

SERMON – 15/3/20**The Third Servant Song: Steadfast and Obedient**

Isaiah 50:4-11

“All of you that honour the LORD and obey the words of his servant, the path you walk may be dark indeed, but trust in the LORD, rely on your God.” (Isaiah 50:10)

There are no prizes for guessing where I begin this morning's sermon. It is the topic that is on everyone's minds, in everyone's conversation and on every news bulletin. I will say a more a bit later when the young folks join us about practical arrangements to deal with the threat of coronavirus within our church family but we are here this morning first and foremost to humble ourselves before Almighty God, to call upon Him in our need and to seek His direction as we read and reflect together on His Word. It's what we do every week in worship and today is no exception.

In 2001, I was serving in a rural parish in the Borders when there was a devastating outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease among sheep, cattle and pigs that turned life upside down in many parts of the UK. As in the early days of that epidemic so also today, tensions rise as the reality of physical danger edges closer, there is a sense of helplessness and confusion in the face of something that is bigger than any of us, bigger even than experts or governments can deal with.

In 2001, I spent many months in a situation where there was widespread, severe anxiety in the population at large, where a great many people suffered economic hardship, where members of the community were self-isolating and phone calls replaced home visits and where I spent more time with people in tears than at any other period in my ministry. This time it is people rather than animals who are at risk and I expect that the coming months may prove even more challenging than the dark days of 2001.

So what is God saying to us in these days? In our Sunday morning services since the beginning of Lent we have been looking at what are known as the Servant Songs in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. In the first and second songs, the Servant could be identified *either* with the whole people of Israel, *or* with an individual but in this third song, the Servant stands in contrast to the whole people – Israel does *not* heed the call of God while the Servant is 'eager to hear' (v.4) what the Sovereign Lord is going to teach

him; while the Servant suffers unjust accusations but trusts in the Lord, the people of Israel as a whole suffer because they have rebelled and because they are unconvinced of the love and power of God. For those of us who follow Christ, the Servant is supremely revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God who, though He was equal with God, humbled Himself and made Himself nothing, submitting even to death for our sakes, and as we reflect this morning on the Third Servant Song I want to call on you to lift your eyes above the ever-diminishing horizons of this world in our current circumstances and fix them on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

And to those who do that, Isaiah's word from the Lord proclaims a clear call to put our hope in Christ: "All of you that honour the LORD and obey the words of his servant, the path you walk may be dark indeed, but trust in the LORD, rely on your God." It is not wishful thinking about an escape from reality – the path we walk in these days and in the weeks and months to come may be dark indeed – but if we are to bear witness to the Gospel at this time, then we are called to learn a new reliance on God that takes us beyond a token allegiance or some kind of religious duty to a truly trusting faith.

Down through the ages, God has spoken into his creation not only through wonders but also through disasters. We sometimes consider the story of Noah and the flood only in terms of the attractiveness of its child-engaging drama, but if you read it in the context of the threat of a world-wide disaster there is much to learn about the challenges and blessings of walking with God against the flow of a society that is otherwise dismissive of the power of God and of the grace of God. What is the Lord saying to our world through this global epidemic?

In the midst of Foot and Mouth in 2001 there were passages of Scripture that spoke to me in ways that I had never read them before. As the fields lay empty of livestock for hundreds of miles in every direction I remember being deeply moved to read verses from the prophet Habakkuk that will doubtless have resonated over many generations with those facing natural disasters: "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, *yet* I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour." (Hab.3:17-19) What is the

Lord saying to our world through this global epidemic and how are we responding to *God* rather than just to our circumstances.

As people face the prospect of a very different kind of life in the days ahead, perhaps a less frenetic life, I have been reminded this past week of another verse that spoke to me in 2001. It is a verse from the final chapter of 2 Chronicles where the Chronicler reflects on one of the outcomes of the Exile of God's People to Babylon: "The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfilment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah." (2 Chr.36:21) The implication is that since God's people did not follow the pattern of work and rest laid down in the Law of Moses God would find another way to ensure it happened. Are we being reminded in these times that there is more to life than busyness, more than the availability of 24/7 shopping, more than the right to go where we want when we want? What is the Spirit saying to the churches in the midst of this current crisis? Listen! Listen for a word from the Lord!

Let me offer you four suggestions from this Third Servant Song which I trust will give you food for thought as you prepare for what the coming weeks and months may bring us as individuals, as a church and as a society.

Firstly, as you read the Song, you notice the use four times of a slightly unusual title for God – the Sovereign LORD. You may be aware that throughout the Old Testament, the name of God is rendered in Hebrew by the four letters YHWH, sometimes people transcribe is as Yahweh, in former times as Jehovah, but when the Hebrew Bible is read, the name is replaced by the word Adonai (which means Lord) because Jews consider that the name of God is too holy to take on our lips. And in fact most Christian translations of the Old Testament into English also render the name LORD (usually using capital letters). However, when the name of God is preceded in Hebrew by the actual word Adonai, instead of saying Adonai twice, the letters YHWH are replaced by the word Elohim which means God and in English the phrase is usually translated 'Sovereign LORD'.

I tell you all that simply to bring home the point that the God who sends the Servant and who is addressing us today and calling us to trust, who teaches and gives understanding and who helps and defends, is the all-powerful

One, the Lord God of heaven and earth and is therefore more than able to be trusted. But more than that, this God is the One who is in fact the Servant too and who teaches us to call Him by name – His name is Jesus. Everything that God is, Jesus is – trust the Lord, rely on your God.

Secondly, the Servant shows us something about how to trust God that people have found to be true again and again in the midst of all kinds of crisis. We are called to be hearers of the Word and to be doers of the Word. I read this week of someone who has been shut in her home in Wuhan now for seven weeks because of the lock-down. She wrote of the many good things that had come from her enforced quarantine, one of which was a fresh hunger for God's Word. If you have to spend more time than normal at home over the coming weeks, then perhaps you too will read your Bible in a way that you have never done before and you will find a daily eagerness to be taught by God that will in turn work itself out in a willingness then to go and strengthen the weary with the good things that you have been taught. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh and as you read the Scriptures you will come to know more of the Servant of God and you will learn to be more like Him as day follows day. Trust the Lord, rely on your God.

Finally, the Servant shows us something about the reality of suffering that we will see supremely in a couple of weeks' time, God-willing, when we come to the final Servant Song. There is no question but that the coming weeks and months will see all kinds of suffering as a result of coronavirus, not just for those who become infected but for those whose lives are restricted by the measures that will be put in place to contain and slow its spread. But as the Servant King Jesus found in the midst of the suffering He endured for our sake at Calvary, the Sovereign LORD gives help and God is near. The message to us in these days must be proclaimed loud and clear – Christ is near, even in the darkest place, perhaps especially then, Christ is near. Trust the Lord, my friends, rely on your God.

I hope it is clear to you this morning. Although written many hundreds of years before He came, this is all about Jesus. He is the Sovereign LORD, He is our Teacher, He is the Suffering Servant who gave His life that we might live and who draws near when we call on Him. I do not know what the coming days and weeks will bring. I expect that they will be testing

times for many if not all of us. But I do know this – God is near and He will walk with us through the darkest valley.

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