

Here is My Servant

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 January 1999

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 31st of January 1999.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled, Here is my servant, and is from Isaiah chapter 42 verses 1 to 17.

Mighty God, we pray that you will give us eyes to see and ears to hear your word. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Have you noticed that you can already buy hot cross buns?

A couple of years ago, I noticed hot cross buns on sale at one place before Christmas. Now, I'm a planner, and I like to be well organised and in advance, but I did think that that was a touch excessive.

It seems that no sooner is Jesus' birth over than we gear up for his death. Well, there is a sense in which that that's an appropriate thing to do, of course. Preparing for Jesus' death began a long time before Christmas, though.

[1 : 1 8] Hundreds and hundreds of years before he was even born. God was preparing his people for the one who would come and the one who would die for them. 500 BC, people of Israel in exile, far away from the promised land, were given these words that we're looking at in Isaiah today and over the next few weeks.

Little snippets, if you like, of hope and salvation culminating in the death of Jesus Christ. The reason why we're going to look at these chapters of Isaiah between now and Easter is to understand more about what Jesus' death is about.

To understand more of the depth of his work, its breadth and height. To understand our own salvation better. To understand God's purposes for the universe better.

So I invite you to have open the passage from Isaiah 42 in the Black Bibles in front of you, page 584, as we preach and hear God's word in this passage.

The situation is this. The people of God who'd lived around Jerusalem had been conquered in 587 BC by the Babylonians.

[2 : 3 4] Big, bad Babylonians and been taken away into what's called exile. Relocated, at least the leadership and the wealthy people of the nation.

To all intents and purposes it seemed, for God's people, Judah or Israel, God had finally abandoned them. He was silent.

No longer speaking to them. And for probably to this point, maybe 40 years or so in exile, it seemed that they had no future back in the land and no future with God.

But then at the end of that period, God's word to Isaiah comes to them. Maybe originally even spoken 150 years earlier still to Isaiah the prophet himself.

But now applied to those people in exile. What we find in these chapters are like jigsaw pieces of salvation. Snippets and bits and pieces of restoration and hope and future with God.

[3 : 4 2] Reassuring the people that God had not, in fact, abandoned them. Now once a year I try and do a jigsaw puzzle. Usually the week after Christmas.

I don't feel guilty then. And this year's jigsaw puzzle was a particularly difficult one. Thanks to Diane and Peter Barclay. It didn't have a picture on the box to follow.

And it was full of flowers. And all these thousand jigsaw pieces looked the same. And by the time I put them together, they still more or less look the same, I suppose. But when you start a jigsaw puzzle, if you do what I do, you gather the reds and the purples and the greens and the whites.

And then of course the 95% of black over here on the side. And what you try and do is put the reds together and you get a little bit of a picture in order to understand bits put together.

Now there's a sense in which in these chapters of Isaiah, we do that. We gather the similar pieces together to get a picture. But there is actually a sense in Isaiah where we ought not to do that too quickly.

[4 : 49] We should let each piece speak for itself first. And in the chapters we'll be looking at over the next few weeks, periodically a figure called the servant comes to the fore.

It's tempting, and some do it, to just gather the servant passages together, put them together and then see what they say as a whole. It seems to me best, first up, to try and let each jigsaw piece of the servant, so to speak, speak for itself before we try too quickly to gather them together.

What we find in today's passage is the first major announcement of the person called the servant. So the chapter begins, here is my servant.

It's as though God is on the stage and Israel is the audience and he's the announcer, the compare of the show, so to speak. And he says, you know, ladies and gentlemen of Israel, here is my servant.

And verses 1 to 4 are God describing the servant, as sometimes happens with compares. Here is my servant, this is a bit about him. And then at the end of verse 4, so to speak, would you welcome him?

[5 : 59] And on he comes. And then the remaining verses to the end of verse 8 or 9 are God actually speaking to the servant. Servant, let me say some things to you now. That's the sort of sense that's happening in chapter 42.

It's God presenting to Israel, first up, his servant. But what we find out about the servant, is more about what he does than who he is.

We find out about his task rather than primarily his identity. His task, I'm going to analyse in four bits.

