

All Saints Talk for 12 May 2024

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The Power of Godly Vision

'Christ centred vision'

Isaiah 53 v 1-7

*53 Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
4 Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

Today is the sixth week of our sermon series all about the power of Godly Vision. Last week Dave Phillips and Andrew Alden introduced a new section of the book of Isaiah starting at chapter 40, which is sometimes called 'second Isaiah'. The writing shifts gear away from imminent judgment and calamity to fast forward with a whole new perspective for God's people. You might be forgiven for calling this half of the book 'Eyes higher (!)' because it no longer focuses on the present challenges facing King Hezekiah and the people of Judah, but instead shifts to thinking about God's future Kingdom, with a completely new kind of leadership personified by a character Isaiah calls *the Servant*.

Four passages in Isaiah 40-53 are known as 'the servant songs' because they are poems depicting a new unique servant of God who impacts the whole earth. The first of these servant songs is in Isaiah 42.

Isaiah 42

42 "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.
² He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
³ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope."

Over the years there has been debate and speculation as to who exactly the servant could be. From Isaiah 42 it might conceivably be Hezekiah or one of the Judeans raised up to succeed him. But as we proceed through the servant songs up to our passage today in Isaiah 53, it becomes clear that the servant is not just an ordinary person or some aspiring leader.

Isaiah 53 has been called 'the Mount Everest' of scripture because it stands tall above all other words and prophecies for its depiction of the suffering servant, saving the people from their sin and iniquity. The New testament quotes this passage more than any other to explain the work of Jesus on the Cross, and right up until around the Eleventh century both Christian and Jewish scholars were largely in agreement that the servant songs are all about the Messiah.

Then an influential Rabbi known as Rashi reacted against the Christian interpretation of the passage by suggesting the servant is actually Israel, and this interpretation has become dominant in Jewish and rabbinic theology. However, I am convinced that Jesus spoke about this passage when he explained the scriptures concerning himself with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. In Acts 9, the Ethiopian Eunuch was reading this passage when Philip the evangelist met him on the road to Gaza. The Holy Spirit so moved him that he ended up begging to be baptised on the spot. Both Peter and Paul quote extensively from this passage when they explain the Gospel.

I'm told that just a tea spoon full of the matter that makes up a white dwarf star would weigh more than Everest itself, and in the same way within this short passage from Isaiah we find a mountain of theology and the Good news of Christ distilled and condensed into just seven verses. So what is it about these verses that makes all the difference?

It is because these verses point to the answers to some of the biggest questions of life, confronting and unifying the contrasting polarities of sin and justice, suffering and love.

The overarching story of the Old Testament describes the problem of the human condition and people's attempts to be reconciled to God and each other. Genesis describes our problem as sin, which is a word with 'I' in the centre of it. We can try to put it down to 'Survival of the fittest' or simply 'the ways of the world' but sin not only separates us from God's perfect love but also causes successive pain and suffering cascading down the generations. When our lives are weighed on the scales of justice, we are all found wanting. We are not only guilty of the obvious things we know about, but also the things that are done in our name or simply because we have prospered by the exploitation of others. Our society continues to turn away from God on our watch, and it is painful to see materialism and idolatry growing just like it was in Isaiah's day. Earlier in chapter 30 he warns that sin like a bulging wall about to collapse. "Because you have rejected this message, relied on oppression and depended on deceit, this sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly, in an instant."

If sin is not dealt with it leads to destruction and death, divided relationships and separation from God. Leviticus even talks in terms of the land vomiting out the people because creation itself groans under the weight of our iniquity. So in ancient times the answer was to slaughter a perfect lamb as a sacrifice, which was not only costly for any family, but highly symbolic reminder of blood for blood and life for life needed for justice and legal atonement.

And yet even with this sacrificial system centred around the temple in Jerusalem, Israel and Judah's sins continued to pile up around them and the scales of justice could no longer balance indefinitely. Isaiah summarises our fallen state in verse 6 'We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way...' but then he continues with this incredible response – a completely unique idea and which blindsides every prior expectation of law and justice: 'and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'

Just let that sink in for a moment. It is incredible. Scandalous. Shocking.

And yet the heart of the Gospel is that the Servant suffered for our iniquity, my iniquity, your sin, my sin.

When we were still teenagers Mims and I went on beach mission to St. Ives. We had to preach from a soapbox whilst the waves came up around our feet. I don't know what the tourists made of it, but there were a few people who prayed a prayer of commitment over the course of the week. The leaders had a Brethren background and everyday this was the memory verse we had to learn and teach. I've never forgotten it.

⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

It is an incredible concept. As we acknowledge our sheep-like propensity to wander away from the truth, to fall into sin and error, the heart of the gospel is that instead of us being punished, all our iniquity was laid on the suffering servant. He is punished in our place, offering us healing and peace.

⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

Some theologians have reacted negatively to the idea of substitutionary atonement, saying that it somehow feels abusive that God would punish Jesus instead of us. And this would be true unless Jesus was who he claimed to be. He said 'I and the Father are one... if you have seen me you have seen the Father'. When Jesus died on the cross, God himself was paying the price and taking the punishment for our sin.

Jurgen Moltman titled his book on the subject 'The crucified God' and the idea that God would sacrifice himself for our sakes is unique in world religious thought. The idea is offensive to some, ridiculous to others. But for those who will believe it and be thankful, it is the way to forgiveness, healing and peace with God.

When we ask 'How can a God of love allow suffering'? The answer is found in the cross. When we ask how the violence of the Old Testament squares up with the love and peace of the New, the answer is through the cross.

Verses 2 and 3 of our passage talk about the servant having no beauty or majesty that would attract people to him, instead people hid their faces from him, he was so stricken and afflicted.

I remember my own reaction to seeing news reports featuring the suspects who had been arrested after the Crocus Hall attacks in Moscow back in March. The Russian authorities had not held back using physical violence on them and I found myself wincing, appalled at their injuries on public display.

Jesus was stripped, beaten, whipped and severely flogged before his crucifixion. I could not stand to watch the Passion of the Christ, let alone truly appreciate the brutality of Good Friday. Yet it was my sin and your sin that put him there, and his love for us that made him endure it in silence.

He didn't respond at all to the Herod's questioning, he remained silent in the face of false accusations.

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he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

So today how do we respond to all that Jesus suffered and endured for our sakes?

Do we see it as simply a noble display of courage in the face of injustice? Or do we understand that God himself gave himself for all our sakes on the cross, so that if we believe if we might be saved, forgiven, healed and delivered?

This is the Good news of the Gospel – which is of primary importance: That Christ died for our sins on the cross according to the scriptures.

Isaiah invites us to understand and respond – to repent of our selfish ways and to turn to Christ the saviour and redeemer.

As he says in verse 1: Who will believe this message? To whom will the work of the Lord be revealed?

I pray that someone here senses the call of the Lord today.