

**Isaiah 49:1 - 7** Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations:

Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. <sup>2</sup> He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. <sup>3</sup> He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour." <sup>4</sup> But I said,

"I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all.

Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God."

<sup>5</sup> And now the Lord says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honoured in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength—<sup>6</sup> he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will **also** make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

<sup>7</sup> This is what the Lord says— the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—

to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down,

because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." "In the time of my favour I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you ;I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

<sup>9</sup> to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'

**Luke 2** <sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

<sup>33</sup> The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

We live in a time when it is not easy to be a Christian. For the entire lifetime of nearly all of us here, we have seen the church in decline and Christian beliefs and values have less and less influence in our society. As a church it feels often that we have to run harder and harder just to stop going backwards. Looking abroad many of our brothers and sisters in Christ across the middle-east and in parts of Africa and China are suffering terrible persecution for their faith. If we are not careful there is a danger, that we fall into despondency and despair – we might feel that however hard we try, we cannot succeed in seeing the Kingdom of God established and growing in our nation and in our world.

Last week when James gave the background to the first Servant song in Isaiah, he told you how Israel had been suffering terrible oppression and sense of abandonment by God in the Exile. That first Servant song was a word from the Lord to the world about his Servant: "*I know your plight, my Servant will deal with it*"

This 2<sup>nd</sup> song is autobiographical: it is the servant himself sharing his testimony about how his calling came. And he is sharing this not just with Israel but with the world. *Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations*

"Listen to me" is a very surprising way to start. Many prophets begin a message with "Listen" but only Isaiah uses "*Listen to me*" and even then elsewhere it is only when it is the Lord who is speaking. How can the Servant speak in this way? Not "*Listen to the Lord*", but "*listen to me*".

The servant then shares his story of how he had been prepared right from the beginning for a special role *Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name*. He talks of being hidden or concealed by the Lord during this time of preparation *in the shadow of his hand he hid me; ... and concealed me in his quiver*. It seems this servant would spend many years away from the public eyes, being trained privately and personally by God himself before he was ready to take on his special role in public.

Last week we were reminded how the Servant would take care *not to break bruised reeds, or snuff out smouldering wicks*. He would be a gentle shepherd to the weak, the outcast and vulnerable

But this passage describes the servant as having a mouth like a *sharpened sword and a polished arrow*. when the time came the Servant would be no soft pushover, but like toughened steel able to speak truth to power against all pride, hypocrisy, injustice – particularly amongst the powerful, the leaders,

### **Who is this servant?**

v.3 The Servant says *He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour."* So we might well think that the nation of Israel is the Lord's servant—and indeed Isaiah's hearers may have flattered themselves that this was the case. But in v.6 we discover that the role of the Servant is initially at least, *to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept* – so the servant cannot be Israel herself for she is the very one who needs to be rescued by the Servant. In fact if you go back to Chapter 48 you discover that Israel had proved to be incapable of living up to her calling to be a servant of the Lord - indeed she had forfeited all right to the name of Israel

### **By contrast he servant has been completely faithful...**

He can say *I have laboured ...I have spent my strength* and he is *honoured in the eyes of the Lord*.

It seems that Israel had been called to - to be a light to the nations, but since she had proved incapable, now the Lord has raised up and personally prepared the Servant – the true Israel – to take on that role.

Before the name Israel referred to a nation, it was a name given to one individual, Jacob. He embodied, if you like, the entire nation. Now, once more the name Israel would be given to an individual who would represent and embody the entire nation. But whereas Jacob, had often failed to live up to his calling, this Israel would be the one in whom the Lord would display his splendour, reveal his beauty.

In our gospel reading Simeon has the momentous revelation that the tiny 6 week old baby who has just been brought into the Temple, Jesus, is this very Servant that Israel and indeed the world has been waiting for down through the centuries, specially prepared by God from the womb, to be God's agent of salvation and a light of revelation for the Gentiles, the nations of the world.

As Jesus grew up, he must have memorised and meditated on these Servant songs of Isaiah and gradually come to realise that they indeed referred to himself.

As Jesus neared the end of his earthly ministry and saw how the vast majority of his people had either rejected or ignored him and how even those who had at first responded had later fallen away it must have seemed in human terms that all his hard work had ended in failure – that as the Servant says here, he had *laboured in vain*; and *spent his strength for nothing at all* - but equally he would have been able to say as the Servant of God *"Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God."*

Furthermore, not only had his faithfulness not gone unnoticed by God, but God would one way or another bring about his purposes: He would one day *bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself* - for this is the very purpose for which Jesus the Servant was born. And in fact in the meantime, God will use the apparent failure of Jesus the Servant to achieve a much greater purpose: <sup>6</sup> *he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."* *"Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down,* Today, God's kingdom reaches every nation in the world

*continued*

## What does this all mean for us today?

1. We should be filled with gratitude and wonder at God's determined unstoppable grace to reach us. When Israel failed to fulfil her part in God's plan, God did not give up but sent his son – the true Israel - to fulfil that role on Israel's behalf. Jesus shows us that God's purposes for grace can never be thwarted
2. Whilst like Jesus we should be willing to comfort the challenged, the vulnerable, we should also be willing to challenge the comfortable. There are times when we as followers of Jesus are called to have mouths that are a *sharpened sword and a polished arrow*. wherever we come up against pride, hypocrisy, injustice – particularly amongst the powerful, the leaders, for this is what Jesus did – He challenged the comfortable
3. as we seek to bear witness to the love of Christ and the truth of the gospel, we should not be surprised
  - a that many do not respond
  - b nor that some are actively hostile– for Jesus himself, the perfect witness, had exactly that experience.
4. Like Jesus the true servant we should seek at all times to be faithful to our calling even when apparently there is no success in worldly terms; and look for honour not from the world but only from God –
5. we should be deeply encouraged that in God's economy even when our faithfulness seems to achieve nothing in human terms, God somehow uses that apparent failure to achieve his greater purposes long-term.

For God is working his purposes out and ultimately his plans to rescue the world and his grace will never be thwarted. God's purposes are like a mighty, slow moving, river: ultimately that river will break down all barriers, and overcome all obstacles to establish his kingdom of grace.

*God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year;  
God is working His purpose out, and the time is drawing near;  
Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,  
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God,  
As the waters cover the sea.*