



8th January 2017
Isaiah 42.1-9
Matthew 3.13-17

Servant Grace

Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.

This week, as I was battling with a book of theology I've been meaning to get to grips with for far too long, I came across a phrase that jumped off the page. It was a line by a popular Franciscan writer, Richard Rohr, and it went: *Remember, how you get there determines where you finally arrive!*

Such wise words remind us that a victory can be hollow and a dream can be empty if achieved by corrupt, tarnished or aggressive tactics. So this one liner is worth pondering on one of the early Sundays of a New Year. *How you get there determines where you finally arrive.*

Our lectionary readings this morning take us to one of the Servant Songs of Isaiah. These four songs come in the latter part of this Old Testament book which we often refer to as being written by Second Isaiah and they contain some of the most beautiful poetry of the Jewish Scriptures. Today's is no exception with phrases like: *These are the words of The Lord: In the time of my favour I answered you: on the day of your deliverance I came to your aid. I have formed you, and destined you to be a light for peoples, restoring the land.*

Other Servant Songs from Isaiah have similar resonant phrases: These words from chapter 42, the first of the four songs, are some of the most inspiring: *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, I have put my spirit on him, he will establish justice among the nations, he will not shout or raise his voice, he will not break a crushed reed or snuff out a smouldering wick.*

And that, it seems to me is the point, God is not only praising the outcomes of this Servant ministry but the methods. This servant will be gentle, generous, just, full of hope and integrity. In short this Servant reminds us of God's qualities and that's why I think Richard Rohr's words were spot on: *Remember, how you get there determines where you finally arrive!*

The identity of The Servant in these Isaiah passages has intrigued and foxed Bible commentators for centuries. This enigmatic servant is never really identified.

Yet what comes over in all four songs is the irresistible integrity and beauty of this kind of service. It's as if Isaiah is saying to us God is not so much interested in WHO the servant is but WHAT the servant does. And in particular God is concerned with the manner in which this ministry is conducted.

God's servants don't use force or coercion. God's servants are not just interested in results but in the methods used to achieve them. God's servants won't trample on the weak or turn a deaf ear to the marginalised.

If it sounds like a high benchmark – perhaps it has to be, because this kind of Servant

ministry is meant to be a reflection of God's character made known and experienced among us.

Ambassadors have been in the news this week. It's become obvious from what's been going on in Brussels that they can only stay in place if they are willing to represent the views of their government. And servants of God can only claim to be about his business if we strive to live by his character of justice and speak his words of love.

One of the things that really fascinates me about this part of Isaiah is the way a pagan king is so honoured in these writings.

This part of the bible comes from a pivotal moment in Israel's history. They have been in exile living in Babylon, modern day Iraq, taken there by Nebuchadnezzar as prisoners of war.

Yet all of this is about to change for the days of exile are drawing to a close and soon the people will be able to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls and once again establish daily worship at The Temple.

And who is the one who is going to make all this possible? If you were expecting a Jewish King or a High Priest to be the hero of the hour think again!! That's because his name was Cyrus and he was king of Persia, modern day Iran – the neighbour of Babylon. In those far off days he was considered to be outside the fold, not only a foreign king but one practicing a pagan religion.

And yet, and yet...Cyrus was a good man and an honourable king. Indeed in Isaiah 45.1 he is referred to as a messiah for Israel.

You see that term, meaning God's anointed, seems to have been regularly used for those who lived in God's way and enabled God's love and justice to be experienced in our world – it isn't just a name used for Jesus.

Doesn't the fact that King Cyrus of Persia, a so called pagan monarch in Isaiah's day, was given the title messiah, God's anointed – speak to us today about the variety of ways that God's kingdom and blessings, God's presence and love can touch our world.

We are pleased when that happens through the ministry of The Church but in truth we are thrilled wherever and whenever we meet that touch of heaven resting upon our lives.

The Revd John Clifford was one of those great early 20th century non-conformist ministers in Britain with an almost celebrity status – unimaginable these days. Actually I think Duncan has come pretty close to it here in our community of Amersham – as a much loved and respected servant of Jesus Christ – and that's terrific! Well, John Clifford was the minister of Westborne Park Baptist Church in Paddington and a regular guest at both Asquith's and Lloyd George's table at No 10. He wrote a bi-weekly column for the Baptist Times. And around 1907 to 1910, a period when Parliament introduced some great social legislation that included the Old Age Pension and National Insurance – John Clifford regularly used his column to praise the efforts of the Liberal Government – he used to say he saw something of the Kingdom of God in these Acts of Parliament. Clifford saw God at

work in civil as well as ecclesiastical life.

