

SERMON – 22/3/20**The Fourth Servant Song: The Suffering Servant**

Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12

The LORD says, “My servant will succeed in his task; he will be highly honoured. Many people were shocked when they saw him; he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human. But now many nations will marvel at him, and kings will be speechless with amazement. They will see and understand something they had never known.” (Isaiah 52:13-15)

It was sometime before Christmas that I began to plan a preaching series on the Servant Songs in the Book of the prophet Isaiah for the weeks leading up to Easter.

At that time no-one had ever heard of Coronavirus and yet within three months people the world over talk of nothing else, and in country after country unprecedented measures are being put in place to help lessen the impact of the disease and save lives, measures that go far beyond what many have ever experienced even in wartime, the potential outcomes of which economically and psychologically are unimaginable.

Did I consider taking a different text as the focus for our reflections on this day when, as has happened before perhaps only in times of extreme persecution, church buildings are closed and Christian people are prevented from meeting together to worship. Yes, certainly – there is much to be said and I could have brought a variety of different messages this morning. But I kept being drawn back to this passage, the last and probably the best known of the Servant Songs, the Song of the Suffering Servant from which we often read on Good Friday or when our focus is on the Cross of Christ. Written hundreds of years before Christ these words speak so powerfully of the reality of suffering and of the presence of God Himself in the midst of suffering that there could be perhaps no better starting place for our attempts to make sense of what has come upon us so quickly and has left most of us reeling and unable to find enough to hold on to as certainty after certainty tumbles before us.

As the Servant Songs unfold, we are gradually shown that God's plan for His Servant People, Israel, to be His chosen instrument for the blessing of all the nations will ultimately be focussed on a single person whom we as Christians recognise to be the Son of God, revealed when the times had

reached their fulfilment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Third Song which we looked at last week, it begins to emerge that God's purposes do not always lead us along an easy path and if that was hinted at last week, it is proclaimed loud and clear here. While we are apt to want to focus on the many and on ourselves, Isaiah calls us again and again to focus on the One.

And that is what I would like to encourage you to do this morning at a time when the focus is on the many – the thousands worldwide who have been infected with coronavirus, the millions in our own country whose lives have been turned upside down and in some cases whose livelihoods have been whipped from under them in an incredibly short space of time – at a time when we quite understandably want to know how things are going to turn out for us ourselves; to turn and fix your eyes upon Jesus.

It is the biggest question of them all in this world – why suffering? why death? And as that imponderable question is writ large the world over at this time, we find that that is where Isaiah begins too in verses 1-3 of chapter 53.

“Who would have believed what we now report? Who could have seen the LORD's hand in this?” Isaiah asks, and if this is the way God seeks to answer the question 'Why suffering?' we might be forgiven for being puzzled – is it believable that God should raise up the Messiah, the Saviour of the world to be like a seedling that is planted out in dry soil, bound to die; is it believable that God's Chosen One, His own beloved Son, should be one without dignity or beauty, unattractive, of whom no-one would take notice, to whom no-one would be drawn but whom people would despise and reject, who would endure suffering and pain, whom no-one would even look at, who would be ignored and dismissed?

Is the Lord's hand in this? Isaiah asks, and so do we. What kind of plan is that, God? What are you playing at? It's little wonder that when God's Son came into the world He was not even recognised never mind received. When we observe suffering we simply do not understand – from our human perspective it just doesn't make sense.

But Isaiah also offers an explanation that invites us to look at ourselves and our situation and compare it with what happened to the Suffering Servant. In verses 4-6 the prophet writes:

“But **he** endured the suffering that should have been **ours**, the pain that **we** should have borne. All the while **we** thought that **his** suffering was punishment sent by God. But because of **our** sins **he** was wounded, beaten because of the evil **we** did. **We** are healed by the punishment **he** suffered, made whole by the blows **he** received. **All of us** were like sheep that were lost, **each of us** going his own way. But the LORD made the punishment fall on **him**, the punishment **all of us** deserved.”

The language here is full of echoes of the Book of Leviticus and particularly the account of the Day of Atonement where the sins of the people were confessed over the scapegoat which was then driven out of the camp or out of the city into the wilderness. We are the lost sheep, by our own deliberate choice we have gone astray, we have so often brought suffering upon ourselves and others by our foolish and stubborn actions or by our selfish inaction and while we are caught up with a mess of our own human making, quietly and without a word, the Lamb of God takes upon Himself the punishment all of us deserved.

I don't begin to understand where coronavirus has come from or why it has caused such devastation in the world and why it threatens to shake the whole earth on its axis, but if our focus remains only on the many dimensions of human suffering that are emerging as a consequence we will be utterly overwhelmed. I venture to suggest (and I take no pleasure in doing so) that the psychological consequences of all that is happening may yet eclipse the physical suffering that is being lived out in homes and hospitals and intensive care units the world over, which is why we *must* shift our gaze from our own suffering to the suffering of the Servant whom the Lord sent to be the Redeemer of the world and who willingly gave His life for the life of the world and has won the victory over death itself.

“He was treated harshly, Isaiah says in verses 7-9, but endured it humbly; he never said a word. Like a lamb about to be slaughtered, like a sheep about to be sheared, he never said a word. He was arrested and sentenced and led off to die, and no one cared about his fate. He was put to death for the sins of our people. He was placed in a grave with those who are evil, he was buried with the rich, even though he had never committed a crime or ever told a lie.”

And as we know from the Easter story, foreshadowed also here in closing verses of this final Servant Song, death could not keep its hold on the

Lord's Suffering Servant and through His rising again from the grave He has accomplished forgiveness, life, the fulfilment of God's ultimate purpose, joy, honour and a name above every name.

And when we are tempted to be overwhelmed by the things that are happening in our world in these days, or by the thought that these trials may go on for months yet to come, that is when we need to lift our eyes beyond this world's horizons, beyond the enormity of the crisis and beyond our fixation with ourselves and look to Jesus, the Suffering Servant of God, who in the nonsense of His apparent weakness and humility actually turns out to be the cosmic victor.

My dear friends, nothing could be more serious than this, and this would be true whether or not the world had ever heard of coronavirus. If our focus is on ourselves then our destiny is the grave. While there is a real threat at this time that some among us may find death knocking at our door sooner rather than later, the stark truth of the matter is that each and every one of us must face death one day. But I proclaim to you the unspeakably good news this morning, that if we put our hope in Christ the Saviour, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we need fear the grave no more.

If you are anxious at this time, then you are in good company. But Christians have a message of hope to share with the world in these days and we each need to take hold of it afresh today – that the Suffering Servant has yielded to death in our place so that we might share in the life that is His.

The LORD says, “My servant will succeed in his task; he will be highly honoured. Many people were shocked when they saw him; he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human. But now many nations will marvel at him, and kings will be speechless with amazement. They will see and understand something they had never known.”