

Epiphany 2 2020 Isaiah 49:1-7

19th Jan 2020

Contemplatio

ISAIAH 49:1-9

Reader 1

Listen to me, O coastlands,

pay attention, you peoples from far away!

The LORD called me before I was born,

while I was in my mother's womb he named me.

² He made my mouth like a sharp sword,

in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

he made me a polished arrow,

in his quiver he hid me away.

³ **And he said to me,** 'You are my servant,

Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'

⁴ **But I said,** 'I have laboured in vain,

I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;

yet surely my cause is with the LORD,

and my reward with my God.'

Reader 2

⁵ And now the LORD says,

who formed **me** in the womb to be his servant,

to bring Jacob back to him,

and that Israel might be gathered to him,

for I am honoured in the sight of the LORD,

and my God has become my strength—

⁶ **he says,**

'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant

to raise up the tribes of Jacob

and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,

that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'

Reader 3

⁷ Thus says the LORD,

the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
'Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'

⁸ Thus says the LORD:

In a time of favour I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you;
I have kept you and given you
as a covenant to the people,^[a]
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages;
⁹ saying to the prisoners, 'Come out',
to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'
They shall feed along the ways,
on all the bare heights^[b] shall be their pasture;

The book of the prophet Isaiah is actually three books, commonly called 1st, 2nd and 3rd Isaiah, covering a roughly 200 year period from the Assyrian conquest, then the Babylonian conquest and then finally the permission to return home under King Cyrus of Persia.

One of the really big themes in Isaiah, if not THE theme is the role of Jerusalem and the Jewish people in God's plan for the world. The exile was seen as being God's punishment on Israel and Judah for faithlessness, idolatry and injustice. The only solution to this was the radical surgery of exile, for 70 years, which would purify the people from their sins, following which they would return to live in Zion, rebuild the temple and once again the holiness of God would be manifest to the world. This liberation from slavery in Babylon and the return to Jerusalem was seen to be a kind of 2nd exodus which reminded the people of the great liberation from slavery in Egypt.

These first few verses strike me as very poignant. There is a really clear sense of vocational calling ("The Lord called me (that is, Israel) before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb, he named me")...and yet there is this tragic sense that it has all been for nothing. "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing, for vanity".

Have we ever had an experience like this? Perhaps we thought we were on the right track. Perhaps we thought we were being true to our vocation, but then it all came crashing down. Maybe we face a sudden tragedy, it all goes off the rails, we look back and we ask, 'wow – has this all been for nothing'?

...and yet even in the midst of such despair, the prophet is able to feel hope, "yes surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward is with my God".

In other words, there is already a hint here that it doesn't all depend on the people. Ultimately it's God's project not ours. It doesn't all depend on us.

Perhaps this is why the Prophet Isaiah is so repeatedly quoted in the gospels and by St Paul. The Christ story is so evidently leaping out from the pages of Isaiah. The pattern of Christ's death and resurrection is there....just as Israel would be brutalised and mistreated as the "suffering servant"....so the Christlike God was already been made visible and the birth of Jesus was being anticipated.

Isaiah 49:5-6

After the moaning and groaning of the people (even if with a bit of hope in God), now God gets to speak. How does God speak into this people's hopelessness.

It's actually quite humorous at one level. God doesn't pander to this people's misery and sense of failure for even one moment. God does not, like a good therapist, say, 'yeah – it's hard isn't it – I feel your pain'.

Rather, God comes out with an even bigger challenge...God says "It is TOO light a thing that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Israel and restore the survivors of Israel".

It kind of sounds like this: YOU thought you were just going to patch up the damage of the exile. That's too easy. WAY too easy. I have MUCH bigger plans for you than that....

How does this sound to us? Do we underestimate the potential scale of our vocation – or to think less individually and more corporately (as Isaiah does) Do we UNDER estimate what God can potentially do through the church, through the body of Christ, as his servants?

How does it feel to get pulled out into an even bigger vision of possibility, even at a time when things are grim – remembering that the people in 2nd Isaiah are STILL exile – they have not, at this time, even been set free. All they have is the hope of the possibility – the hope which comes from the promise of God.

Isaiah 49:6-9

So here the vocation and the promise get really ramped up.

The vocation of Israel which Isaiah sees is not JUST a rebuild of the temple and a quiet life of temple going back in Jerusalem.

Rather, “Kings will see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the holy one of Israel, who has chosen you”.

This great liberation plan of God was picked up by Jesus and subsequently the early church....

But...and this is the big BUT. Living, as we do on this side of the Jesus story, we can see with complete clarity the actual work of God, towards which Isaiah was leaning and pre-figuring but not entirely realising:

* the deliverance from slavery which Christ brings is not slavery from foreign powers, but slavery from Sin and Death – the very things which lie underneath power and domination by empires. Christ’s death goes to the very root of the problem.

*the springs of water are not just literal springs of water in a middle eastern desert, but springs of living water flowing upwards from the well of our souls

* the vocation to be light to the nations is fulfilled not in the first instance by a particular cultural group or church, but by God himself in Christ. Christ is the fulfilment of the vocation to be light to the nations. Once again, the work of God doesn’t all depend on us. In all things, Christ goes before us. All we can do is to occasionally cooperate....to receive the faithfulness of Christ to us.

Amen.