What the task is, the manner by which he completes that task, the power under which he completes that task, and the scope of that task.

And then we'll look at the question of the identity. Who is this servant? So firstly, his task.

[7 : 09] And in verses 1 to 4, three times we're told that his task is to bring forth justice. The end of verse 1, he will bring forth justice to the nations.

The end of verse 3, he will faithfully bring forth justice. In the middle of verse 4, until he has established justice in the earth. Now whenever you get a word repeated so often as that in just the space of four verses, you've got to say this is important.

If we were to summarise this servant's task, it is to bring forth justice. Now what does that mean? We might think, ah, this guy's going to solve the problem of Christopher's case.

He's going to make sure that he's extradited and faces the courts and receives the justice that's due to him. That's a fairly small view of what justice in the Old Testament is about.

Justice is a broad term. Throughout Isaiah, one of the things that he berates the people for is the absence of justice in their nation. Way back in chapter 1, there is no justice in the land.

[8 : 19] And then several times in the following chapters. And whenever he says there is no justice in the land, the things that are occurring are things like murder, or people are taking bribes, or the poor are getting trampled on.

But not just social things either. Where there is a lack of justice, there is a lack of honouring God as God. There is a worshipping of idols rather than the real God of the Old Testament.

So justice is a term that comprises social things as well as things to do directly with God. If we were to summarise what this idea of justice is about, it is about God's people as a society living together under the lordship and law of God.

It is not a private thing. It is not a person claiming private justice for himself or herself. But rather justice is about the right workings of God's people as a society under God.

And in a sense, God's law is about this justice, about how God's people can best work, live, operate together as an entity.

[9 : 39] In one sense, what God's law is about and what God's justice is about is about bringing God's people back to the original good ordering of society. Back in Genesis 1 where God made everything, put it in its place and said it's very good.

In a sense, the nation of Israel to this point is like a car that hasn't been tuned. It's sort of running but it's not running properly. It's not clicking properly.

It's not running smoothly. There are things that are out of kilter. Justice is the reordering of it or the repair work of it, if you like, or the servicing of it to bring it back into a unified, harmonious order under God.

Now, for the people of God who are in exile in Babylon, to hear the promise of a servant who will bring forth justice would have been a good thing to hear.

They would have heard in that us coming back to God as a society and under his law in his land. They would have seen that as a good thing.

[10 : 46] They would have been pleased to hear that statement. The second thing about this servant is the manner by which he executes justice.

Now, normally when somebody in the world, in any age really, comes to reorder a society according to a set of laws or principles, almost invariably they do so by force.

We think of French revolutions and Russian revolutions and many other revolutions in our day and age in times past and present for that matter. By stark contrast, this servant comes to bring forth God's justice not by force, but rather in an unassuming and unaggressive way.

So see what verse 2 says. He will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street. That is, he's not going to be one of these power mongers who walk into a society with megaphones on the back of trucks or army tanks going through the main streets proclaiming what is now the law.

This person will do so in a quiet way, a surprisingly quiet way really. And then we're told in verse 3, a bruised reed he will not break.

[12 : 09] Now a reed at the best of times is fairly brittle, a bruised reed more so. This is not talking about his love of plants.

Rather it's a metaphor for the people in exile who are bruised under Babylon. He's not going to be one to trample over them, to come in aggressively and not care for the weak, the bruised and the battered, but rather a servant who will come to bring God's justice in a gentle and tender way.

The same at the next line of verse 3, a dimly burning wick he will not quench. It's not because he loves candles, but rather because it's another metaphor for the people.

They're like lights or candles or flames that are just flickering. They are almost about to expire and go out. That's the people's life in exile.

That's their hope. It's about to expire. But rather this one will kindle that and let it live gently and tenderly looking after the weak.

[13 : 22] That's the manner of this servant. He is after all called a servant. He's there to serve the people rather than lord it over them. So his task, justice, his manner, gentle, but his power.

Just because he's gentle doesn't mean he's weak or without power. Rather the power that he has is an extraordinary one. Here is my servant whom I uphold, God speaking.

It is God's power sustaining this servant. It's not in one sense his own power, but rather a divine power given to him.

