

SERMON – 8/3/20**The Second Servant Song: Chosen and Appointed**

Isaiah 49:1-7

'I said, "I have worked, but how hopeless it is! I have used up my strength, but have accomplished nothing.'" (Isaiah 42:4)

Although I begin with that verse this morning it is not our text today. We will come to that a little later, because I certainly want you to have something a bit more uplifting ringing in your ears as you head out into a new week than this verse. But it's here that we must start because I expect that it may be where some of you are right now, downcast at the thought that though you may have laboured hard and long you may not feel that you have very much to show for it. Perhaps you feel like echoing Isaiah's words: "I have worked, but how hopeless it is! I have used up my strength, but have accomplished nothing."

Have you ever sat with your head in your hands and wondered what the purpose of it all might be, and to what end you yourself are here at all? People have crises of confidence all the time – something may happen in life or at work to make you question whether you are doing the right thing, or even to question the very foundations on which you have built your life thus far. If it's happened to you then it's reassuring to know that you are not the first and you certainly won't be the last.

On Sunday mornings during these weeks of preparation for Easter that we call 'Lent' we are reading and reflecting on four passages from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah which are known as the Servant Songs. As I said last week, the identity of the Servant of God about whom they are written is not disclosed, and we are probably actually intended to read them through a variety of lenses. On the face of it they appear to be about Israel, the people of God, although it has to be said that the Servant is written about in the singular; it is often suggested that the writer may have had one particular person in mind, perhaps one of the prophets, perhaps himself, but as we will see again in this week's Song the text could be equally applied to a variety of different individuals; for us as Christians it is clear that Christ is to be found here and that the Servant Songs have much to teach us about the nature of Jesus' ministry; and since we seek to be followers of Jesus

these words also have a message for us as we seek to be servants of God today.

In the light of what I have been saying, those who have gone before us as servants of God will often have faced a crisis of faith which has shaken their confidence and made them seriously question whether they are on the right path. From the earliest Old Testament times, Israel as a nation had a very strong sense of purpose as the Chosen People of God – the patriarch Abraham to whom all Israel owed their physical and spiritual ancestry had received a very specific promise from God: “I will give you many descendants, the Lord had said to him, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing... and through you I will bless all the nations.” (Genesis 12:2-3) But by the time Isaiah was writing these words, Israel faced the prospect of utter defeat, the overrunning of the Promised Land, and mass exile in Babylon. How appropriately would they have taken on their lips these words of Isaiah's - “[The Lord] said to me, “Israel, you are my servant; because of you, people will praise me.” And I said [to the Lord] “I have worked, but how hopeless it is! I have used up my strength, but have accomplished nothing.” It must have seemed utterly devastating for the whole nation.

Individual prophets also came upon times of questioning and self-doubt as they sought to fulfil their calling. Take Jeremiah for example. He spoke God's Word fearlessly and yet he was ridiculed and even imprisoned for his trouble. You can hear a sense of dismay in his writing: “What an unhappy man I am! Why did my mother bring me into the world? I have to quarrel and argue with everyone in the land. I have not lent any money or borrowed any; yet everyone curses me.” (Jeremiah 15:10)

Centuries later, John the Baptist had a similar experience. Called to prepare the way for Christ, he had had an incredibly fruitful preaching ministry with thousands flocking to him in the desert, repenting of their sin and committing themselves to the ways of God's Kingdom. John was right there when Jesus' ministry began – in fact it was John who first recognised the Holy Spirit in Jesus – but soon John found himself in prison and Jesus a very different Messiah than anyone, himself included perhaps, had expected. There is real anguish in the message John sends from prison to Jesus: “Are you the One I said was to come or should we expect someone

else?" (Luke 7:20) You can hear him echoing Isaiah's words again: "I have worked but how hopeless it is! I have used up my strength but have accomplished nothing."

And Jesus Himself, of course, the Servant of God *par excellence* came to the crisis to end all crises, offering Himself in complete self-sacrifice to win victory for the whole world, and staring defeat in the face when His heavenly Father turned His face away and laid on Him the sin of the world. "My God, my God, why did you abandon me." At that moment of awfulness, did Jesus Himself not experience the hopelessness of suspecting that He had accomplished nothing?

