

Isaiah 53 Sermon
Church on the Corner

1 Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
2 For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering[a] and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces[b]
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
4 Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
9 They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb[c] with the rich,[d]
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
11 Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Introduction.

The superhero movie genre shows now sign of slowing down. In recent years almost all the old favourites have been rebooted. In fact Batman and Spiderman have been rebooted twice. These movies hint at a messianic hope within our culture, a desire for someone who will save us from the mess that we are in.

But the danger is when the concept of messiah is misunderstood, or deliberately misused it is very dangerous. An authoritarian figure who act above the law and dispenses what they alone decide is justice usually by means of violence might be fine in a movie. But don't for a minute think that is okay in the real world.

Messianic figures in history have a bad record. - often they are violent revolutionaries like Judas Maccabaeus who led a revolt against the Greek empire in 160BC who achieved a short lived freedom at the cost of thousands of lives.

It is a natural desire to think that the solution to our problems is a strong uncompromising leader. It isn't and it never has been.

Context

At the heart of Isaiah is this deeply mysterious passage and - it is largely overlooked in Jewish rabbinical tradition. Because on the surface it makes no sense. But it is The missing link - a defining text for our understanding of God's plan in the world and a poignant foreshadow of Jesus. Don't forget that this is utterly unprecedented. Here, 700 years BC is an astonishing foreshadow of Christ.

It presents us with a figure know only as “the servant”. (Ch52:13 See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up”) So far, so messianic. But look at v14 he will be “*marred... beyond human semblance*”. That concept of a suffering messiah is fundamentally contradictory. How can the one chosen and blessed by God be despised and rejected? And It goes against every understanding of blessing in the ancient world. And concepts like *v7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth like a lamb that is led to the slaughter* are almost incomprehensible within that worldview.

Watch how this unfolds.

1 - The servant will be rejected.

“v1 Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” Who has understood the Lords plan? Isaiah says to the people of God - you are not going to believe what God is going to do. This figure will come from nowhere - he will grow up like a green shoot in the desert.

2. Nothing outwardly attractive.

Our tendency to want leaders to be celebrities, to fit that peculiarly superficial attractiveness. Have you ever met a TV celebrity in real life? You have to be an astonishing sort of person to make it. Driven, self-assured to the point of sociopathic, egotistic. By contrast the servant has no status or reputation. *v3 “we held him of no account”*

I was in the chapel of Lincolns Inn the other day - a beautiful place. And the walls are adorned with grand plaques commemorating the lives of the great and the good. But I was really struck that radiant in stained glass, in the place of highest honour were the disciples - Matthew, Peter, John, Mary Magdalene. Ordinary working class people and outcasts like tax collectors and prostitutes. Because they were the only ones who payed Jesus any notice.

3 And his life was marked by suffering.

v3 *“a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity”*

We pity those who suffer, but we never look to them for wisdom or inspiration.

We look to those unscathed by life - the lucky ones, born privileged, but of course what do they really know? What resources of wisdom can be found in a life of privileged?

The servant entered into the harsh reality of life - born into a poor middle eastern family, having to flee as a refugee as a child, orphaned, working with his hands to support his family.

He knows what life is like. He ‘bore our infirmities’ He is acquainted with our struggles.

This is what God’s chosen leader is like.

5. And more than that - the servant suffers in our place.

v5 *But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole,*

What is the nature of the rescue that the servant messiah would enact? Not political emancipation or military triumph. Not the kind of rescue we think we need. What Jesus brings is not simple solutions to simple problems, but a restoration of our humanity.

He isn’t interested in simply winning the war but winning the peace? It isn’t enough to simply defeat the enemy, you need to offer a better way of life, to give hope.

v6 He addresses a more fundamental problem. If the heart of the human problem really is the problem of the human heart. That the fault line in humanity lies not between rich and poor, conservative and liberal, and not between nations or religions, but right through each of us. So If the problem is not out there, but in here the solution to the problem needs to start with me.

v6 *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Did you know that the Bible has two distinct concepts of wrongdoing?

Transgression is crossing the line - actually doing something wrong. This is what we usually think of as sin. But it isn’t.

Sin means falling short. Not living up to the standards that we should meet.

“All have sinned and fallen short”

Am I my brothers keeper? said Cain? The answer is yes, of course you are. The Commandment is to love you neighbour, and when Jesus is asked ‘Who is my neighbour’ he tells the story of the good samaritan - even your enemy is your neighbour.

What is wrong with the world is not just that we break the rules, but that we fall so far short of who we should be.

v8-9 But the servant does not come to condemn.

We love to blame. That is our response when someone does wrong. And so when the world goes wrong we look for who is to blame. But nothing gets fixed that way.

v11 *“The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”*

The nature of the rescue is that our humanity is restored. Our Guilt is born away, righteousness given as a gift.

And this will happens through an innocent man being put to death.

v8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.”

And he is buried in a rich mans grave *“9 They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich,”*

v10-12 But amazingly death will not defeat him

How can this be? How can his life be made an offering, and yet he shall prolong his days? The answer of course is very clear in retrospect, but was incomprehensible. Even his own disciples on that long darkness of Easter Saturday could not see what was to come.

And who are his offspring? You are. *“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith”*

And this is why Jesus is the greatest there ever was, the greatest that ever will be.

Conclusion

This is God’s messiah. This is his plan to rescue humanity. Not a tyrannically king enacting his own version of justice, but one who *“does not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”*

A suffering servant, a wounded healer, reconciling and forgiving king.

This is how God has enacted his rescue in this world. And the further our culture drifts from this understanding of leadership the more dangerous place it becomes.

But the best of our leaders have emulated that. Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Martin Luther King jr all of them would say that they are putting into practice what they learnt from Christ.

Not through strength but through weakness, not dominance but service. Not hate but love.

Not dehumanising, but empowering, not deceitful but truthful.

Allowing ordinary humans fulfil their potential and become what they were created to be.

This passage is the jewel in the crown of Isaiah. An unprecedented prophetic picture of a hitherto unheard of idea. Don't ever forget that this was written 700 before Christ.

And we are followers of that crucified messiah, that suffering servant who says if you would come after me take up your cross.