

‘Servant and Service’

Main text – Isaiah 42:1-9

Also Matthew 3:13-15

People are anxious at what the future holds. Political structures are changing. The main superpower is under threat and a new political force has arisen. There are worries among the believers about the future, and worries about the attitudes of people around them. The believers face obstacles and have their own personal needs to struggle with and have their doubts, is God really for them, or does he only tolerate them or perhaps has turned his back on them...

Isaiah writes to the Jews in exile in Babylon and these are the feelings and questions they are wrestling with. Isaiah focuses upon the Servant of the Lord – our Old Testament passage is one of four main passages on this theme but actually the phrase is used in a number of places between chapters 40-55. As he describes the Servant, it gives shape to our understand of how God calls us to be and live as Christians – while the Church identified the Servant of the Lord as our Lord Jesus, we realise that as he was sent by the Father, so we are sent by him, to continue in his footsteps...

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight,”

begins Isaiah in chapter 42. The focus of God is their **identity**. Fears are in the people. In the midst of these fears, in the previous chapter, God speaks about who they are,

“But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen ... You are my servant I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear for I am with you: do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (41: v8-10).

How many doubts and fears and anxieties come from believing God is not there, or feeling he is not for us, that he cannot be with us or help us in the storm?

Again, God reassures his people

“For I am the Lord your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you Do not fear. I will help you.”(41:v13).

Those words remind us of God the Father’s words to Jesus at his baptism – *“This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.”* I love the fact that God regularly speaks positive words about his people or individuals – he does not need to, but he just does! He regularly affirms his people, and he affirms Jesus in his decision to be baptism. He wants us to know our identity to see ourselves as he sees us.

There was a course we ran, in England, called Freedom in Christ, (<http://fcm.org/>), and part of that course is embracing what God says about us through the New Testament – so often we can take **WE** statements in the Bible and subconsciously process it, that is does not *really* mean us, but means *everyone else*. But the course changes the statements to make them I, *I am* a child of God, *I am* accepted, nothing *separates me* from the love of God and so on. And the participants are encouraged each day over the course, to reflect upon those statements about who

they are in Christ and let it soak into them... And it is remarkable the healing and confidence it brings into many people's faith.

I will put up some of these statements during this week into the facebook and website if you are interested. In their fears, God reminds his people of their identity.

These exiles have been there for maybe 60 or more years. He writes to people who may have known nothing more than exile and defeat. And God says – 'Look at how I see you, not what your feelings or experiences or others say you are...'

And so he declares their identity and so reveals the status and privilege and position of being his servant.

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold chosen one in whom I delight." (42:1)

Yahweh has declared his commitment to his servant, he will 'uphold' his chosen one. But then the question is – what commitment does God expect of his servant. What does God expect of his people? We can enjoy basking in the sunlight of God's love, yet while we can continue to do that, this experience of God's love is to give us the resources and strength to serve him in his world. As a church planter in Belgium once commented about popular churches with people queuing up to go in, he said – 'People line up to be blessed, but will they line up to serve?' God reveals he is committed to us, are we committed to him?

What will they do? The Servant people are the ones by which God will bring his justice to the nations. His Spirit will rest on

them. Through them he brings to the nations his offer of a covenant relationship. Through them he brings freedom from prison, brings illumination. The servant is to be a light for the Gentiles (v6). God wants to bring order, he wants to bring direction, he wants to make true life possible. And the nations – the islands – know this and they wait for that teaching and need it. Maybe these islands have not been consciously looking for it, maybe they have filled it with other things, other activities, yet deep down there is a gap, a restlessness. It possible among the people we live and work, on our streets, in the homes that look good, the jobs that are successful, the latest technology or whatever people have that deep down, they know they miss something. We are to be a light. This definition suggests attracting others to God - of letting God's revelation shine in our own lives and so through and out to others. Of course, attracting people to God isn't the only way of evangelism, as Paul and the Early Christians showed in Acts and as Jesus commissioned his people to go and make disciples and preach to all creation before his ascension. But how attractive is our lives as Christians, to a non-Christian or someone who rejected God?

We have the task to be done by the servants of God. **But how to go about it?** A beautiful set of words.

'A bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.' (v3).

