

The Servant Insulted

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of March 1999.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Servant Insulted and is from Isaiah chapter 50 verses 4 to 11.

And you may like to have open the page from Isaiah chapter 50, page 594 in the Black Pew Bibles which are in front of you, under the seat in front of you.

And this is part of a sermon series through the book of Isaiah that we've been looking at over the last, well, many weeks really. 443 years ago today, 21st of March 1556, in Oxford, Archbishop Cranmer was burnt at the stake.

543 years ago, he'd been given every opportunity and encouragement to renounce his Protestant faith and therefore to save his life.

[1 : 23] He'd been made Archbishop of Canterbury by Henry VIII, had remained Archbishop of Canterbury through the reign of Edward VI, and then when Edward VI died, young, his older sister Mary I became Queen.

A staunch Catholic. And that spelled the inevitable end for Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. In the lead up to his death, he was insulted, mocked, disgraced and publicly humiliated.

And as he stood manacled with the flames around him, he committed himself with confidence to his God and Saviour.

Despite earlier waverings to the end, he did not waver or falter. He did not bow to pressure. He did not turn away from his commitment to the Gospel of the Bible.

Why? Why? Why did he think it was worth holding firm to the truths of the Bible, even though it meant a painful death in flames?

[2 : 44] Because he trusted in God's ultimate vindication. He trusted that even though he was wrongly accused of heresy, and was wrongly being put to death, he trusted that in God's heavenly court, he would be vindicated and acquitted, and welcomed into God's kingdom.

Because he trusted that his enemies would ultimately perish in the day of God's judgment. That even though in 1556 for a time, it would only last another two and a bit years, his enemies and the enemies of the Gospel seemed to be dominant and prevailing, he trusted that in God's judgment and justice, those things would be upturned.

Archbishop Cranmer did not see himself as acting heroically, but rather simply following the model of Jesus Christ, God's perfect servant.

And that is the model in this passage in Isaiah chapter 50. It's the model that Isaiah commends us to look towards, even to emulate and follow.

The servant who is the focus of this passage in Isaiah has already been revealed in previous passages. Indeed, this is the third scene.

[4 : 15] Some weeks ago we saw in chapter 42, the first announcement of this coming servant. Not the servant who would bring the people from their exile in Babylon back to the promised land, but rather the servant who would bring the people back to God himself, a spiritual return to God.

And then last week we saw the second scene of this servant. And there, just a hint that he would be rejected, abhorred and despised.

And now in this third scene, the dark clouds of rejection, even suffering, are gathering behind this servant. There's a growing sense in each of these scenes of the servant of rejection, opposition, humiliation, suffering, and as we'll see on Good Friday in the fourth and climactic scene of this servant, death.

The servant is in direct contrast with the people of God, the people of Israel or Judah, as they were then called.

In the chapters leading up to this, as we've seen in recent weeks, and indeed in the first three verses of this chapter, chapter 50, the people remain deaf and silent, deaf to God and unable to answer him.

[5 : 37] But now we find that in contrast to them, there is one who hears and there is one who speaks God's word, the servant himself.

And indeed we find that it's his very listening to God that qualifies him to speak. They're not separated issues. It's because he listens that he can speak.

So in verse 4, the Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher. Literally it's the tongue of one who's been taught well, the tongue of a disciple, the tongue of one who has learned.

That is, God has given him the tongue of one who has listened. He's listened and therefore he's enabled to speak. Verse goes on to say, morning by morning God wakens.

He wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. There is a daily education process for this servant. Every morning it seems God is teaching him, calling to him, preparing him, equipping him for the ministry and tasks which lie ahead of him.

[6 : 51] Daily God is wakening his ear. The ear is not normally open to God, it's God who has to open it and waken it in order that he hears his word.

And that's why, because he's got an open ear to God, he is one who is qualified to speak. Therefore, he's a model disciple. Yes, he's unique and perfect, but he stands in contrast to God's people.

He is what they're meant to be. People who are attentive and listening to God's word and therefore enabled to speak it in the world.

He's a model disciple. He's listened with the ear of a disciple and that qualifies him to speak with the tongue of a disciple. Last week we saw that his key function was to speak.

The second scene of the servant opened with the words, listen to me, and that God had made his mouth like a sword. It's his word that matters.

[7 : 57] And now we see that function being developed here as well. Remember too from last week if you were here, that when we hear in the Old Testament, we heed and obey.

