

The Servant's Mission

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on March 14th 1999.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Servant's Mission and is from Isaiah chapter 49 verses 1 to 13.

You may like to have the passage from Isaiah 49 open, page 592. And for those who are here for the first time, this is continuing our sermon series through the prophet Isaiah over recent weeks.

And I'll pray that God's word will be heard and heeded by us and applied to our hearts and lives. God, we pray that you'll speak to us through your word, write it on our hearts, that we may not only hear it but understand it and obey it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. The quest for peace is so elusive, it seems. Everywhere there are glimpses of some peace and yet a forlorn hope so often.

[1 : 1 8] Ireland, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Timor, Latin America, Israel, Palestine, the list goes on and on. For some branches of the Christian church, world peace is their primary goal.

And they see that to be the gospel of Jesus Christ, to bring peace to the world. There's a branch of theology called liberation theology, which is about bringing oppressed peoples out from their oppressors and setting them free.

Sort of on the model of ancient Israel coming out from the oppression and slavery of Egypt and bringing it to freedom in a promised land. And sometimes the churches that follow the liberation theologians and this quest for world peace can become subsumed into politics.

That that is the sum total of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If that were the case, that the gospel is about political freedom, then Isaiah would have finished his book by now.

But at the end of the previous chapter, which we looked at two weeks ago, after promising the people of Israel who were slaves in Babylon, liberation and bringing them into their promised land again back to Jerusalem, the chapter ended with the statement, but there is no peace for the wicked.

[2 : 5 1] There may be some political peace, but there is a lasting lack of peace for humanity that is estranged from God.

At the time of this, these words are being applied, the people of God, the nation of Israel or Judah, the Jews or Israelites, are in Babylon. Their land has been conquered.

They are captive in Babylon. They've been promised in these earlier chapters of Isaiah that Babylon itself would be conquered by a Persian who would let them go free and go back to their promised land, a man called Cyrus, and that happened in about 539 BC.

But the problem is that bringing the people of Israel back to their land would not solve their greatest problem. It may bring them and restore them to land, but it would not necessarily restore them to God.

Their sin would still be a barrier from God that would need to be dealt with. God had promised a servant, Cyrus, to bring them geographical or political freedom and restoration to their land.

- [4 : 03] Now, in this chapter onwards, God speaks of another and greater servant who will deal with their greater need, restoration to God himself.
- The servant speaks at the beginning of the chapter. Listen to me, O coastland.
- Pay attention, you peoples from far away. That's a very bold claim. This is some extraordinary person. Because in the Bible, almost invariably, people say, not listen to me, but listen to God.
- This is the word of the Lord. Thus the Lord says, listen to him. But this servant says, listen to me. In Isaiah, the only person Isaiah ever directs people to listen to is God.
- So when now we have this servant, this unnamed, unknown servant speaking, and he says, listen to me, he is claiming some special authority. Something that seems to approach the authority of God himself.
- [5 : 13] Notice also whom he addresses. It's not, you Jews and Israelites, listen to me, O coastlands. Pay attention to you peoples far away.
- This is Australia being addressed. From the point of view of Babylon and Palestine, you can't get much further than Australia. In other places where the same people are addressed, it's so distant islands.
- Now, of course, they're not addressing Australia per se, but he's addressing, you see, more than just Jews. He's addressing the nations of the world, who are scattered all over the world.
- He's addressing not only Jews, the people of God of the Old Testament, but what are called Gentiles, the peoples of the world as well. And that also is remarkable.
- There are very few places in the Old Testament where all the nations of the world are explicitly addressed. Even before he was born, God had called him to this task.
- [6 : 14] This is somebody clearly special. Then we're told at the end of verse 1, while yet in his mother's womb, God named him.
- And then Isaiah teases us because he doesn't tell us his name. He named me. And we want to know his name, but it's not there just yet. What's this servant got to do?
- The task is described in verse 2, or implied at, at least. He made my mouth like a sharp sword. What's his weapon? Not a literal sword.
- Not chariots and horses. Not military might. Or political power. His weapon is his mouth. This servant will speak.
- His words are important. That's why he begins the chapter by saying, listen to me. Listen to me. My words are significant and important.
- [7 : 20] Now to this point, as we've seen in recent weeks, Israel, the people of God, has been consistently deaf. Determined to be deaf to God's word. And we saw that especially in chapter 48 two weeks ago.
- That they refused time after time after time to listen to God's word. And God is getting fed up with their deafness. And when we begin this chapter and it says, listen to me, we could well think, well, what's the point?
- They're being deaf all the time. They're not going to listen to him. But now we get a sense that maybe something's about to change. Because his mouth is like a sword that pierces.
- And we're told that he's also like a polished arrow. The idea is that these words of this servant now at last will pierce through the deafness of God's people.
- Indeed, the people of the world. Now at last their deafness will be dealt with and done away with. Who has Isaiah in mind here?

[8 : 31] I suspect that he wasn't quite sure. I suspect that he expected somebody to be raised up by God in the very near future who would do this and restore the people to God.

700 BC these words may well have been spoken. Thereabouts. Give or take a decade or two. And yet ultimately these words point to somebody 700 years later.

to Jesus Christ. There's a time when God's own voice was heard from heaven speaking to a gathered crowd around Jesus and saying to the crowd listen to him.

Picking up this idea of listen to me God himself saying listen to him. He is the one whose words are worth listening to.

And then in the last book of the Bible the book of Revelation we get a very strange description of Jesus Christ. Part of that description says this from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.

[9 : 45] Clearly the same person. In the end Isaiah's description is pointing to Jesus Christ. Listen to him. his word being like a sword and being like an arrow suggests as I've said piercing through the deafness.

The sword is an implement a weapon that you use close up but the arrow is for more distant enemy. The idea perhaps being that the sword is in a sense for those close by the Jews metaphorically and those far off the Gentiles the non-Jews the nations of the world the arrow but it's the same word that goes to those near and to those far.

And the arrow is polished. In that sense it's like a new cricket ball. You know that when well you may know I hope you know that when an inning starts and the ball is new it's the fast ballers because they need some accuracy but when the ball loses its smoothness and is a bit rough that's when the spinners come off because the roughness means that they can use the deflection and the variation in the ball.

This arrow is polished that is it's not going to be deflected by being rough that is it's an accurate arrow. It will pierce where it's directed to. It will be effective.

It's not just an arrow flung willy-nilly into the world but God will pierce the deafness of people deliberately and specifically and accurately he will fulfil what he sets out to do.

[11 : 22] The other thing in verse 2 about this servant is notice how he's hidden. He made my mouth like a sharp sword in the shadow of his hand he hid me.

A sword may not be that big and it may have been hidden in the person's hand so that somebody couldn't see it. And then he made me a polished arrow in his quiver he hid me away. The idea is of God protecting this servant maybe a close relationship between God and the servant but more than that God hiding the servant away until the right time.

700 BC the servant was not revealed. It took another 700 or more years before God took him out of his quiver to reveal him to the world.

God you see is waiting for the right time and at the right time he sent this servant. Well at last his name is mentioned in verse 3 and though we know and this is clearly about Jesus Christ that's not the name that's given here and he said to me you are my servant Israel in whom I will be glorified.

Why name him Israel? That's the nation's name. I think in this there's a rebuke going on but also a description of his purpose as we'll see.

[12 : 47] The people have failed to live up to their name, Israel. The people have by their own sin in effect renounced their privilege and rights to be God's special people.

We saw that at the beginning of chapter 48 two weeks ago. They seem to practice on the surface all the right things to do with their special privileges of God's people but not in truth or right.

They've renounced their claim in effect to be the real Israel, to be God's special people. But this one will do and be what the nation was meant to do and be.

He will be the ideal people of God, an individual only and therefore there's a sense of rebuke to the nation. Look at my servant, that's what you're meant to be like and you've failed to be and do what he is and does.

And notice also that in this servant God will be glorified. Again, a unique statement about a person in the Old Testament. But when we consider the New Testament we see one person in whom God is glorified.

[14 : 00] Again, Jesus Christ. the one who the beginning of John's Gospel tells us revealed the glory of God the Father to the world. The one who in John 17 said in his prayer, I have revealed your glory.

And he wasn't boasting or lying. And yet this servant, this one whom we may think and must think is great and glorious, nonetheless his words in verse 4 I have laboured in vain.

I've spent my strength for nothing and vanity. He's saying what I've done is a waste of time. Now maybe this is referring to the past history of God's people because they've been deaf and God's word has not actually got through to their hearts.

But also in the end it's applying to this future servant. That at some point in his life and mission there will be this point of feeling of futility and frustration and ineffectiveness as though all he came to do was a waste of time.

It wasn't effective. He's failed to accomplish what God has sent him to do. And yet he goes on to say in the same verse, yet surely my cause is with the Lord and my reward with my God.

[15 : 24] There is a statement of trust and confidence. And that's not the opposite or contradictory to a statement of futility or frustration. The servant clearly at some point will feel as though he spent his life for nothing.