Until last century, in southern Iraq, you could still find house and boats made of reeds. People do not tend to mend broken reeds. Instead if broken it is swept into the fire for cooking or heating. We do not take a stub of a candle to read by. We snuff it out, and get a new one. The Servant of Yahweh, does not snap off

broken reeds, he binds them up and supports them, he does not quench flickering flames he fans them to flame. When describing Jesus own ministry, Matthew takes this exact words and says Jesus is fulfilling them, (see Matthew 12:v15-21).

A Chuck Girard song says *“Don’t shoot the wounded, they needs us more than ever. Sometimes we just condemn them, and don’t take time to hear their story. Don’t shoot the wounded, some day you might be one.”* There are the bruised reeds among us...

As a church with a vision to be about UP, IN, OUT, **IN** is about deep community and lifelong discipleship. Deep community means that as people we are willing to admit where we are bruised or where we feel we are becoming a flickering flame. It means our community is a safe space to admit this. I think of our Christmas celebrations we heard the story of Mary going to visit Elisabeth and she stays 3 months. Would it have been easier to have stayed there? Not come home to people who would be misunderstanding or finger pointing. No, she returns home and before her husband to be, she is vulnerable to what decision he will make. She could have hidden.

I hope we can be a church where people in small groups, at coffee, or when visiting each other, we can be open and vulnerable, not hidden, where we feel we can be bruised reeds and flickering, instead of pretending it is all okay.

But **IN** means we are not only a safe space, but also, a place where we can be like Jesus showed, a place of binding up, of supporting, a place where we stand alongside people living and loving and saying:

‘do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, I will strengthen you and help you, I will uphold you...’

But God’s vision is greater than what I have described. Looking at the context, it says – bruised reeds and smouldering wicks as he talks about the nations. God is talking about **OUT** - our involvement in our world. Our approach, among the people who do not know God or who turned away or no longer see him as relevant – to be servants who show compassion. To show compassion in our service and in our evangelism. Jesus showed compassion to all, he lived out Isaiah 42 as Matthew shares in chapter 12. But how many were there on the day of Pentecost, when the church, the gathered followers of Christ, was born? Were there only 120 whom he helped? He showed compassion to many more than those who ultimately responded and trusted their lives to him.

So the challenge is to be people of healing and restoration, people of compassion **out** there, and not just among our near and dear, to see people in our community bound up, and fanned into flame.

This is a hard task, as Isaiah describes it. He says that the servant will not only be compassionate, he will not falter or be discouraged. **Where does strength come from?** The servants of the Lord can go forward in this challenging work because of God’s power – he is the creator, whose Spirit is upon them. But also because of his care and love – he gives breath to people and life to all – we go because of his care for his world. And we go because we are called to go, and he will keep and guard us as we respond to his call. It is not our initiative this task – but HIS. It is

not our strength – but HIS. And God desires that worship and glory should not go to anyone but him...

But to be clear, **who is the Servant?** I have deliberately focused on the exiles who heard it – Israel is God’s servant. Yahweh remains committed to them, but they have a call to serve to be committed to him as he is committed to us.

Yet Jesus, in our NT, is clearly pointed to as the Servant par excellence. At his baptism, (Matthew 3), the words spoken to him by God, have influences from Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42, and indicate he is the Davidic king, the son of God, the Servant of the Lord. And as we know Jesus, with the Spirit resting upon him, he brings a covenant relationship, he is the light of the world who will not break bruised reeds or snuff out smouldering wicks as he cares for bereaved widows, as he restores Peter, as he welcomes social outcasts like Zacchaeus, Matthew and Mary Magdalene. He was never dragged down by the weaknesses and lack of faith and opposition of those around him. He kept his confidence in his heavenly father as he won the victory at the cross as he shouted aloud – it is finished it is completed.

The Servant was to bring light to the nations. Jesus said he was light of the world and yet he told his followers, ‘you are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world.’ And after his resurrection he looked at those who believed in him and said: As the Father sent me, so I send you... Jesus returns the servant calling to the people of God, to people like us.

So Isaiah 42 is a description of the calling of Israel and that is, in one sense, still a calling upon her to fulfil. It is also a description of the calling of Jesus which he lived up to 100%. But it is also a

description of the calling of the messianic people, to the followers of Christ, to Christians like us here at All Saints.

We as such people embrace this calling and challenge to us...

Shall we pray...