The word is used of a firm grip on something. God has got his firm grip on this servant. He will not let him go. His power is upholding him and sustaining him.

More than that, God in the second part of verse 1 has put his spirit upon him. God's own spirit placed upon this servant.

[14 : 33] A spirit which in part at least is also a spirit of power. And then in verse 4, he will not grow faint or be crushed.

The words are the same as in verse 3 about the bruised reed. He will not break. The dimly burning wick he will not quench. This one will not be quenched or broken.

Now at the end of chapter 40 and those who are here on Wednesday night may remember that even youths in the prime of their life grow weak and faint. But not this servant.

That statement at the end of chapter 40 was saying that every human being grows weak and faint. This person is unique in that.

Sustained by the power of God himself. So what this is saying is this servant has great power. He has an intimate relationship with God who is sustaining him in a unique way.

[15 : 38] This intimacy with God, this upholding by God also suggests that this servant's work will be successful. He will not fail. God will ensure success.

Now the fourth thing then about this servant's task and function is the most surprising of all. Scope of it. For Israel in exile to hear the statement this servant will come from God and bring forth justice must have been a great statement of joy to their ears.

but the servant will bring forth justice to the nations. Israel in exile surely would have expected him to say God will bring forth justice to God's people, for God's people.

They're after all the ones who are oppressed. They're after all the ones who are far away from their land. But the scope of this servant's task is to bring forth justice to the nations of the world which include even Babylon.

Even the enemies of God's people will receive the justice of God and God's servant. Now my guess is that that would jar with Israel hearing these words.

[16 : 58] I'm not sure that they would have warmed to these words very eagerly. Yes, it's okay to proclaim justice for God's people, for Israel. Yes, wonderful. Freedom from Babylon surely.

But justice to the nations? Surely God's people at this point would have thought to hell with the nations or what they've done to us. But more than that probably they thought back a few hundred years and thought about God's commands to them to go into the land and conquer the land to destroy the nations the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hivites and Hittites and all the otherites that were living in the land.

Get rid of them all. And now it seems God is saying He will bring His justice to the nations. Now most of us I suspect have perhaps a slightly faulty view of the Old Testament.

We tend to think and people generally tend to think that the Old Testament is fairly brutal against other nations as though God has chosen the Jews and He doesn't care at all about the rest.

But even in the Old Testament God is concerned for the nations of the world. They are not outside His concern nor His purpose. Why in verse 5 it goes on to say thus says God the Lord who created the heavens and everything in them.

[18 : 17] Verse 5 you see is telling us why God can bring justice to the nations because they're His nations. He made them. So what this servant's scope is to go to all the nations is not outside the realm of God's dominion and sovereignty.

They are His nations. But more than just create them God's concern for the nations is seen in what He does for His people Israel in the Old Testament.

In the early part of the Old Testament God made a covenant with Israel indeed with Abraham and Abraham's descendants who became the nation of Israel. And the reason He did that is never exclusively for the benefit of Israel.

Rather it is for the benefit of the nations of the world. So when God chose Abraham and made promises to him in Genesis 12 the culmination of those promises was that all the world will be blessed through you.

That's a concern for the nations surely. And then when the nation was actually constituted on Mount Sinai when Moses gave the law to the people he called them a royal priesthood.

[19 : 31] That is to be a mediator between God and the world. Because God had chosen Israel to mediate His blessing for the nations of the world.

Again you see it is not God choosing the Jews because He loves them alone. But rather God choosing the Jews for the sake of the world.

But then thirdly when God gave them the law He promised them that if they were obedient to the law they would receive God's extraordinary blessing. But more than that as the nations of the world looked on and saw a nation living under God obediently and receiving His blessings they would be drawn in to the nation.

So in Deuteronomy 4 the peoples of the world the nations of the world would say what God is this what nation is this that lives like this let us go and investigate and worship this God in effect.

So you see at every point God's covenant with God's people Israel was for the sake of the nations of the world. With rare exceptions Israel failed to bring blessing to the nations.

