

Servant Songs

Fr Peter Groves

Isaiah 42.1-4

Our addresses during these Lenten devotions feature four passages from the section of the Bible which is usually called “Second Isaiah”. Broadly speaking, chapters 40 to 55 of Isaiah look different from most of the rest, and appear to rely upon the compositions of a particular poet whom we cannot identify. The original Isaiah was a prophet in Jerusalem in the 8th century BC. The oracles he left behind seem to have given birth to something of a school so that later texts, written in his prophetic tradition, became included in the book which we now call Isaiah. But within that book, scholars distinguish a number of different authors - most obviously by dividing the book into the portions ascribed to Isaiah of Jerusalem (the original), Second Isaiah - that’s 40 - 55, and Third Isaiah 56-66. It’s too simple to see these as three entirely discreet books, but it helps us to be able to think of certain sections as different from what has gone before, and from what follows.

More specifically than most Old Testament texts, we can date second Isaiah to the end of the period of the Babylonian exile, that fifty-year captivity in the 6th century BC which followed Nebuchadnezzar conquering and destroying Jerusalem, and carrying off many of its inhabitants to exile in Babylon itself. Second Isaiah brings the news that this exile has come to an end. Babylon's days are numbered, and so remarkable is the historical turn around that the conqueror of Babylon, Cyrus the King of Persia, is actually called by the prophet "the anointed of the Lord." Anointed, remember, is what messiah means.

Isaiah 40 - 55 sets out this promise of redemption and liberation, looking back to that first and greatest liberation, the exodus from Egypt. By preparing a highway in the desert by which the exiles can return to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, God has brought about a new Exodus, set up a new people, brought hope from despair, brought life to those who were dead. It should not surprise us, then, to learn that when the gospel writers sought to introduce the story of Jesus of Nazareth, they made extensive use of the work of Second Isaiah.

This is particularly true of the four passages which speak of the servant of the Lord, that is, the servant of Yahweh, the God of Israel. For a long time, readers have agreed that these four passages stick out from the rest, and that they work together to describe the mission of this character called the servant of the Lord. Whatever we think of the historical origins of these songs, it is undeniable that the writers of the New Testament, and especially the gospels, found in them rich resources for reflecting on the mission of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they knew to be the Christ, the Lord's anointed.

We see this application of the servant songs most plainly in Matthew's gospel, as he describes Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing. In Matthew 12, Jesus argues with the Pharisees about the sabbath, and then demonstrates his authority by healing a man with a withered hand on that holy day. The Pharisees begin to conspire against him and so, despite healing many, Jesus instructs his witnesses to keep his presence and his powers a secret. Matthew explains this by quoting most of first servant song.

Taken in isolation, it is easy to see why the early Christians would find these passages redolent of their claims concerning Jesus. However, we should be wary of reducing the passages to some sort of magical prediction. Prophecy in the Old Testament is much more about forth telling than fore telling, as theologians often say. In the context of the Book of Isaiah, the servant songs look much more as if they concern the mission of God's chosen people Israel, so that the identity of the servant is both an individual one – as an imagined ideal figure, perhaps to be compared with the anointed King – and a composite identity, whereby the people as a whole are called to bring God's truth and justice to the nations of the world.

So it is that in this first servant song, justice is at the forefront. The word appears three times in only four verses. The vocation and mission of the servant is to be the one who will bring forth the justice of the Lord. In the prophetic tradition, of course, that justice is far from the assumptions of human law and government, which too readily rewards the rich and treads down upon the needy. Here the justice of Yahweh goes hand in hand with the liberation of his people.

In the synoptic gospels we read accounts of the baptism of Jesus, in each of which a voice from heaven declares the identity of God's beloved son. And, in each of these accounts, this first servant song is not far from the surface. As Jesus begins his mission, we are reminded of the one whom God has chosen, who will endure struggle and persecution to bring forth truth and justice. This first song is only the start, just as we find ourselves in the early period of Lent. The journey of the servant and the way of the cross will not seem far apart.