Real hearing, you see, is not just an intellectual pursuit. Real hearing is hearing that leads to obedience. obedience. When God's people hear God's voice, they obey.

When they disobey, they have not in effect heard God's voice. And that's the point of verse 5. The Lord God has opened my ear and I was not rebellious.

There's a connection between the two. When you hear, when God has impressed his word upon somebody and they hear it properly, that means they will not be rebellious.

They will not turn back. They will obey. Because hearing God's word properly is the same as obeying God's word. So you see, he's a model for what Israel was meant to be like.

[9 : 01] Not deaf and not disobedient, but rather hearing and heeding God's word. Now this servant of God in this section is not a normal servant of God.

There are others in the Old Testament who are called servants of God, but this one is rather special. He's not rebellious and he doesn't turn back. Compare that with, say, the greatest servant in the Old Testament, Moses, who was rebellious in the wilderness.

Or compare it with Elijah, one of the other great servants of God and great prophets of God, but the one who turned back away from God. Or compare it with Samuel, another great servant of God in the Old Testament and yet one who at least initially couldn't even recognise God's voice when God called him in the night.

Or compare it with Jonah, servant of God and yet fled in the opposite direction when God called him to a mission to Nineveh. Even Jeremiah cursed the day he was born.

Great servant though he was. You see, this servant is unique. This servant is not rebellious and does not turn back. Oh, all the list of the great servants of God have failed at some point apart from this one.

[10 : 20] Even Archbishop Cranmer recanted his faith at one point before renouncing the recantation and sticking firm to his Protestant faith in the Bible.

By contrast to all of them and all of us, this servant is never rebellious and never turns back.

We've seen that this servant's function is to speak. His word is what matters. What does he say then? We would expect a servant who is in the midst of a deaf and disobedient people to speak words of condemnation and judgment, surely.

God's word to the nation a word of judgment for their deafness and disobedience. And given the fact that last week we saw that his mouth was to be his sword, surely the idea of a sword conjures up words of condemnation and judgment.

But maybe surprisingly we find the opposite to be true. The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher so that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

[11 : 37] A gentle and comforting word. Not a word of rebuke or condemnation or judgment deserving though that might be by sinful people.

But rather a word of sustenance to weary people. Weary because of the exile in Babylon. The years that they've spent under Babylonian rule far away from their own land, far away from the destroyed temple, far away from God's promises being fulfilled.

Those who are weary of the oppression or perhaps weary of the idolatry and the paganism that surrounds them. Maybe those who are weary of carrying their idols.

We saw a few weeks ago that if you worship idols and false gods then they become a burden for your back and wearisome. Maybe these are weary of them. Maybe they're weary of their own sin and failure.

Maybe some of them are weary of the world and its problems and frustrations and futility. Maybe they're weary of their self-righteousness or self-sufficiency, their own attempts by their own strength to get right with God.

[12 : 51] We know from chapter 40 which we looked at several weeks ago that God promises relief to the weary, those who wait on him.

The weary, probably a few in number given the great deafness and disobedience of the nation, but the weary are those who are weary of their sin, weary of idolatry, weary of all the things that are bad with this world and their world, those who wait for God and to them this servant promises relief.

What God does in chapter 40 the servant does here, the two are inextricably linked together. But notice how he does it. You see, he sustains the weary not with a glass of Lucozade or some other high energy drink that's being promoted now.

It's not even Coke, Coca-Cola. He's sustaining the weary by a word. By a word.

What sort of word could sustain the weary? What sort of thing could offer weary people sustenance? a word of salvation, a word of assurance, a word of hope, a word of confidence, a word of promise, a word of rest.

[14 : 21] That's God's word to a sinful world and it's that word that sustains the weary, the promise of eternal rest that is absolutely guaranteed by God's goodness and grace, a word of promise that is undeserved by sinners.

That is the word that sustains the weary. The word of grace to ease the burden of guilt and sin, a word of promise to sustain trust in God. For the exiles believed that God had abandoned them and given them up.

But the word of promise that God had not done that, but would stand by them to the bitter end and would bring them back not only to the land but to himself with forgiveness and reconciliation to him, that is the word that sustains the weary.

And that is still the word of salvation that sustains God's people in every age. The word of assurance and promise and hope and salvation and grace for us in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

So if you're weary in faith, if your faith is flagging you're weary of this world and weary of worshipping God, then take sustenance from God's sure and certain promises that eternal rest is yours by grace through Jesus Christ.

