

The Servant Suffering

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 2nd of April 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled The Servant Suffering and is from Isaiah 52.13-53.12.

Almighty God, we pray that your word will take deep root in our lives and bear much fruit for your glory. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Peter, after a little bit of build-up, we see somebody who dresses smartly and is meant to be an appealing sort of person to win votes and so on.

[1 : 22] When a football club unveils its new captain, maybe again with a bit of fanfare and build-up, we expect to see somebody who is strong and impressive and meant to encourage lots of wayward supporters to place their money and become a member.

However, when God unveils his servant, after in Isaiah several chapters of build-up and fanfare, we expect to find somebody who is strong, charismatic, attractive, handsome, appealing, an awesome hero.

That's what we're meant to believe from the chapters we've seen in recent weeks. And the beginning of today's passage contributes to that expectation. See, my servant shall prosper.

He shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high. The only time in Isaiah when those words are used is of God.

Our expectation is that this servant will be somebody just like God. Somebody awesome, somebody lifted up, somebody full of majesty and splendour and awe.

[2 : 47] He's called the arm of the Lord. We're meant to expect somebody full of power and might. And this servant, as we've seen in recent weeks, needs to be surely like that, because his job is to restore God's fallen people, Israel, back to God.

Not to take them back to the land. And Cyrus, we saw several weeks ago, was God's anointed servant for that purpose. But this job is bigger. To restore sinners to God himself.

To overcome their spiritual deafness, their spiritual blindness, their rebelliousness and their lack of faith. And so the curtain draws back at last.

And as we watch, we gasp. We have shock. Horror, even. For what do we see?

Not somebody full of splendour and majesty after all. But a repulsive Quasimodo figure. Ugly.

[4 : 00] Disfigured. Deformed. Grotesque. And those who are looking at him recoil in horror.

A sight so sickening it, it makes your stomach churn. It's repulsive. You turn away and shield your eyes.

And even kings are speechless. That's what verses 14 and 15 are saying. At the end of chapter 52. Just as there were many who were astonished at him, so marred was his appearance.

Beyond human semblance. His form beyond that of mortals. So he shall startle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him. For that which had not been told them, they shall see.

And that which they had not heard, they shall contemplate. These are the kings of the world. People who hadn't been told perhaps some of the things in Isaiah that we've been told.

[5 : 05] Those three verses are the first of five stanzas in this section about the servant. Each stanza comprises three verses.

And this first one, verses 12, 13 to 15 of chapter 52, is God's own introduction to the servant. It's God who speaks these words.

Creates intrigue and interest. Who is this person? Who is this one for whom so much fanfare and expectation is attached and yet who is so ugly and repulsive?

The second stanza is verses 1 to 3 of chapter 53. It begins with a question. It's now the people who are speaking. Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? If the kings who hadn't been heard this, they're repulsed. The same sort of response is found on those who have heard the things of Isaiah. [6 : 09] Who have got some expectation of this servant to come. And I say, well, who's going to believe this? The fanfare and the expectation said this. But now we see this.

Who will believe that this is the servant? Who will believe that this is the one who will do what God has said he will do? Yes, probably again, it's a reflection on their own stubbornness and blindness and deafness, spiritually speaking.

Their inability to comprehend the ways of God. They expect somebody of note. They find one of no consequence.

The verses that follow through all the stanzas in a sense trace the life of this servant from verse 2 onwards. A fairly inauspicious beginning.

This is not the beginning of a life that the woman's weekly would notice or pick up on or give you photos of. It would be outside their notice. Verse 2 says he grew up before him, God, like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground.

[7 : 20] Not a great beginning. Not a flourishing beginning is what's being implied there. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him. Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

There was no personal charisma. If you go into a room in which this person is, you probably wouldn't even notice he's there. No, nothing noticeable, remarkable or attractive about this servant. Another dimension is added in verse 3. He was despised and rejected by others. A man of suffering or sorrows.

A man acquainted with infirmity or grief. And as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised. And we held him of no account.

He's repulsive. He's ostracised. Persona non grata. He's a loser. A misfit. And for those looking on, his suffering and sorrows seems to suggest to them that it is God's curse upon him.

