

I wonder if I were to ask you to give me one verse you remember from the book of Isaiah what would it be.....?

I was visiting Eve Cull during the week in the nursing home she is now in and while visiting I read a passage from the Bible. I thought I would read the passage we are looking at today and said we were going to look at the role of the servant and immediately she responded, "Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?" which I recognised as Isaiah 53:1.

One verse that may be familiar is "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light". It is Isaiah 9:2 read in many churches at Christmas at the carol service – just six months away!

It would be a good description of God's people for whom these verses were originally intended.

The threat to God's people living in Judah, the southern part of the kingdom, was that they would be obliterated by Babylon, God warned Hezekiah, "The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon" (Isaiah 39:6). Chaps 40-55 look ahead to the time when that will have happened and are aimed at bringing comfort and hope to God's people as they await exile and as they are in exile.

These words were read by those in exile in Babylon, those who as we see in 42:7, "to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness." In exile they were very much a people walking and sitting in darkness.

To his people in a dark situation God speaks comfort. We saw that in the last sermon in this series from Isaiah 40 and we see it today in a very much clearer way as God spells out, through his messenger Isaiah, what he is going to do to bring comfort to his people.

What we see today is God's promise to send his servant who will bring God's truth and salvation to Israel and to all nations.

I was playing 5-a-side football on Wednesday and during the game there was a collision between two players and one seemed to bang his head on the wooden surround to the pitch. He lay there for a while with a few guys around him and I wondered who was the designated first aid person? I mean I know nothing about first aid. I could have stood over him and said "don't worry you will be alright" but I couldn't have done anything about it.

God doesn't just speak comfort to his people facing and in exile but he also promises to act to bring that comfort in terms of bringing them salvation and that salvation will, he says, come through his servant.

### **1. Who is the servant v1?**

The task, and we'll see more of this in a moment, was to bring God's truth and salvation to his people and to the nations but who was going to do that? Well initially that had been the task for

God's people. This was the promise to Abraham, that God would give him a people, a place and they would be under God's rule so that "you will be a blessing....and all people's on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3).

However, as we have been seeing through Isaiah, God's people had failed in this task. They had been disobedient and turned to other gods which were no gods at all as a result rather than reveal God in their national life they did anything but. We see this in what God says about them, "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." (Isaiah 5:7) They had failed and so God's promise is that he will send another servant and we are introduced to him here in Isaiah 42 and in three other passages which together are referred to as the Servant songs.

Isaiah 42:1, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight;"

Now just in case you think from that the servant is different he's not. God as we see in Isaiah 5:7 describes Judah as his delight, and if you can just turn the page back to 41:8, ""But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend" they are chosen and in 41:10 "I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" God promised to uphold them. However the servant who God spoke of here in 42:1 is different and we see that in the third song, "The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious, I have not drawn back." (Isaiah 50:5). This servant will not just hear God's word he will be obedient. So who is this servant? Who is this one who would bring salvation?

You have perhaps seen the game 'Guess who?' where each child has a board with images of 24 people and their first names with all the images standing up. Each player selects a card from a pile of cards containing the same 24 images. The object of the game is to be the first to determine which card one's opponent has selected by asking questions such as "Does this person wear glasses?" Well here we have a similar problem of asking who matches what God is saying.

In Isaiah 45 we read of Cyrus the King of Persia who is described as "his anointed" and of whom God says, "He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free" (45:13). In part Cyrus is the servant in that he did defeat Babylon and allow God's people to return to Jerusalem. However as we will see as we consider the task of the servant and how we would accomplish that task we see that there was a greater servant to come.

## **2. The task of the servant v1, 6-7**

So what did God envisage the servant doing? Well in v1 he makes it clear "he will bring justice to the nations". Now justice here is more than judgement. What God is saying here is he will bring God's

truth to the nations through which a just order is established, that is an order where God is God. In other words he will bring the kingdom of God.

This is fleshed out a bit more in v6-7, “I will keep you and will 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 to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

Then in 49:6, ““It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth”

He will be a covenant for the people that is for God’s people he will be the way through whom they will come back into a covenant relationship with God and not just them but also all the nations.

So who is it who can make a covenant, be the light for the Gentiles and the rest?

The answer of course is Jesus who spoke of a new covenant in his blood (Luke 22:20), who was described as “a light for revelation to the gentiles” (Luke 2:32) and who in his teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth used very similar words from Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18-19).

The task of the servant promised by God was to bring his truth and salvation to Israel and all nations.

While Cyrus may have done a bit of that it is only Jesus who has completely fulfilled this task.

### **3. How would the servant do this? V1-4**

Having set the task God immediately reveals how the servant will fulfil his role.

**a. in God’s power** – “I will put my Spirit on him”(v1). The point is that God’s truth and salvation are worked out not by human initiative and power but by God.

