

MY SERVANT

Isaiah 42
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To be a servant. It's one of the great themes of Isaiah, but it's also such a misunderstood term. And I think we often miss the sharpness of the idea. If you want to become or grow as a Christian, then you will need to be a servant.

I remember years ago being at a prenatal class and serving the coffee and someone said thank you, and I said "I'm happy to serve you". She responded something like "Oh you don't need to put yourself down." It was certainly a different reaction.

What do you think of when you hear the word servant? (interact)

Do you think of Downtown Abbey and domestic servants? Do you think of slaves of some sort? Do you think of a nanny? Or do you think of high minded public servants? There was a fabulous TV show in the 1980's called "Yes Minister", where the British Cabinet minister Jim Hacker was at the mercy of the public servants including Sir Humphrey Appleby, it wasn't quite House of Cards but it was pretty funny.

What do you think of when you hear the word 'servant'? