

The Third Servant Song Mthr Melanie Marshall

Isaiah 50:4-9

The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

5 The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.

6 I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

7 The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

8 he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

9 It is the Lord God who helps me;

who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

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What happens when we are baptised? The concept of baptism wasn't part of Jewish thought when these lines from Isaiah were written. But the need for what baptism offers, new life - that was as present as it always is. Assyria holds a vast empire; until Assyria is violently toppled by Babylon, and which sweeps up Israel and drags her people off into exile; until Babylon is violently toppled by Persia - and Israel can go home again. And it's some other nations' turn to be traumatised by the violence and humiliation which goes on, and on.

That is the human condition. The will to power and its conjoined twin, violence. A violence even more dehumanising for the one who inflicts it even than for the one who suffers it; a sufferer who, in this scheme of so-called living, is only waiting for his chance to be the inflicter.

It's into this that the Second Isaiah speaks in the 6th century; into this that Christ speaks in the 1st century; into this that we are called to speak today. We are called by our baptism to be the suffering servant: to receive a tongue of prophecy from God, to sustain the weary

with the word of truth, to listen to God as a pupil to a teacher.

So I ask again. What happens when we are baptised? As the wonderful Dominican Simon Tugwell puts it, we desert. We desert from the forces of the world. We run away to be with God, like eloping lovers. The will to power is enthralled by death. Fascinated, and impelled towards it. In baptism, we call death out. We say bring it on. Death doesn't impress us. Let it do its worst. And we rise from the water with a new life on us. The life that can't die, and (the crucial point) because it can't die, doesn't need to be defended.

When we are baptized, we desert the war, for a life that is defenceless. Why? Because you cannot intervene in violence by fighting back. To resist violence is to commit violence. You've lost, you're colluding, you're now part of the problem not part of the solution. So, the song of the servant is – should be – the song of every baptized person: I did not turn backwards. I gave my back to those who struck me. I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

The stations of the cross are a helpful close-up – freeze-framed, in every detail, of what it actually looks like to accept this vocation. This is what we can expect when we desert to the God of peace.

Isaiah calls us to desert afresh this Lent. So let's do, let's begin living our baptism all over again. The servant says

‘The Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced’. We can never be disgraced by suffering violence. XP is not the one disgraced in these stations of agony. We can only be disgraced when we inflict it. And we begin, always, with the truth: where is the violence? The violence around me, and the violence in me. Violence against those who threaten your interests, or your children’s interests. Violence against people whose needs are inconvenient. Sniping. Gossiping. Not caring what Bangladeshi five-year-old went blind making your clothes. The casual, daily violence, of the false self, made of boasting and subterfuge and hypocrisy, with this one intent: so that you can feel like you do exist after all and other people can be made to feel worthless.

Isaiah says, Christ says: follow me: Desert. We all know what happens to deserters. They get shot. And what happens if you stay in the front line? (You get shot). A world made of violence will kill us, whatever we do. With this difference; that if you accept the world’s shilling, embrace the rationale of violence, you can enjoy the privilege of killing and brutalising others before being shot yourself.

Christ calls us to choose our death. As Christians we say we would rather die as humans. We would rather show ourselves to God as he made us to be, full of wounds, than to stand before his throne, deformed by violence

and hatred, and find that our own maker doesn't recognise us.

People say of the Christian call to offer our back to the smiters 'but it's impossible'. And they are wrong about that. They say of the Christian vocation 'but you can't live like that'. And there, they are on to something.

Amen.