

Monday in Holy Week, April 14th, 2025

7.30pm Compline, All Saints Oakham

Isaiah 42. 1-9

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

The prophecy from the book of Isaiah that we have just heard was first delivered to the Jewish People in exile in Babylon around 2500 years ago. The Jewish community had been taken from their homeland around 70 years before and Jerusalem laid waste. Their cause seemed hopeless and it would seem that they had settled down to a fairly humdrum existence, not looking back because it was too painful, and not daring to look forward to a future without hope. And it was into this environment that the prophet spoke. We don't know his name – Isaiah himself spoke before and during the period when the Jews were exiled – but he was clearly one of his disciples and followers. He brings a message of hope that the time of the exile was drawing to a close and that the Jews would be restored to their native land. At several points in his prophecies he introduces the idea of the Servant of God, in passages that have come to be known as the Servant Songs. We have the first of those this evening. The prophecy speaks of God's servant, who will come and establish justice in the nations and healing and freedom for individuals, set out in poetry of great beauty. A servant who is commissioned by the all powerful creating God as his instrument in the world.

Prophecies of course have different meanings at different times. What this prophecy meant for those who originally heard it is far from clear. Who was this figure that the passage is referring to – a Messianic figure who will come and set the world aright? Perhaps a prince, a descendent of David? Was it an individual at all, or is the prophet referring to the nation of Israel as the servant, as he seems to do in some of his later prophecies? I doubt we will ever know what the message meant to those who first heard it, but to the followers of the prophet it was clearly very important, and they collected and preserved his words that, over the centuries, came to be regarded as holy scripture.

By the time of Jesus, 500 years after, the figure of the servant had definitely come to be regarded as a picture of some future messiah, and it is clear that the words and the concepts that Isaiah used were of immense importance to Jesus himself. Indeed he modelled his life and ministry on them to a great extent, and saw in the later Servant Songs a prophecy of his suffering and death. And that is how the Servant Songs have been regarded by the church through the ages – as a picture of the life and death of Jesus. Interpreting our passage in this way, we can see that it speaks of Jesus, the gentle prophet, who came into the world with no great fanfare, bringing justice quietly and persistently. Not crying or lifting up his voice. In gentleness and compassion; not breaking the bruised reed or quenching the dimly burning flame; restoring the covenant of love between God and his people; and, in words that Jesus took to himself in his ministry, he came to open the eyes of the blind, and to release the prisoner, both physically and spiritually.

And all of this is true, and remains true. The way of Jesus still stands in contradiction to the way of the world that relies on violence and coercion. For those who are battered and bruised by circumstances, Jesus comes to comfort rather than to condemn. For those trapped by their past, their habits and lifestyle, Jesus still comes and offers freedom and release. And that all remains gloriously true.

But these words are, I would suggest, more than a description of Jesus – they have been preserved by the followers of the prophet and by the church, because they are regarded as scripture, as the way in which God speaks to his people through the ages, and continue to do so today. Musing on this, I wonder if the old Jewish interpretation of the servant of God as the nation of Israel might be very relevant to us. In scriptural terms the church is regarded as the new Israel, so perhaps the words we have here are a perpetual and ongoing reminder that the church (which includes of course you and I) should be seen as the servant of God, and the words of the prophet give us a pattern for how to live that out.

Firstly it is a call for the church to work for justice in an unjust world, on the national scale, but also in terms of the communities in which we live. We may paraphrase

I have sent my spirit upon the church; to proclaim justice to the nations.

A call to speak out when we see things going on that we know are counter to the teaching of Jesus. What this might entail depends very much on who we are, and where and how we live. Standing up for justice is never easy and may lead to conflict, but it is a role that we are called to play, both individually in our day to day lives and as a church in addressing wider issues. But the prophecy encourages us to do so with gentleness and compassion

A bruised reed we should not break, and a dimly burning wick we should not quench.

Here we have the model of Jesus, who, we are told so often, was filled with compassion for the crowds who gathered around him, like sheep without a shepherd. Then we are to persist in this calling, to carry on the quest for justice as long as there is any need.

Not to grow faint or be crushed until God has established justice in the earth;

Secondly, as part of this task is speaking out for truth and justice in the world around us, we are also called, as far as we are able, to bring the light of Jesus to those who don't know him; to bring release from all that binds them.

to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness

And this means getting alongside others, in whatever situation they are in, bringing comfort and hope and the good news of Jesus.

The third point is that we do this in the realisation that we have been commissioned to do so by the creator God and do so in his strength and with his resources. Again we paraphrase the reading.

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the church and the spirit to those who

within it. I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you.

This seems to me crucial – that to be God's servant in the world is only really possible through God's Spirit walking with us, leading us by the hand. All somewhat daunting. But the passage continues with the words

I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other,

For whoever was the servant referred to when the prophecy was first delivered; for Jesus himself, the epitome of the suffering servant; and for the church today, ourselves, as God's servants in the world, this remains true. We are all servants of the great *I am what I am*, the Lord, the only God, who shares his glory with no other, and we serve in his name and in his strength.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen