servant, or the Servant's humiliation and Vindication. The song conveys the prophet's frustration in trying to convince his people of God's faithfulness and ability to deliver them. The servant has been persecuted because of his faithfulness to the task God has given. He is not deterred but trusts the Lord, sure of his vindication.

The passage foretells the treatment of Jesus just before his crucifixion as recorded in Matthew 26, Mark 15 and Luke 22. The passage echoes Psalm 22 the opening line of which Jesus quoted whilst on the cross; Matt 27:46 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" However, the Psalm ends in praise of God; "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations."

We will come back to Isaiah as I now want to look at the Gospel reading from John 9, "A Man Born Blind Receives Sight." This is by far the messiest of Jesus' healings and one of six different healings of the blind people recorded in the Gospels. I would rate the second messiest Mark 8, the healing is unique in that it did not go right the first time; "Jesus took the blind man put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'can you see anything?' The man said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly." The other eye healings are more straight forward with Jesus either touching their eyes or with the blind just being healed with no contact from Jesus.

What does this tell us about healing? First I would say there is no magic formulae, stand this way, use that technique, say these words. Jesus demonstrates by the different ways that he healed blind people there is no set pattern or procedure. Faith plays a significant part, either in the person being healed or the people who brought the blind to Jesus. Mark 10:51 "Jesus said to the blind beggar, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight." No contact, just the faith of the blind man and the command of Jesus!

So this extravagant healing in today's Gospel reading begs the question, why all the fuss? This happened in Jerusalem, the blind man was known in the community, the Pharisees were present, the blind man's parents were the members of a synagogue and Jesus' disciples had asked a theological question; "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.' The man had not asked for healing, Jesus picked him out; we don't know exactly where Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem, but beggars would normally congregate where lots people walked past either near the Temple entrance or one of the city gates. Jesus sent the blind man with muck on his eyes to the pool of Siloam in the south east corner of the city, not near the main thoroughfares or gates about a quarter of a mile from the Temple. It would not have been easy for a blind man to walk to the pool which was down a steep path with many steps. The blind man would have needed assistance to get to the pool. It was not until after he was interrogated by the Pharisees and "driven out", of where we don't know but one can assume it was his parents' synagogue that Jesus went and found him.

This is where we get this interesting exchange; "when Jesus found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.'" The crucial point of this story comes at end of the passage. Jesus wanted the Pharisees attention to deliver a clear message; "Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

Our human condition is that we want to be healed of all of our ailments all the time. The ever greater investment in the NHS is a reflection of our desire to cure everything. However we will die, we can be certain of it, and it will not necessarily be easy. 43 years ago I was healed of a crippling condition in my knees which resulted in my being invalid out of the Royal Navy. Many other people I have prayed for have not been healed, some of whom have suffered greatly. Why was I healed, I don't know for certain, a bit like the blind man I was not seeking healing, but a friend asked if he could pray for me and I was healed. What I do know is my healing played a significant part in the coming to Christ of some people, particularly my own Father Cecil.

Last month Bronwyn told us of the remarkable story of the need she had to pray for her granddaughter and found out that the niece had been saved from a car crash. My sister Sue commented later, who was praying for my daughter Lizzie when she was killed in a car crash.

When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed; Matthew 26; "Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' A second time Jesus prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' Jesus knew what was about to happen he asked for it to be taken away but he also went to the cross an innocent man giving no defence. Jesus knew the scriptures, Luke 4 tells us Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61 at the beginning of his ministry. "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn."

The Servant Song from Isaiah 50 spoke of Jesus' suffering and rejection and Isaiah 53 continued; "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

On the cross Jesus called out to his Father; "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He cried out in his pain and anguish as he died for your and my salvation.

On this mother's day I think of those of us who have lost our mothers and also of more poignantly of those mothers who have lost their children. What did Jesus' mother Mary pray when he was arrested, when he was tried, when Pilate presented Jesus to the crowd, when he was on the cross, her heart breaking as she watched him die?

To help us understand this a little better I would like to read a few extracts from a book by Revd Dr Sam Wells, the Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, Be Not Afraid and particularly chapter 2 Does God Heal? Rather than comment I will quote the selected extracts as one passage.

Every healing story in the Bible is there for a reason and is telling us something specific about salvation, because in the Bible healing and salvation are more or less the same thing. If salvation is what the gospel is about, then healing is what we pray for. Salvation is the transforming of our future from curse to a blessing, from a place of fear and death to a destiny of hope and glory. When we talk about the salvation of the past we call it the forgiveness of sins. When we talk about salvation of the future we call it eternal life. What is healing? We know that even when we've been forgiven, there is still a mess to clear up. Forgiveness takes away the guilt, blame, enmity and shame, but it doesn't immediately take away the pain, loss, hurt and damage. Salvation means there's forgiveness, there's eternal life and in between, filling up any space that may linger between forgiveness and everlasting life, there's healing. If you truly know the forgiveness of sins, and if eternal life really has intruded on you're here and now, healing may not be quite so important to you, because healing names the gap between forgiveness and eternal life, and very occasionally the gap is very small. If you have forgiveness and eternal life, you don't need healing quite as badly. You don't have to believe that God sent the cancer or that suffering has a purpose or any of that stuff – you just have to see that God offers us forgiveness and eternal life, and sometimes in our most extreme situations we and those around us are more aware of that than ever. If you are a million miles away from forgiveness and eternal life, healing isn't really going to help you. What we think we need is healing. What we really need is forgiveness and eternal life. Sometimes we get healing, sometimes we don't. If we get healing in the context of forgiveness in the past and the hope of eternal life in the future, it's a kind of fulfilment of forgiveness and an anticipation of eternal life. So the question does God heal? Can only be asked alongside the question, does God save? And these are the answers. Does God heal me? Sometimes. Does God save me? Always. Always. Always. Sam Wells expands on this much more in his book and if you would like to read the chapter speak to Anthony who has a copy of the book.

Let us pray. Father we pray for all of us who yearn for the healing of our loved ones. Strengthen our resolve to continue to lift them before you and help us to understand your timing and we give you thanks for the life of your son Jesus who died that we may be saved and reconciled to you. Amen.

David