

God's servant

Two weeks ago in church, we looked at Revelation 21, and contemplated the hope that God gives us.

Last week, we looked at the beginning of John's gospel, and contemplated the certainty of that hope.

Today, as we turn back in the scriptures to Isaiah 42, back six centuries before Jesus' birth, we come to the means or the mechanism of that hope, the one who gives us hope and certainty. God's servant. Our saviour. Jesus.

Isaiah 42 is often called the first of the servant songs – where the prophet speaks the word of God poetically, and tells his listeners about the one who is to come – the Messiah.

It was a message for the people of Isaiah's time – people who were in exile in Babylon, people who longed for their homeland, and sought justice for everything that their captors had done to them.

They knew, at some level, that God would deliver them, eventually, because that was what God had done in the past – every time the people had gone astray – but it had been such a long time, and the hope still seemed distant. The chapter before this one tells us that they'd made idols for themselves, but they were worthless and useless.

Living as they were among the Gentiles in Babylon, their memories of God and what God had done for them were fading. And although exile wasn't ideal... well, it could be comfortable. If they worked hard, even though it wasn't 'their' country, they could do pretty well.

While God, through Isaiah was speaking to the exiles in Babylon, in his own time, the message that he shares was not only for them – it's also for us today. People find themselves wondering where God is, and where they fit in. People are comfortable, so what do they need God for? ... or people are frightened or insecure, so why not do whatever they can to look after themselves?

For many people it's the same today as it was all those years ago in Babylon. Where is God? Why hasn't God rescued them or made their lives better? Why does God allow injustice to prevail and go unpunished? Shouldn't we just be looking after ourselves?

And against that background, Isaiah delivers the first servant song:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.

What God has planned wouldn't be a supernatural intervention, or military one. What God has planned would be a saviour – but not in the way that the people expected, or I guess people still hope today. Because the saviour will be a servant, God's chosen one. Not leading an army, but bearing God's spirit. And this saviour – this servant – will bring justice to the nations.

I think 'bring justice to the nations' is especially important to note, because even here, addressing in the first instance at least the Jewish exiles in Babylon – it's justice not to just the Jews, but to [all] the nations.

Isaiah reveals that the saviour is God's servant, not a grand, proud conquering hero, but a humble servant who does God's bidding, not his own. Think about Jesus' prayer in the Garden of

Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42)

God speaks through Isaiah, saying about the servant, “[he is] my chosen one in whom I delight, I will put my Spirit on him”, and in our gospel reading today, we see that happening – that prophesy being fulfilled, as Matthew tells us, “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:16-17)

Isaiah continues to prophesy, talking about the servant “He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.” Jesus brought revolution to the world, but Jesus wasn’t a revolutionary in the sense we understand it today. He wasn’t an activist, he didn’t wave a red flag or write ‘Romans go home’ on buildings, he didn’t encourage his followers to chant slogans or commit acts of disobedience or build barricades. When Peter drew his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane to fight off those who had come to arrest Jesus, he told him to put it away.

And it follows then, that the Messiah will be something quite different. Isaiah tells us “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice”(42:3) or in the New Living Translation, “He will not crush those who are weak or quench the smallest hope. He will bring full justice to all who have been wronged.”

And Isaiah assures us that the Messiah will achieve that, because “he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.” (42:4)

In verse five, the authority and power of the message that Isaiah delivers is confirmed: “This is what God the Lord says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it.” These promises are from the God who made all things. This servant is from God who gives life to all, these aren’t idle thoughts or hopes for the future... but a surety. This will happen because it is God’s power that will make it happen.

Then the prophecy turns to the servant: “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,”

The servant, the one who is to come is God’s own servant. God will guide the servant and protect him, and the servant will be the covenant for the people. It might seem odd that an individual would be identified as a ‘covenant’, because the various covenants we learn of in the bible are partnerships between God and the people – we know of the covenants of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. All of the covenants build on each other – and the last one, the covenant with David is left hanging – waiting for fulfilment which we as Christians find in Jesus.