[15 : 39] Cling to God's sustaining word of grace. It will sustain you through thick and thin in this world and nothing else will. Come to me, Jesus said, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

That's a word to sustain the weary every day. And it ought to sustain us too. Now in this passage, not only does the servant speak and offer a word of sustenance, but he offers a model of sustenance as well to follow.

Let me show you what I mean. In verse 6, he's facing serious opposition, physical beatings and insults. I gave my back to those who struck me, physically that is.

I gave my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard. I can't believe such resilience. When I pick up a little child and their little groping hand comes and pulls on my beard, it hurts, it's painful.

One doesn't give one's cheeks to that naturally. This one is suffering pain and beating. I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

[17 : 01] Physical beating, insulting words, mockery, degradation, spitting. That's the opposition that this servant faces.

But how does he respond? Not in like kind, nor by running away. but rather by standing firm in faith.

What sustains him in that opposition? God's word. The promised reversal that's been running through Isaiah.

That the proud and the arrogant and the oppressors will be brought down by God's judgment and the humble and lowly lifted up and vindicated by God. That's what's sustaining this servant.

You see, he's a model of the very word that he speaks. He holds firm in faith and clings to God's word, trusting in that ultimate reversal and therefore for him vindication by God.

[18 : 06] Yes, there's shame and disgrace and suffering and pain now, but he's confident in God's goodness and grace and therefore he stands firm, trusting in those promises of ultimate vindication at the final time.

He even believes it to be soon because he who vindicates me, verse 8 begins, is near. He has that confidence that God will vindicate him. He conjures up a sort of court scene in verse 8.

He calls for his adversaries to come forth. Who will contend with me? He asks. Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

He's confident in his rightness with God and even if he faces a trumped up charge that is full of injustice and that will bring about his downfall, this servant knows that because he's right with God, ultimately God will vindicate him and his enemies will be brought down.

It is the Lord God who helps me, he says in verse 9, who will declare me guilty? Well there may be many humans who will declare him guilty but the point is their label won't stick with God because with God this servant is confident that he stands in the right.

[19 : 32] And so what will come of his enemies? Just as their arguments are full of holes, their accusations full of holes, so they themselves will be like cloth full of holes.

They will wear out like a garment, the moth will eat them up. This servant you see is sustained by the sure hope of God's vindication of his people.

The one he says in verse 8, he who vindicates me, is the same word that's translated in the New Testament as he who justifies me. The one who declares me acquitted, declares me to be innocent, declares me to be righteous.

That is the hope of this servant. Not that he's a sinner needing forgiveness, but rather he looks forward with confidence to God's day of judgment when he is declared to be in the right with God the final judge.

This is saying nothing less than what St. Paul says in Romans 8 as well. In the great statement that climaxes with nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, Paul asks who will bring any charge against God's elect?

[20 : 42] It is God who justifies who is to condemn. There may be many who seek to condemn, he says, but he knows that he is justified by God, vindicated by God.

For him that means forgiven for his sin and declared righteous in God's sight. Because he has confidence in that ultimate announcement on judgment day. St. Paul has no fear of any who seek to condemn him now.

His trust in God's word is the same as this servant's trust in God's word. It's not unlike Archbishop Cranmer the same. Trusting in God's ultimate vindication, he was prepared to submit himself to the injustice of his own trial and therefore death.

But confident that in God's sight he was forgiven, acquitted and declared righteous by God's grace on that final day. That statement of justification by faith in God's grace is the linchpin of the reformation.

It's to that that Archbishop Cranmer held firm. But it's not only the linchpin of the reformation, it's the linchpin of the Bible and salvation. It is what the servant trusted in though he needed no forgiveness.

[21 : 55] It is what St. Paul trusted in. He needed forgiveness. It's what Archbishop Cranmer trusted in, needing forgiveness. And it is what you and I are called to trust in and cling to.

The word that sustains the weary is the word of God's declaration of acquittal and righteousness. He's assured us of that now through Jesus' death and resurrection so that we can be confident on God's final judgment day that that sentence will be announced over us.

innocent, acquitted, righteous by grace. My friends, that ought to sustain us all the time in this life.

That is a sure announcement as certain as Christ's death and resurrection is, that for those who place their faith in that word, that is God's announcement on the final day.

The point of this passage is not just to describe this servant, his word, or what he would do. The point of it is for the hearers, the people, the nation.

