

SERMON – 1/3/20

Isaiah 42:1-9

'And now the LORD God says to his servant, "I, the LORD, have called you and given you power to see that justice is done on earth.'" (Isaiah 42:6)

Today is the first Sunday of Lent when we begin to turn our eyes towards the cross and commit ourselves afresh to walk in the footsteps of Christ towards His death and rising again. To help us along the way this year I wanted to turn for our Sunday morning studies to what are known as the Servant Songs in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. They are passages which I have often quoted from over the years but have never preached through as a series and because they are so important for our understanding of who the Messiah is and why the Cross is so central to the Christian faith, I thought it was high time I did it.

Although I am familiar with these passages, I have not been surprised to discover new riches in them as I have looked a bit more closely and delved a bit more deeply into the text. There are always new treasures to be discovered in the Scriptures if we come to them with an openness to hear what God is saying.

It is often suggested that when these servant songs were first written they were about Israel, the people God had called out from the nations to be His own, to walk closely with Him and ultimately to make His ways known among the other peoples of the earth, and the text can certainly be read with those spectacles on in the context of the reality of God's people being sentenced to be exiled from the Promised Land because of they had not lived up to their calling. Others suggest that the servant is an individual – perhaps one of the Old Testament prophets, maybe even Isaiah himself, but the picture these servant songs paint does not reveal particular characteristics of any known individual. We are on much firmer ground when we find Jesus in the person of the servant and we will certainly come back during this Lenten journey to consider the light that the songs shed on the kind of Christ Jesus turned out to be, contrary to the messianic expectations of the time which were built on rather more worldly models of kingship than we find here in Isaiah. But I would also like to suggest that there is a message in the servant songs for the church of Christ too, which means that there is a message for you and me, for us in this place and for the creaking church throughout Scotland in our time.

It doesn't take very much study of this morning's song to discover two very clear strands of teaching about the servant – firstly what it is that the Lord God has done and is doing and will do for the servant, and secondly what it is that the servant will do for the Lord, focussed on one very clear outcome for the servant's mission, repeated no fewer than four times in these short verses, namely *justice* for all. So let's take a few moments to take a good look at the Lord's Servant, Jesus Christ, and to take a good look at ourselves who are under the same calling as He was, and then to consider what it was Christ accomplished and what it is we are called to do in our time in His name.

Firstly, then, the prophet holds up the servant for us to take a good look. That in fact is what we are here to do Sunday by Sunday – in the words of the letter to the Hebrews, to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, no time more so than when we gather here at the Lord's Table and take hold by faith of Christ Himself as we take the bread and the wine.

Look at my servant, says the Lord, whom I have chosen (v.1), whom I have filled with my Spirit (v.1). I the Lord have called you and given you power (v.6). Look, it's the Lord's servant – gaze upon Him – He is chosen before the beginning of time, promised to you centuries before His coming, conceived by the Holy Spirit and filled with that same Spirit, given for you to suffer and die at Calvary.

Look! says the Lord. Here is my servant with whom I am pleased (v.1). These are words that will be echoed centuries later when Jesus is baptised in the River Jordan. Do you see Him?

And look at what is promised by the Lord. This is my servant whom I will strengthen (v.1) He says. And addressing the Messiah directly, God says, 'Through you I will make a covenant with all peoples; through you I will bring light to the nations (v.6) What a prospect that must have been when Isaiah first proclaimed these words and what a promise it remains in a world where many still walk in darkness and many still do not know Christ.

In Jesus, the Bible says, the Word of God is made flesh. Christ, the apostle Paul tells us, is the Yes to all God's promises and here in this first servant song we see the promises laid out that Jesus will fulfil. What a thrilling list Isaiah gives us here. The Servant will bring justice to every nation (v.1); He will not shout or raise his voice or make loud speeches in the streets

(v.2); He will bring lasting justice to all (v.3); He will not break off a bent reed or put out a flickering lamp (v.3); He will establish justice on the earth (v.4); He will see that justice is done on the earth (v.6); He will open the eyes of the blind and set free those who live in dark places (v.7). These verses are quoted in Matthew's Gospel at the height of the controversy raised by Jesus' healing miracles – it seems to chime with the nature of Jesus' ministry, quite unlike anything the people of Israel had ever experienced before and certainly quite unlike their expectations of the kind of Messiah they were waiting for, and yet here it is written in black and white centuries before He came. But what I have to confess had never struck me before was the emphasis there is on the bringing of justice – justice to every nation, justice to all, justice on the earth, justice on the earth. What a proclamation not only in Isaiah's day but also in our time.

And perhaps that is the message we need to hear today as we fix our eyes on Jesus and as we hear afresh the call to follow Him to Calvary and the call to serve the Lord in the world today. What does it mean for us to bring justice to our world – to every nation, to all, to the whole earth. That's pretty all-encompassing, isn't it, and yet our vision tends to be small, if not non-existent. This is Fairtrade Fortnight, an opportunity for us to take practical action in favour of the poorest and most marginalised in the world – I hope we all make a point of buying fairly-traded goods whenever we can, but how many of us take a further step and take part in challenging the political and economic structures that bring institutionalised oppression to the world's weakest?

And if we are tempted to emulate the world's politics with its loud voices and attention-seeking rhetoric, there is a rebuke for us right here – the Lord's servant (and that's you and me remember) will not shout or raise his voice or make loud speeches in the streets. How many of *us* thoughtlessly dismiss the cries of the vulnerable in our own society, those who are in a mess whether through no fault of their own or because of their own foolish decisions. The Lord's servant will *not* break off a bent reed or put out a flickering lamp. What action can you and I take this week to advance the Kingdom of God by bringing justice to our neighbours? And whether we understand the needs of the blind and those who live in dark places to be physical or spiritual or both, our calling as those who follow Christ, as the Lord's servants, is to open eyes and set people free who today are in a dark place.

The LORD God said to his servant, Israel, “I, the LORD, have called you and given you power to see that justice is done on earth.” Sadly Israel, though called to be a blessing to all the nations, was not faithful in that task. The vision of the Kingdom of God, conceived as being one that would reach to the ends of the earth, became more and more insular and inward looking until it was God who took His people out of themselves, exiling them to Babylon until they came to their senses and returned to Him.

The Lord God said to His servant, Jesus, His Son, “I, the LORD, have called you and given you power to see that justice is done on earth.” Christ was faithful to His calling, and how! In Jesus we see Isaiah's description of the Servant lived out in the flesh, walking the road of faithfulness and justice all the way to Calvary.

So when the Lord says to His servant church, to the Church of Scotland, to Kinross Parish Church, to each one of us, “I, the LORD, have called you and given you power to see that justice is done on earth,” which path will we follow? Israel's path that will take us only to the dead-end of Babylon, or Jesus' path that will take us to Calvary and to life in all its fulness? On this Lenten journey, hear again the call of God upon your life – know afresh that you are called to serve; rejoice anew that God takes delight in you, that He has promised to strengthen you and fill you with His Spirit. That is what the Lord has done for you, you servant of His. Now what will you do for Him? Don't shout or raise your voice or make loud speeches in the street but quietly and faithfully restore the bent reed and fan the flame of the flickering lamp, open the eyes of the blind and set free those who live in dark places, and bring justice to all, establish justice on the earth, see that justice is done.

The journey begins. Where will take us this Lent?