And yet he knows that because God has called him to this task and he's been faithful to that call, despite the apparent feelings of futility, his mission will be successful under God.

as Jesus was dying on the cross, he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And there is a sense of futility there, a sense of abandonment by God, maybe a sense of ineffectiveness. But Jesus there is quoting a psalm, Psalm 22, and that psalm finishes with the same sort of statement of confidence that this verse also completes itself with, a statement of confidence that God's cause will be successful and vindicated.

Jesus didn't think that he was a complete failure on the cross. To all intents and purposes and appearances it looked as though he was, that's what he's expressing. But his final words on the cross were a triumphant and confident cry.

[16 : 52] It is finished. It's done. The job is fulfilled. The servant mission is spelt out in verses five and six.

In verse five we're told, and now the Lord says, that is the Lord who formed me in the womb to be his servant. This is the task to bring Jacob back to him and that Israel might be gathered to him.

Now that's the one task. It said twice, Jacob and Israel are interchangeable names at times in the Old Testament for the people of God and also for the grandson of Abraham. Notice that the task is to bring Jacob back to, not the land or Jerusalem, back to him, God, the person.

This is spiritual restoration. It was the Persian leader Cyrus' job to bring the people to the land, but that was insufficient as we've seen. It's this servant's job to bring the people back to God himself, spiritually, by piercing through their deafness and bringing them to a point of obedience to God's word.

His job will be to gather Israel. The sense is that Israel are like sheep that have gone astray. And this servant will be a shepherd type character who will gather God's people and bring them back to God, as we've already seen hints of that in recent weeks as well.

[18 : 25] How this is done, you'll have to wait until Good Friday when we get to chapter 53. Ultimately though, again, this is describing Jesus Christ, the one who said, I am the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life, the sheep, the one who restores sheep back to God himself.

But that's not just God's, this servant's task. It's not only his task to go to Jewish or Israelite people, that is to go to the people of God of the Old Testament.

Because we've already seen in verse 1 the hints that his call is to the Gentiles of the world and that becomes explicit in verse 6. God says to this servant, it's too like a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel.

We might think that's an enormous task and it is. But for this servant, God says that's too little a task for you. You can do more than that. His task is complemented at the end of verse 6.

I will give you as a light to the nations to be my salvation to reach to the ends of the earth. Not only to restore the people of God, the Jews or Israelites, but to bring salvation to the world.

[19 : 45] What an enormous task that is. It was hard enough surely to bring back estranged Israel to God, but to reconcile the world to God, is the task of this servant.

Now the point of saying this makes clearer the point of his name Israel. Because the nations' task from the beginning in the Old Testament was to be a light to bring the nations to God.

That's why God chose the Jews, not because he loved them and he couldn't care less about the world, but because he wanted to use the Jews or the descendants of Abraham to bring the world back to himself.

So when he chose Abraham in Genesis 12 and made him various promises, one of the promises was that through you and your descendants the world will be blessed. And Israel, the descendants of Abraham, had failed to do that.

And then on Mount Sinai, when he gave them the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law, he said to them, you are a royal priesthood. The idea of priesthood is mediation.

[20 : 52] That is, you, the nation of Israel, are to be mediators between God and the world. And the way that they would do that, we are told later in say Deuteronomy 4, is that by keeping God's law and trusting in God, their nation would be so prosperous and so righteous that it would be like a beacon in the world that would attract the nations to find out about the God of this nation.

But the trouble was Israel never did that. Oh, glimpses of it just occasionally, say in Solomon's glory when the Queen of Sheba comes from a far away nation to pay homage to Solomon and to his God.

But apart from rare examples like that, a fundamental failure on the part of the people of God. They were not the light they were meant to be. And the nations did not come to their God as they were meant to do.

but this servant, who is also called Israel, the ideal Israel, will do what they failed to do. He will bring not only the people of God, the Jews and Israelites, back to God, but the nations of the world as well.

No wonder then, when Jesus was just a child and Simeon spoke of him in the temple, he said, this is the light to the Gentiles, the salvation for the world.

[22 : 15] in Luke chapter 2. No wonder then, that when Jesus was risen and before his ascension, he said to his disciples, go into all the world with my gospel.

Now, typical of God in the Bible, he works in ways that we do not expect. We would expect this servant to arrive in fanfare and trumpet to sound and triumph and glory, that the world would quickly see.

that this was God's chosen servant and follow him. But no, that's not the case. Verse 7 tells us what we already know from Jesus' own life. Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to the servant he's speaking, to one deeply despised, abhorred by nations, the slave of rules.

A funny place for God's servant to find himself. God's love. But it's true, isn't it? These are strong words, deeply despised, detested, hated, persecuted, enslaved by the rulers of the world.

But that's not the end of the story, as we know, because verse 7b reverses all that. Rather than the nations of the world lording it over and despising the servant of God, it is the servant to whom they will look up and prostrate themselves.

