

Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Isa 49.3, 5-6

Ps 40

1 Cor 1.1-3

John 1.29-34

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

The context for our reading in Isaiah is a heavy one. God's people are in exile, homeless, oppressed, enslaved in Babylon about six centuries before the coming of Christ. The land, that land promised to Abraham all those generations before, was of primary importance to the people. The land was their inheritance, it was their salvation. Exile, captivity away from their land, was not only separation from a piece of real estate, but would have been more like separation from their very life; it would have felt like separation from, maybe even abandonment by, God.

The passage opens with reference to Israel as a whole as the 'servant' of God, but then the focus seems to turn to a particular servant who will redeem the people: God promises a bold and daring rescue. God promises a homecoming.

But in this homecoming, in this salvation, God's redeeming love is shown to go far beyond national borders and ethnic boundaries, and so we read:

'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the preserved of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the
earth' (Isa 49.6).

The restoration of the people of Israel alone is 'too light a thing' for God's boundless love. This salvation, this homecoming, will be for the whole world. God, through his 'Servant', will call all people home.

So when the psalmist proclaims:

'Thou hast multiplied, O Lord my God,

thy wondrous deeds and thy thoughts toward us;
none can compare with thee!' (Ps 40.5),

this is our thanksgiving too.

And when the psalmist rejoices,

'I have not hid thy saving help within my heart,
I have spoken of thy faithfulness and thy salvation;
I have not concealed thy steadfast love and thy
faithfulness
from the great congregation' (Ps 40.10),

we bear witness to this joy too. And when the
psalmist cries out:

'Do not thou, O Lord, withhold
thy mercy from me. . .
. . . I am poor and needy;
but the Lord takes thought for me.
Thou art my help and my deliverer;
do not tarry, O my God!' (Ps 40.11-12, 17),

we, too, join both in the psalmist's sorrow and in the
psalmist's comfort, surrendering to the Love and
Mercy on which he depends.

Thanksgiving, witness, surrender, and dependence—
a litany of Christian living. In joy proclaiming God's

perfect and unending love, in sorrow for our unfaithfulness, depending upon God's faithfulness, and in the midst of all our imperfections, all our pains, even sometimes despair, throwing ourselves upon God's mercy.

And when we wander in exile, far from our home, far from origin or destination or anywhere recognizable in between, we hear God's words through the prophet: 'I will not forget you' (Isa 49.15).

Because as grand a thing as it is to deliver a people from oppression and suffering in exile, this is 'too light a thing' for our God. We are all headed home.

John the Baptist came preaching in the desert and baptising to lead to this salvation. And in doing so John practices this litany of the Christian life: thanksgiving, witness, surrender, dependance. He baptises for the repentance of sins, but not only that. 'I came baptising with water', he claims, 'so that he [Jesus] might be revealed' (Jn 1.31).

In the baptism of Jesus he is revealed to John to be the Saviour, on whom the Spirit of God rests and remains, and John reveals him to Israel.

But, just as in Isaiah, the salvation of a select group is 'too light a thing' for God. So John does not say, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of Israel', but the one who takes away, who bears, the sins of the whole world.

Everywhere, with Jesus, we see the broadening of love.

The imagery of Jesus as the 'Lamb of God' is not a straight forward one. It could refer to the passover lamb, and John's Gospel seems to make that connection explicit by placing Jesus' crucifixion at the same time as the passover sacrifice of the temple in chapter 19. But the passover lamb didn't really have anything to do with forgiveness of sin. At least until the Christians made the connection with Easter.

The scapegoat from the Day of Atonement might seem more appropriate in this sense, as 'taking away' sins, but, as its name, 'scapegoat', suggests, it was not a lamb, it was a goat! The daily offering in the temple, the *tamid*, was a lamb, but again, was not a sacrifice for sin.

Perhaps we're not meant to understand Jesus as fitting into a preconceived mould, as panning out nicely in the system, but as blowing the system wide open. Because it is the broadening, the stretching out of God's love to the end of the earth, that we are drawn to at John the Baptist's testimony: 'Look! There, that one, Jesus, he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'.

All throughout the gospel story we see the keepers of the system, the guardians of the religious hierarchy, those who claim to know the way to God, constantly missing the point. And the outsiders, the marginalised, the broken, the sinners, the wounded,

even the forbidden, forgiven of their sins, healed and made whole, loved and embraced: we see them brought *home*.

And you, and I, we will find Jesus today still in the face of the poor, in the pain of the marginalised, in the horror of the oppressed, and, even in our own poverty and need when we are honest and dependant enough to cry out: 'I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. Thou art my help and my deliverer; do not tarry, O my God!'

And we find Jesus there because that is where he revealed himself; that is where he revealed his love. This Lamb is slain. This Lamb broadens out the experience of God's love to all people by entering into the farthest reaches of our despair and dragging it into hope, into new life, into *resurrection*. Jesus is found in the marginalised and oppressed because he himself *is* the ultimate marginalised and oppressed one. As Isaiah has it, he is 'despised and rejected'.

And the tricky thing is, to follow Jesus is to move in his direction. Following someone is not simply submitting to a set of rules or values or principles, it is to go where they go; to move where they are moving. And it is there in that following, in our own movement through death and into life, from darkness into light, through our own passion, we might say, that we begin to see what John sees.

'Look!', John says, 'open your eyes. Here is your salvation. Here is your homecoming'. Set your gaze on the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and follow where he leads. Go where he goes.

Even to the cross where the Lamb is slain—where the borders of our weak, self-seeking and carefully reasoned love come undone; where a reckless, wasteful love that has nothing to gain, that is neither for profit nor for plunder, is gifted to the whole world: a salvation that reaches to the end of the earth.