[8 : 32] That's why he's ostracised. That's why he's suffering. Because God has cursed him. You may have seen the, I think it's the double AMLI car insurance ads.

That atrocious American driver. There's one of the ads where he's sitting watching television. And he's laughing at the bad driving on the television. And then the realisation comes to him.

He's not laughing at somebody else. He's laughing at himself. He's the bad driver. And that realisation comes in the third stanza, verses 4 to 6.

In Hebrew poetry often, it's the central stanza that is the key one. And so through the poem, things build up towards the centre. And then they perhaps unwind a bit from the centre.

So verses 4 to 6 are the centrepiece of this poem about the servant. Surely. Surely. Surprise. Emphasis.

[9 : 44] Contrast is meant by that word. Surely, you see, the realisation is that he has borne our infirmities. Yes, it looks as though he's a person of infirmity because they're his own.

He's cursed by God. And then all of a sudden, the people watching, they realise. It dawns upon them. They're my infirmities. They're our infirmities.

He has carried our diseases. It is a shocking realisation. The very things that made them reject the servant are their fault.

Their sins. Their failures. They thought his disfiguredness was God's curse on him. But all his suffering, indeed, even death, was due to them themselves.

The end of verse 4 says, yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted, as though he himself was the sinner and what was happening to him was just deserts from God.

[10 : 53] But the reality of verse 5, he was wounded for our transgressions, not his. Crushed for our iniquities, not his.

And that's not just pain and suffering. It's death. He's pierced. He's literally the word for wounded. It's not just pain.

It's death. Crushed, again, implies death. All of it for our transgressions and iniquities. The language is metaphorical.

And the words about sicknesses and illnesses are actually words about sin. It's not as though the servant has got my measles and I don't.

That's not the sickness that's implied. But rather the servant has my sickness of sin. That's the point of the description.

[11:57] In the very first chapter of Isaiah, the sins of the people of God, Israel, are described as sicknesses. Now we find they are on that servant.

In the old book of common prayer, the old Anglican prayer book from the 17th century, in the confession of sin, there is a confession that there is no health in us. That is the health of sinlessness.

Sin is in a sense a sickness. This man is carrying sin. Failure to trust God, failure to obey God, rebelliousness against God and all those sorts of things.

But why? What's going on here? Why is this servant carrying the people's infirmities, their sicknesses, their transgressions, their illnesses, their sins?

Why? The end of verse 5 tells us, upon him was the punishment that made us whole. by his bruises, we are healed.

[13:07] This is an absurd exchange. Our sins, our transgressions, our iniquities, placed on him so that we will be whole or healed, forgiven for them.

it's a weird exchange. It doesn't seem to make sense or balance the scales. But God's servant is taking the sins of God's people.

God's people, in verse 6, are likened to wayward sheep. All we, like sheep, have gone astray. We've all turned to our own way.

No exception there. Each and every person, a wayward sheep. Earlier in Isaiah, chapter 40, God promised that he would carry his people back to himself.

He'd come and get them and carry them home. And now we see how he'll do it. Because he'll do it through his servant. The servant who will carry the sins, who will bear the iniquities in order for God to carry the people home to be with God.

[14:21] Why does God do it? Why has God done this? Why should this servant carry sins and iniquities? Because there are two truths about God that are essential in the book of Isaiah, indeed in the Bible.

God is loving. He promises a hope and future for his people. But God is also holy. For Isaiah called the Holy One of Israel time and time again. And that means that he cannot let sin go untouched. He cannot just pass it over and pretend it didn't happen. He cannot just wipe it under the tablecloth and pretend it's not there. But rather, in his holiness, sin must be dealt with properly and punished. Forgiveness, you see, doesn't mean turning a blind eye. but rather, the punishment must be paid. And here, in the picture of this servant, we see the shocking truth that it is the servant who takes the punishment so that God's people can be forgiven.

You see how costly forgiveness is? It costs this servant his life. The servant is the one who steps in to pay the price to allow God's holiness to be satisfied and his love to be fulfilled.

[15:53] The teacher of the class went out of the classroom for a short time with one other child from the classroom. And when the teacher came back with that child to the classroom, the teacher found the classroom in turmoil.