[20 : 48] they indulged themselves in their privileged position they didn't act as light or beacon for the world they didn't attract many in to worship God and of course the reason for that is that they didn't obey God their light was dimmed a dimly burning wick so to speak and rather than attract people to God they abandoned their God and worshipped the idols of the other nations and ended up in exile living in the midst of Babylonian pagan gods and idols.

This passage is telling us that Israel's failure does not bring an end to the purposes of God for the world. God remains determined to bring his justice and order to the world as a whole and so this servant's work is not only to restore Israel but rather to bring blessing through Israel to the nations.

So that's why in verse 6 all of that is in a sense by way of preamble to verse 6 in the middle of verse 6 it says I have given you the servant as a covenant to the people.

The covenant is already there. This is saying it stays. But now this servant embodies the covenant with God's people. He himself in a sense renews it and keeps it going.

But not only the covenant to the people but a light to the nations because that's what the covenant to the people originally was for to bring light or blessing to the nations of the world.

[22 : 35] Israel's failed to do that but now the servant the true Israel so to speak will do what the nation has failed to do. Who is this servant?

Years ago when I was a teenager I used to enjoy watching *Sail of a Century*. I haven't watched it probably since then. I used to particularly enjoy, I don't even know whether these questions are still on it, the who am I questions.

Who am I? I was born in such and such year. I'm 80 years old today, single woman. I've given my life for Christian agencies helping CMS in particular and a worshipper at Holy Trinity.

Who am I? Well, happy birthday Joyce. Who is the servant? We've heard lots about the servant.

Who is he? Instantly we think, oh it's Jesus, that's easy. But Isaiah's hearers wouldn't have said, oh this is Jesus who's going to be born in 540 years time.

[23 : 46] Who would they have thought this servant was? To this point in the Old Testament the person who is most often called the servant of the Lord is Moses. And there are many echoes of Moses here.

Verse 6, I am the Lord, just what God said to Moses when he called him at the burning bush. I have called you just as Moses was called by God at the burning bush.

I've taken you by the hand, very similar to God's promise to Moses at the burning bush that I will be with you. Moreover, the covenant or giving the servant as a covenant to the people is very similar to Moses giving the covenant to the people on Mount Sinai.

There are echoes of Moses through this. Not least in the fact that one of the things these passages generally are doing, we saw it on Wednesday night in chapter 40, is promising in effect a new exodus.

Moses is the one who led the people out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness into the promised land. Now from Babylon through another wilderness, God is promising to bring the people back to the promised land.

[24 : 58] the servant is the one who is going to do it. In a sense he is a second Moses, another Moses and indeed earlier on Moses himself said before he died that there would be one who was greater than him to come.

For the readers or hearers of these words of Isaiah, I suspect they are meant to think this is another Moses figure who is being promised here. But what's the point of it all?

What's the point of it if a servant all he does is just lift up the people from exile and plonks them back in the promised land? The cycle of history will just continue downwards.

The people will be unchanged, they'll continue to sin, in the end they'll abandon God and go after the idols of other nations and presumably get conquered and taken off into another exile somewhere else.

You see, what God is promising here is not just another Moses figure to lead the people from one lot of slavery into the promised land. What he's promising here is something bigger and greater than that.

[26 : 07] Because he's promising that not only will he bring them into God's promised land in effect and restore them there, but he will change them so that the cycle of sin and idol worship will stop.

It is not just a geographical relocation that's being promised, but rather a fundamental change of the nation's internal disposition.

Moses himself acknowledged in Deuteronomy 29 and 30 that God had not changed the heart, the mind, the eyes, the ears of God's people. They were still deaf and blind to God.

God had yet to do that. Now here comes part of the promise that God will do that, that he will now give sight to the blind as verse 7 says, to open the eyes that are blind, not physically so much as spiritually.

One of Isaiah's main complaints about the people is that they're blind to God and deaf to his word. Isaiah himself was told that in his own commissioning in chapter 6. So now Isaiah sees the promise that God will change the insides of God's people so that they will see and will obey and therefore through them be a light indeed to the nations.

[27 : 35] So this is a big promise. This one is greater than Moses. That's why verse 9 says, see the former things have come to pass, that's the first Exodus, the first act of salvation, the first bringing into the land, and now new things I declare.