Just one historic example of the way God touches our world with his blessing – and perhaps, as we read of Cyrus of Persia being called a messiah, we might ponder more deeply the idea that God's servants are to be found both inside and outside of The Church of today – they are surgeons, teachers, politicians, campaigners, mentors, social workers and entrepreneurs just as much as they are priests, pastors or bishops. Quite simply we can be constantly surprised and thrilled by the way God is let loose in our world today.

Now, our New Testament reading this morning is The Baptism of Jesus. The compilers of The Lectionary take us on quite a sprint from the manger of a new born to the baptism of a thirty year old in just three Sundays!

One bible commentator calls these Servant Songs the 'connective tissue' between the ideas of servanthood in the Old Testament and the baptism of Jesus as God's Servant in The New Testament. They echo each other – hence they are joined together in today's set readings.

It's as if Jesus' baptism signifies his Commissioning into the vocation of Servanthood.

We Christians rejoice in seeing Jesus in the Servant Songs of Isaiah. In today's we hear of: the one chosen by God, in whom God delights, who will bring forth justice and be a light, who will open the eyes of the blind and release the prisoners. Of course, we think of Jesus Christ, The Man for Others, as we read these wonderful words.

Such words paint for us a vision of life in all its fullness.

We might be as baffled in some ways by the details of Jesus' baptism as we are with the Servant Songs of Isaiah. It doesn't seem to make sense – at least John didn't think so – that the inferior, John the Baptist, should baptise the superior, Jesus of Nazareth. But this is God's Topsy Turvey understanding of what's really important in life.

And none of this seems to matter to God's servant. He comes in humility and by this very act of baptism seems to be saying to us – God doesn't care what faithful, humble service looks like to a hierarchical driven world – service and devotion, obedience and faithfulness may often look out of place in a competitive society and status driven world – but these qualities mean everything to God.

So Jesus plunges into the water and as he emerges God blesses his beloved Son and Servant with words of affirmation: You are mine and your work is mine.

I've loved reading this week the thought that whatever else the baptism of Jesus was about it can be read as his way of just immersing himself so completely, so utterly, so willingly into the trials and tribulations of his people. This is the God who gets totally immersed as he stands alongside his people and as he comes among them to serve with love and to teach a way of light. This is the baptism of The Servant of The Lord.

So, what does all that mean for you and me?

Well, this morning our texts have drawn us back to this fundamental idea from the Judeo Christian tradition – the honoured place of 'servanthood' among us.

The enigma of Isaiah's Servant Songs

means there is little point asking who this particular servant was. It could have been an individual or maybe it was a whole nation. Candidates include some future Davidic King, maybe Cyrus the Persian, perhaps Isaiah himself or maybe the whole nation of Israel as a servant – a light – to the other nations. And then of course we look at Jesus and Christians appropriate Isaiah's words to him.

Some commentators ask us to view ourselves, the present day Church, as the beloved community of the baptised, to embrace the idea that God delights to call us his Servants in this place and for this time.

And that is indeed your calling and mine – it's what we promised to do at our baptism.

And as I reaffirm today that I am called to be a Servant of God Richard Rohr's words also ring in my ears: Remember, how you get there determines where you finally arrive.

As we look at our church community and long for growth there are no quick fix answers.

So as I look at decline in church numbers I don't want to clutch at bandwagon answers.

As I struggle with deep issues of faith I don't want to brush over my doubts and struggles with simplistic formulas.

As I try to make that connection between what I believe and the world in which I live I don't want to put one of them in a box marked Sundays only.

In other words the way I live this faith in 2017, the way I struggle to bring about integrity between what I believe and the what I do, the honesty with which I talk about these things to my neighbours and the love I strive to show my family and community – this is how, with God's grace and help, I aim 'to get there'.

And as a Servant Church how will we get there?

We won't give up offering God our worship week by week.

We won't give up supporting mission projects in this country and overseas so that something of God's justice and wholeness can be experienced by the marginalised in our world.

We won't give up offering a welcome here by opening our doors and hearts to fellow seekers after truth.

We won't give up building community here where we seek to bless each other with loving compassion and gentle kindness .

That is how we seek 'to get there'.

Because we too are called to be Servants of the Lord – to be a light, to open blind eyes and release the prisoners – we too are called to delight God's heart in 2017.

And may it be so, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Ian Green Amersham 6th January 2017