If you're a teacher, you can probably picture the situation. Desks upturned, graffiti on the blackboard, things strewn around the room, paper planes made out of textbook pages and so on. Every single child in the classroom was guilty. Every single child was involved in this prank. The only exception, of course, was the child who was with the teacher.

Imagine how you would feel if the teacher then said to the class, you're okay, you can go. The child who was with me will clean up the mess and do a detention.

Wouldn't you be outraged? Imagine if you were the innocent child. You'd be distraught with the injustice of that. Imagine if you were that child's parent.

[17:00] You'd be on the phone to the headmaster in no time complaining about the behaviour of this teacher. But imagine if you were the children that were let free and set free. You'd be astonished. You couldn't understand what's going on here.

It's unjust, unfair and immoral for a teacher to behave that way. It's even worse than the initial turning of the desks over and so on. To lay all the blame on one innocent child and let all the guilty children go out and go home.

Christianity's been accused of that. That God is that immoral, that unjust and that unfair because he lays the blame for the sins of the world on the one single person who is innocent.

The one single person who's never sinned, never done anything wrong. Doesn't that look unfair? That God says to all of us sinners, I'll take all your sin and I'll dump it on him. He's the innocent one. He can pay for it. You can go home and have a nice time after school. Isn't that immoral? How can God do that? And yet the charge of immorality against God does not hold for one crucial reason.

[18:13] The servant, the innocent one, is God himself, God's son. If it were not so, then God would be atrociously unfair and immoral.

But he's not because his servant is himself his son. God's not just thrusting all the blame on some third party, but he's taking it upon himself and cleaning up the mess of the classroom himself and paying the punishment himself for the sins of the world.

That's not injustice or immorality. It is extraordinary love and mercy. From this, the heart of this passage, we move on towards the end.

The fourth stanza, verses 7 to 9, sees the death of this servant in the context of an unjust trial. He was oppressed by his accusers is the implication and afflicted yet did not open his mouth, was silent.

He didn't cry out, he didn't sue them, he didn't call for litigation, he was silent. Like a lamb, a sacrificial lamb that's led to its slaughter, like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, he didn't open his mouth.

[19:50] By a perversion of justice he was taken away to be put to death. Not fair, he'd done nothing wrong and yet unjustly accused and unjustly sentenced and unjustly executed.

who could have imagined his future? That is, there is no progeny left, no children left. To die without children was a great shame in the ancient world.

That's the implication of that rhetorical question. He's cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of God's people, dead, unjustly, buried, buried ignominiously.

They made his grave with the wicked, the last thing he deserved, heaping shame upon shame and insult upon insult. And then oddly it says and his tomb with the rich.

Often the rich are wicked. Wealth is a great danger in the Bible. although he'd done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth.

[21:00] He's innocent, he's spotless, he's guiltless. The picture is exactly that of one of the sacrificial animals of the Old Testament. For the people of God knew that they would take a lamb and it had to be spotless, blameless, not the worst lamb, the weak one or the one with a broken leg or something.

You had to pick the best to sacrifice it in order for your sins to be atoned by God in the Old Testament. This servant is a model of that.

A spotless lamb of God was he. It could have ended there. It could have ended with death and burial.

But the fifth stanza brings it all to a conclusion. God's plan will succeed. Firstly, because his death is not futile.

It achieves what God set out for it to achieve. The other night I saw the opera Il Trovatore at the State Theatre. There are two guys in love with the same woman, inevitably.

[22:10] It's one of those romance type things. And she loves one and he's sort of in a tussle with this other guy and he's under the sentence of death.

You can imagine it's a sort of fairly standard plot really. And in between everything, I mean, you can get a bit frustrated because he's in danger and he just stands around singing all the time.

now the redeeming feature of course is the music which is worth listening to. The plot is a little bit thin at times.

But this woman, because of her love for one of the two men, decides that she will take her own life in order to get him free. I won't go into the details of how that's supposed to happen.

the point is at the end it's futile. She dies from the poison she takes, but the one she loves also dies because he doesn't get to escape in time.

[23:11] Her death was meant to be in his stead, in a sense as a substitute for him. But it's futile because they both die. the servant's death is not like that.