[23 : 44] Rather than being the subject of mockery of the rulers of the world, we find at the end of verse 7 that kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves before this servant of God.

We know that to be true in Jesus Christ, don't we? The one who is despised and rejected, hung up on a cross in shame and mockery by the rulers of the world.

And that one who rose, who ascended to the right hand of the Father in heaven, and whom one day we know that every knee shall bow down and worship him and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of all to the glory of God the Father.

One day this word will be perfectly fulfilled, although now it's in part fulfilled in our world. Amen. Amen. Amen. The final paragraph verses 8 to 13 describes the servant's rescue of his people.

In part it functions as an assurance for the servant of his task. In part it functions as an assurance for Isaiah's readers that this really will happen. It looks as though it's just describing the journey back from Babylon to Jerusalem, a physical geographical journey through the desert.

[25 : 05] But the reality is it's speaking of a spiritual return. It uses the geographical categories of the exodus, of going through the wilderness to the promised land, but it's speaking spiritually about the journey back to God himself.

This dawn of salvation, this era of God's hope as it's described in verse 8, involves a number of things. It involves freedom at the beginning of verse 9, saying to prisoners, come out.

To those who are in darkness, show yourselves. That's liberation and freedom that the era of salvation brings. But more than just freedom, there's also provision.

They shall feed along the ways, and on all the bare heights shall be their pasture. You don't normally pasture on bare heights where there's no grass or food for animals and people, but here this is God's miraculous provision spiritually for his people.

They shall not hunger or thirst, he says. Not only is there freedom and provision, there's protection as well. The scorching heat of the wind or the sun shall not strike them down, verse 10 says.

[26 : 17] Moreover, there's mercy as well. For he who has pity on them will lead them and by springs of water will guide them. There's God's mercy involved in forgiveness of these people.

More than that, there's also ease of return. It's not a difficult thing to return to God when this servant is about his job. So verse 11 says, And I will turn all my mountains into a road and my highways shall be raised up.

Like a new eastern freeway going through, it becomes easy to get from Richmond to Doncaster. And now beyond. And it won't matter how far away you are from God, geographically or spiritually.

Verse 12 says, There is salvation for all. Lo, these shall come from far away. And lo, these from the north and from the west and from the land of Saini which presumably is to the south or the east or both.

It doesn't matter where you're from or how far away you are, this servant's mission is for you too. No wonder verse 13 is a hymn of praise to God for his salvation.

[27 : 22] Where is this fulfilled? When is it fulfilled? There are people who argue that it's fulfilled since 1948 in the modern state of Israel.

But all of a sudden from 1948 onwards we've seen people from all countries coming to Jerusalem to live. There are Christians who believe that.

Christians who pour millions of dollars into the nation of Israel because they believe that that is the fulfilment of God's prophecies of the Old Testament. And surely and certainly there are many prophecies in the Old Testament that have Jerusalem as some sort of focus.

Verse 14 goes on after today's final verse. But Zion said, Zion being another name for Jerusalem. But we must not get confused here.

Because this is speaking about a spiritual return to God, not a geographical return. And the New Testament tells us where this is fulfilled. Not in Jerusalem that lies a few hundred metres above the Dead Sea and west-east rather of the Mediterranean Sea.

[28 : 33] But rather in the heavenly Jerusalem. The city that comes down from heaven at the very end of the Bible in Revelation 21 and 22. That's where this is fulfilled.

And in that picture of heaven in the book of Revelation we see some of the words from this very chapter of the people who are gathered around the throne of heaven. The throne of God. The throne of Jesus Christ.

And God says of them, For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple. And the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more and thirst no more.

The sun will not strike them nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of their throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of the water of life. Familiar words? Because they come from this passage in Isaiah.

You see where it's fulfilled? Not in modern Israel. The people who think that don't read their New Testament. It's fulfilled in heaven where God's people are spiritually restored to God through the work of this servant, Jesus Christ.

[29 : 40] That's whom Isaiah is speaking about. The one who was despised and rejected on a cross but risen and ascended and glorified in heaven. The one who does restore estranged peoples, Jew and Gentile, to God spiritually.

The one whose word does pierce through spiritual deafness and bring life to hearts. 700 years before Bethlehem these words were spoken by Isaiah.

And for 700 years God kept hidden his servant until the right time when he became a person and lived and spoke and died.

Revealed for the world to see. If the salvation promised here is to apply to us then the opening words of the chapter must apply to us too.

Listen to me, Jesus says. But if we don't, if we continue in deafness to Jesus' word, then the end of the previous chapter still stands.

[30 : 46] There is no peace for the wicked. We have little choice then but to listen to him.