

The Second Servant Song

Fr Jonathan Jong

Isaiah 49:1-6

There is no escaping the question of the identity of the servant. To a rough approximation, Jews believe it is the collective Israel and Christians believe it is the individual Jesus; scholars are predictably divided. Other candidates include King Cyrus, the prophet Jeremiah, and Deutero-Isaiah himself.

The third verse of this Second Song seems to settle the matter altogether: And he said to me, “You are my servant, *Israel*, in whom I will be glorified”. Ah yes, I’m sorry, the Jews were right.

On the other hand, the sixth verse complicates things: [The Lord] says, “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”. The servant cannot *be*

Israel, unless she is called to raise herself up by her own bootstraps.

The question of the servant's identity is as intractable as it is inescapable. So be it. The Bible is as its best when it confronts us with questions, not when it comforts us with tidy answers.

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There is a fairly obvious way to make sense of this apparent inconsistency between verses 3 and 6, though it is one that leaves the servant stubbornly unidentified. It is to deny that verse 3—"You are my servant, Israel"—reveals the name of the servant in the first place. Rather, it confers the name "Israel" upon the servant, whoever that might be: "*Now* you are Israel my servant, the *new* Israel, in whom I will be glorified". The Hebrew allows for this reading, and it makes perfect sense for this new Israel to be called to raise up the old Israel.

There we have it, then. The servant is whoever it is who is called to be the New Israel, not only to return God's people from exile, but to go far beyond the promised land of the promised people to gather from the coastlands and the ends of the earth the rest of us, now invited to the family meal.

If we understand the mission of Jesus in these terms, we must not fail to notice the asymmetry. Salvation begins in the tribes of Jacob, the preserved of Israel, and from there reaches—like light—to the ends of the earth. There is no sense here that the New Israel replaces the old, but reconstitutes it, and opens it up. This may seem obvious, but the bloody history of Christian anti-semitism suggests that it is not.

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One of the things for which the Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer is famous for saying is that,

over the course of history, people have expanded their circle of moral concern, from family members to tribe members to society members to foreigners and even to members of other species. For this ever-increasing ecumenism, Singer credits the human capacity for reason.

To be sure: Women's suffrage has come a long way since the Swedes pioneered the idea in the early 18th century. Anti-miscegenation laws in Nazi Germany became inoperative at the end of the Second World War; the United States followed suit in 1967 and South Africa in 1985. The Geneva Conventions of 1949, ratified by 196 countries, established standards for humanitarian treatment in war. The Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act, passed by Parliament in 1822 was one of the world's first animal welfare laws.

Doubtless, our circle of moral concern has expanded. The arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, and all that. But there is nothing inevitable about this.

We do not need newspapers to tell us this, but recent trends in local and international politics are stark on this point. The human capacity of reason is neither omnipotent nor omnibenevolent. Nor does the gospel promise inexorable moral progress by inertia or osmosis. If the moral arc bends, it is because there is active force applied.

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I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

We who believe that Israel is reconstituted in Christ also believe two further things. First, that he gave up his own life—even unto death upon a cross—in this act of reconstitution and reconciliation. Second, that the Church is a sign of Christ the New Israel, his body broken and given to the nations.

Far from implying that we may now rest smugly as God's new chosen gentiles, the identification of the mission of Jesus with the mission of the servant in these songs conscripts us into that mission; that mission that ends, in the fourth servant song and on Golgotha, in self-sacrificial death.

In other words, it is Christ who bends the moral arc of the universe, with bloodied hands, and therefore it is us who are called to do so. And therefore it is you, and God help us, me.

It is the second week of Lent. May our Lenten sacrifices be preparation for lives lived more fully as Christ's body, his hands and feet, gifts for the salvation of the world.