[23 : 18] The point of it is to get them to respond to God right. On the one hand, Israel is meant to match the description of verse 10.

Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?

That's what Israel is meant to be like. They're meant to fear the Lord. Not a terror against God. Indeed, fearing the Lord and obeying the voice of the servant are one and the same thing in this verse.

Again, it shows the extraordinary intertwining of the servant and God. Fear God? That's the same as obeying the voice of his servant.

And even in the darkness of exile, even in the apparent abandonment by God, they are to trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon their God.

[24 : 17] You see, the people of Israel are in darkness. They have no light, it seems. But in the midst of that darkness, they are to rely on God. That's what Israel is meant to be like.

But notice how verse 10 is phrased. It's a question, a rhetorical question. Who among you is like this? And the way the question is phrased, the expected answer is no one.

None. No one in Israel meets this. All of them have fallen short of this standard by God. None of them fears the Lord.

None of them obeys the voice of his servant. None of them, even in darkness, trusts and relies upon God. If on the one hand that verse 10 is what Israel is meant to be like, verse 11 is what they are like.

And the picture is not good. But all of you are kindlers of fire, lighters of firebrands. Walk in the flame of your fire and among the brands that you have kindled.

[25 : 28] What's this talking about? The people of God in exile where it seems that God has abandoned them and all is darkness. The people of God have lit their own fire.

They've determined their own path. They've made up their own ways of salvation. Whether it's through the idols and the Babylonian gods or whatever it is doesn't matter. The point is they've rejected God and they've sought to determine their own future and destiny and lit their own metaphorical fires of destiny and salvation.

This is DIY salvation. Do it yourself. Salvation. This is self-salvation. Not relying on God in the midst of their darkness. And the outcome of it?

It's shocking. This is what you shall have from my hand. You shall lie down in torment. The fires that they light for their own salvation recoil upon them in judgment and fire.

And so often that's true, isn't it? Pursue a path of sin and where does it lead? But actually to devouring you. And that's what's happening here.

[26 : 44] Pursue any other path of salvation apart from the God or the Bible. And in the end it will destroy and devour. And you receive God's judgment.

So often self-sufficiency comes unstuck with God. So often the path of sin comes unstuck with God. And that's what's happening here. Just as those who lit the fires to burn Archbishop Cranmer without repentance would have found God's fiery flame far worse as they received his judgment.

One of the astonishing things I think is that we would expect a people in exile to be eager to embrace a word of salvation, a word to sustain the weary.

Why don't they fling aside their idols and warmly embrace the words of Isaiah in this book? Why do they continue so steadfastly and determinedly to refuse to hear God's words of salvation and hope?

But they don't. They prefer to run after their own light than the light of God. And when the servant of this passage came to earth and walked on earth, he found that nothing had changed 700 years later.

[28 : 08] People loved their own light. And they nailed this servant to the cross. And still nothing's changed today, has it?

Men love darkness more than God's light. We ought not be confused when people do not respond to the gospel of salvation. Because they love darkness more than light.

It's the best message the world can hear. It's the best hope the world can receive. And yet, extraordinarily, people do not run to embrace it, but rather steadfastly refuse it.

Because they prefer their own light than God's salvation light. Verse 10 calls us to what we're meant to be.

People who fear the Lord by obeying the voice of his servant Jesus Christ. People who, even in the darkness of this pagan world, are people who trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon our God.

[29 : 19] I heard the voice of Jesus say, Come unto me and rest. Lay down, thou weary one, lay down.

Thy head upon my breast. I came to Jesus as I am, as I was, weary and worn and sad. I found in him a resting place, and he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, Behold, I freely give. The living water. Thirsty ones stoop down and drink and live.

I came to Jesus and I drank of that life-giving stream. My thirst was quenched. My soul revived.

And now I live in him. I heard the voice of Jesus say, I am this dark world's light. Look unto me.

[30 : 21] Thy morn shall rise, and all thy day be bright. I looked to Jesus. And I found in him my star, my sun.

And in that light of life I'll walk till travelling days are done. And I firsthand. I find this dark though.

I waited for her. God. My■■■■ is from Godora to do r Bacon X. Now you may listen less than me if you talk toox muslim. And I say I'm this dark god, you're my son. And I intentional find the voice of■■ ■■xas. And I'm this brown man.

I have led by the swarm of god, I guess I'll walk to him and my blood. And you have a outta here. And I'm this dark boy. How about this quiet? And now I kind of moisturize money to do more of God.