New things because it's greater, it's better and bigger. It's not just bringing to the land, but it's changing the hearts of the people. No wonder Isaiah invites the nation to sing in verse 10.

Sing to the Lord a new song because this is a new act. we've had songs of salvation in the past, some of the Psalms in Exodus 15 are songs of praise at the salvation of the first Exodus.

Now we need to sing to the Lord a new song because this is a new and greater act of salvation. And he goes on to say, let his praise come from everywhere on earth.

Why? Because God's concern is for everywhere on earth. He's concerned for all the nations far and near. So verse 10 tells us that the whole creation is to sing, the desert, the nations that are near, Kedar and Selah at the end of verse 11 are nearby nations.

[28 : 54] Indeed, God's own people's enemies, the nation of Eden. Let them shout from the sea or from the tops of the mountains. It is everybody. It is all inclusive because this servant's work is for all the nations.

nations. Notice also what this singing of praise is. It is not singing as recipients of salvation.

It is singing as anticipation of salvation. That is, even in exile, the people were to sing of the salvation promised in the future.

Do you get the point? it is not this is the song you will sing when you have been saved. It is the song to sing now, in your misery, in your exile, far away from the land.

Now you can sing confidently with hope and expectation because God has promised salvation in the future. That ought to be an encouragement to us as Christians, ought not.

[30 : 01] There is a sense in which we have already received salvation and forgiveness of our sins and therefore our hearts ought to be always filled with joy and we ought to be willing to sing praises to God for that.

But there is of course much more yet to come in heaven. But we can sing with joy about that now, confident in anticipation that God will keep his promise.

Do you see? So our singing for joy is not just singing for past benefits, but singing with confidence for future expectation of all the blessings God has yet in store for us in the future that he will bring.

Who is this servant? In 538 the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians and the Persians let the Jews go back. Seemed like an act of miracle.

It seemed as though all these promises in Isaiah were coming true, but the people headed back rather dispiritedly. It was not really a nation, a Persian province. The temple took a little bit of encouragement before it began to be built.

[31 : 09] There was no blessing, no prosperity. There was certainly no king and maybe glimpses of servants but promises unfulfilled. Another 550 years later though, these words came to the surface again.

When a man was baptised in the Jordan River, a heavenly voice proclaimed something like the first verse, here is my servant whom I uphold, in whom my soul delights, my chosen one.

And then a bit later on again, after healing, after teaching, after attracting crowds not only of Jews but Gentiles, we're told by Matthew the Gospel writer that this was to fulfil these words of Isaiah chapter 42.

the servant has arrived, announced beforehand by Isaiah, as Isaiah even says at the end of verse 9, before they spring forth I tell you of them, so that when they come you know what's going on.

The one greater than Moses has arrived, the one whose healing of the body pointed to the healing of the heart, the healing of the blind physically pointed to the spiritual sight that he brings.

[32 : 32] The one who came, he said, not to be served but to serve. A servant. And in serving, died.

Accomplishing a greater exodus, not from a foreign nation's power but from slavery to sin itself. The one whose death established the new covenant in his blood with God's people.

The one whose death is not only forgiveness of sins but the powerful internal change as well. The one whose gospel is to go to the ends of the earth, to all the nations.

This passage ought to be a great encouragement to us to understand more of what Jesus came to do and to die for. It reminds us of the depth of his work, to the deepest recesses of our heart to change them that we may see and hear and respond to God's word with faith and repentance.

It reminds us of the breadth of God's work, that it's not just for me or you, but for all the nations of the world without exception. And it reminds us of the height of God's work in Jesus Christ.

[33 : 54] Not to take us back to a geographical land in Palestine, but rather to lift us from this world to the heights of glorious heaven. If Isaiah could urge his people to sing a new song of praise to the Lord then, in exile, how much more should we sing praises to the same God now?

For the blessings we've already received are far greater than those that Isaiah's hearers had then received. And we can have greater confidence still that the blessings yet promised will be ours one day as well.

So let's sing God's praise with heartfelt thanks, with sincere anticipation of the promises yet to be fulfilled. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

Let us praise him as we sing that song. Amen.