**b. with gentleness** – “He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.” (v2-3)

God speaks with certainty that the servant will fulfil his task “he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth” (v4) but he will do that not in the manner of the human leaders of propaganda and force. Rather the kingdom of God will be spread by truth and compassion.

On Thursday some of us were doing Christianity Explored and we looked at the account of the rich young man in Mark 10. He came asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. In the end we read that “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21). In love and compassion Jesus told him the truth through which he could find salvation. That was how the Servant was expected to share God’s truth and salvation and that is how Jesus did it.

**c. through suffering** – v4 says the servant “will not falter or be discouraged”, and in 50:6 the servant says “I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting”. So we see that the task of the servant would not be easy.

However, it is when we come to the last and perhaps the best known of the servant songs that we see that suffering was not just something that the servant would have to cope with but the very means of the task being accomplished. We haven't time to look at that passage in detail do read Isaiah 52:13-53:12 at home. Here I'll mention just one verse, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5)

The image is of the Servant taking the punishment deserved by others that they have peace, be healed, be saved.

This is indeed what Jesus did. He made it clear to his disciples "For even the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Jesus knew what is spelt out here in Isaiah that it was only through his suffering and death that salvation could be brought to humanity.

God promised to send his servant who will bring God's truth and salvation to Israel and to all nations but the way that salvation would be achieved was through the suffering and death of the servant, who is Jesus.

#### **4. The servant and us**

So what difference does all this mean to us today?

I don't know about you but often I watch the news and say well so what? What is being shown there seems to be a long way removed from me. I may feel huge sadness at the shooting of those people in the church in Charleston but it is fortunately a long way removed from us here in the UK.

So what about this stuff which after all was written nearly 3000 years ago?

Well God promised a servant to come and bring his truth and salvation and that promise came true in Jesus. So the first point of relevance is have we received that salvation?

I have in my study at home a football. It no longer serves as a football indeed it never has served as a football. It has on it the signatures of the players who in 2005 had the great honour to represent Kettering Town. The ball was a gift to me from the children at one of the schools where I had done assemblies in my previous parish. It was a gift which had obviously been thought about and matched to me and I value it.

Friends the Son of God came into our world and died on a cross to offer you and I the gift of eternal life. Have you accepted that gift or are you in effect saying to God that gift of Jesus' life is of no value to me? The servant, Jesus, came as a "light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (49:6) have we accepted that salvation?

I realise that many here and probably many who will listen to this on download have found salvation in Jesus if so these chapters with their focus on the Servant still have a lot to say to us.

For if his task was to be a “light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” then that task has been passed on to us.

Many of us will be only too well aware of Jesus commission to his disciples just before he ascended into heaven, “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).

The task of the Servant has been handed on to the church that bears the name of Jesus.

It is us who have this task in 2015.

On Wednesday I met with the co-ordinators, those who are responsible for the differing ministries in our church. We were thinking about how we progress our desire to grow to a church with a membership of 250 by the end of 2018. We recognised that in effect if at the annual meeting earlier this year our electoral roll was 144 that means about 25 new members a year. That is our task and I mean our the task of each one of us for, as someone pointed out, if we each brought one new person to Christ Church in the next 3 years we would fulfil that aim.

We are, as Paul often referred to himself, Servants of Christ through whom Christ continues his task of bringing salvation to all nations. Are you taking that seriously?

How do we do it?

Well in general the same way that God spoke about in Isaiah and the same way that Jesus did.

**a. we rely on the power of God.** Not just asking God in prayer to help us as we seek to share our faith but trusting in the gospel which is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

**b. we do it with gentleness.** That is we share our faith from love and compassion because we want the best for our families, friends and contact people and the fullness of life is to be found only in Jesus. Going back to Isaiah 42:2-3, we don’t shout or batter people but we love and share and explain and pray that others may see the God who loves them.

**b. we are willing to suffer.** That is we are prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of people’s salvation. For some like Michael and Nicki Duncalfe our mission partners in Papua New Guinea that sacrifice has meant leaving home and family and serving for many years in that very different situation. For others of us it may mean the sacrifice of time and energy as we build relationships with people and practically share Christ’s love. It may mean suffering misunderstanding as people fail to understand our faith and why we wish to share it. It may mean we find ourselves cut out of some friendship groups because we see things differently or just because we are in church on Sunday when they are doing other things.

We are called to be Servants of God and of the gospel and as such we follow Jesus in the way he shared the gospel.

Isaiah spoke comfort to those sitting and walking in darkness to say he would send his servant to bring God's truth and salvation to Israel and to all nations.

Jesus came and fulfilled that task but he also hands the baton on to us in our day to continue bringing God's truth and salvation to Israel and to all nations. May we take seriously that task and may God bless in fulfilling it.