But I said that while we needed to start in that very human hole this morning, that is not the message we are given here to go away with. On the contrary, what Isaiah's second Servant Song gives us is a message of supreme assurance and hope, a message that might be summarised in the title I have given to this morning's sermon – Chosen and Appointed. If you are wondering this morning if you have a purpose in life, then let me proclaim to you that your purpose begins and ends in the fact that you are chosen and appointed by the living God Himself. Let's explore what that means as we unpack the words of this Servant Song.

It begins before we are born. Have you ever noticed how many of the biblical accounts of the lives and ministries of the most notable servants of God begin not just with their birth but when they are in the womb – Jacob and Esau struggle together before they are born and when Jacob, the younger of the twins, becomes his father's heir and in turn the father of a nation, he is given the name Israel which means 'He struggled with God.' Jeremiah begins his prophecy with an account of his call by God: "I chose you before I gave you life, and before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations." (Jer.1:5) We read of John the Baptist kicking in the womb when Jesus' expectant mother, Mary, comes to visit his mother Elizabeth. The Gospel of John begins not just before Jesus' birth but in the very beginning of all things, and the apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians about God choosing you and me even before the world was made. In God's purposes, our purposefulness as servants of God is not determined by the fickleness of passing circumstances but is given its foundation before the beginning of time. That is truly awesome and incredibly empowering.

And what is that purpose? As with Jacob and Jeremiah and John and Jesus, it is to tell the story, to take up God's Word and to speak it into the world, in fact to be God's message and to lead others into the discovery that God is worthy of all praise.

Secondly, it begins where we are, among those with whom we are closest. For Israel, the calling was to repeat the invitation of God to those of their fellow Israelites who had lost their first love and had been scattered from the land. Isaiah's whole prophecy was addressed first to his own people: "Listen now, my people, and come to me; come to me that you may have life." (Is.55:3) John the Baptist's father prophesied that his son would go ahead of the Lord to tell his people that they will be saved. Even Jesus came first to His own people.

And we too each have a role to play in that regard. We all know people who once had a faith and who once had a part in the fellowship of the Church but who are now occupied with other things and for whom the things of God are at the bottom of the pile. It is for us in our time to bring back the scattered people of God – perhaps all it takes is an expression of how much they are missed, an invitation to something to give them an opportunity to return. If we are to be servants of God here in our time then part of our role is to restore the crumbling walls.

But finally, the Lord says through Isaiah, "I have a greater task for you, my servant. Not only will you restore to greatness the people of Israel who have survived, but I will also make you a light to the nations – so that all the world may be saved." (v.6) As I said before, it was the task of God's people from the time of Abraham to 'bless all the nations'; although sent first to Israel, Isaiah and the prophets all spoke about a time to come when the Good News of God's Kingdom would be for all people, indeed for all creation; in John the Baptist and supremely in Jesus Christ light shone in the darkness that all may be saved.

And that remains our calling as servants of God here and now – the greater task that is before us too – to go and make disciples of all peoples. And while that certainly involves going to the ends of the earth, it is also a reminder to us that there are people 'far away' just round the corner for us, right here in our own community, people who do not have the first inkling of how much God loves them and longs for them to enjoy life in all its fulness.

When I turned first to this passage in preparing for this morning, the thing that struck me most forcibly was how uttering all-embracing the message is – God's interest is not only in Israel but in the whole world, not only in the many but in the one, and in that one not just in the midst of life but from before they are born. How wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, universal and eternal but rooted in each and every moment and in each and every person.

If you are wondering this morning if there is a purpose in what is going on around you and within you at the moment, then let me remind you that the Lord God of eternity holds you in His care as your living heavenly Father – He has chosen and appointed *you* for purposes of eternal significance. Away with hopelessness! Your labour is not in vain. Tell the story, restore the wanderer, make disciples. And trust the Lord who keeps His promises.