The servant's death is effective, not futile. It's not effective because it's unjust. There are lots of unjust deaths in the world history.

It's effective because it bears sin for sinners. That's the point of verse 10. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin, that's the key. His death is not futile when you, the people, make his death a sin offering.

Anyone in ancient Israel could have slaughtered a lamb at any time. That would be a futile death. But when that death of a lamb is at the temple and sin is in a sense symbolically placed on that lamb, then that death is not futile.

[24 : 20] It's a sin offering and God treats it as that and takes away sin. And this servant's death is not futile when and only when people make it their sin offering.

By making their sins on that servant's death, they will be forgiven and their sin atoned for. That's when that death is effective.

When people make it their offering for sin, that lamb you see is a substitute. It's in our place. Any sinner deserves death according to God's scale of justice.

But when the servant dies with our sin on him, he dies in our place as our substitute and our sins are taken away and we are no longer under the sentence of God's death.

But not only is forgiveness one of the results of this death, so too is righteousness. The end of verse 11 says that the righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous.

[25 : 37] That is, he takes our sin and he gives us his righteousness. righteousness. The servant we're told is the righteous one. So do you see the exchange that's going on?

It doesn't look right. We give him our sin, our sins forgiven, and he in exchange returns to us his righteousness. That seems a bit imbalanced, but it's what happens.

You see, his death is not futile because God views us differently through his death. death. If we place our sins on him, then God sees us as righteous as he was.

That's effective. God changes his attitude and opinion of us through the death of his servant. That is a powerful death because it changes our eternal destiny.

death is not the end for the servant either, because God will vindicate his servant. The one who humbled himself to death, God will lift up.

[26 : 45] He will exalt. He will give a future for him. The end of verse 10 tells us that he will see his offspring, not physical children of course, but those who live because of him, us, if we're Christian people.

And he shall prolong his days. there's a hint there of life beyond death. It's not resurrection explicitly, but that of course is where it's fulfilled on the third day, on Easter day.

We're told that out of his anguish, the servant shall see light. He knows that his anguish serves a good purpose to bring light to this world.

He shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. He knows that he's serving God's plan. He knows God himself and he has satisfaction in serving that plan.

So therefore God, in verse 12, will allot him a portion with the great, divide the spoil with the strong. It's a picture of victory because the death itself is victorious. It's not as though the death is defeat and the resurrection is victorious.

[27 : 50] The death itself is victory. So God will give him the spoils of victory, metaphorically speaking, because he poured out himself to death. the one who was humble will be exalted.

Compare and contrast that with the people who are haughty and self exalting, and they will be brought down by God and humbled. Oh, it's clear who the servant is, isn't it?

You all know who this servant is. Isaiah wouldn't have known. He would have been bemused by this description given to him by God. 1 Peter 1 tells us that the prophets didn't understand all the things that God told them.

Isaiah would not have expected who this servant was. There was a eunuch from Ethiopia who didn't know who this servant was. He asked, about whom are these words?

And Philip, one of Jesus' followers, tells him unequivocally, it is Jesus Christ. He is the one without sin and deceit.

[29 : 00] He is the one who is met with rejection and disbelief. The one who endured an unjust trial, but more importantly than that, the one who died to bear the sins of the world.

The one of whom John the Baptist said, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one who restores humanity to God. His death's not futile.

death's not it changes how God sees us. 700 years before Jesus was born, these words were written. It's little wonder that in the New Testament, this chapter from Isaiah is the most often quoted chapter of the Old Testament.

The question for us then is, is this servant your sin offering? does he bear your sins in his death? Are you made righteous through his death? Or are you still in effect carrying your own sins? He's still a scandal.

[30 : 11] He's still rejected. He's still disregarded by the world. but he is still the Saviour. Come and see.

Isaiah beckons us. God beckons us at the beginning of that passage. Come and see my servant. Come and see him exalted and lifted up and being very high.

Ironically lifted up on a cross. But that's not the end. Lifted higher in resurrection. lifted higher in his ascension to the right hand of God on high.

Come and see. Isaiah beckons. Come and see this servant. Come and see him and bow down in worship at his feet.