Indeed, here in Isaiah 42, we find that the servant is the covenant. The covenant between God and the people will be the servant. As Jesus says in John’s gospel, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Verse seven tells us how that covenant will be achieved, because the servant will open eyes that are blind, free captives from prison and release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (42:7)

You might remember that when John the Baptist was in prison he sent his disciples to Jesus to find out if Jesus really was the messiah. They got to Jesus and asked, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” and Jesus responded, echoing Isaiah 35, but also reflecting what we read here in Isaiah 42, “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”

With the servant, with Jesus, things are put right. It's not revolution or revenge or victory in the military sense, but it's correction. Eyes that are blind will see. Those that are lame will walk. Those that are in darkness or prison will be released. As Charles Wesley wrote, “I woke; the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.”

Isaiah's prophecy then affirms again God's unique power to deliver, “I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.”

As we say when we pray the Lord's prayer, “For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever.”

That is something we need to consciously hold on to, because there is pressure in our society to look beyond God to find meaning, to satisfy and sustain us —money, possessions, positions, families or relationships. They may not be bad things, but they don't last, no matter how hard we try. By contrast, God's glory is everlasting and unchanging. When life feels uncertain and we're tempted to look elsewhere for hope, Isaiah's prophecy call us back to God, God who never changes and always keeps his word.

Our reading today ends with an assurance: See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you.” (42:9)

We live in a fallen world – a broken world, and we so often assume that that's how things are and they will always be like that. Just like the people of Isaiah's time had become used to living in exile, even become comfortable living in exile, we have become used to how things are – the unfairness, the injustice, the suffering, the sickness, the death. Over the last couple of weeks I've asked if you think things will be better in 2026, or worse?

To be fair, 2026 has not got off to a good start... but I observe that most people do think things will continue to worsen. That's our experience of life, isn't it? There will be some bright spots, sure, some times of joy and happiness, some times of celebration, but the harder things of life continue to weigh us down. We're getting older. There's fewer of us. We experience sickness. We miss people we've loved.

Malcolm Fraser once famously said, “Life wasn't meant to be easy.” That's our experience isn't it? But life was meant to be easy – or at least meant to be good – because that's the way God intended it to be, and made it to be: Look at Genesis 1, we read that God made things and saw that they were good seven times (Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31).

Isaiah writes, “See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare.” God has, by Isaiah's time, rescued the people time and time again, always though, things went bad again. But now, through this servant, he will do something that has never been done before, something that only he can do. Something powerful, something permanent, something that should give us hope.

And the assurance is that the former things have taken place. The people had been delivered. The prophecies had been fulfilled. And on the basis of knowing that, the people of Isaiah's time – and us today as well – could know that these new prophecies would be fulfilled.

In fact, we today can be even more certain of the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies because we see them fulfilled in Jesus. In his birth, in his life and ministry, and in his death and resurrection for us.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God didn't share a vague hope or distant dream; he gave a bold statement of something specific to come. God is not simply patching up what is broken or bringing us back to what once was; he is bringing about something new.

This hope that God gives us in Jesus, Jesus the messiah, Jesus the servant, shouldn't just give us comfort, but it should change how we see things – and should change how we live our lives.

As Isaiah (9:2) says elsewhere: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." The people walking in darkness weren't just the exiles of 2600 odd years ago, but they're the people of today as well. And on them – on us – a light has dawned.

The prophecy that we've heard today is not simply ancient words for an ancient people, but for us today as individuals, as families and as a church. It is a message of hope – not just that things might get a little better, but that things will be made right.

It's a message that changes how we see things today, how we face disappointment and hardship, and how we live our lives. It's a message that assures us all of this new thing God is doing through his servant, and points us to the day when Jesus will return, and all things will be made new. Or as the prophet Habakkuk says "...the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

Amen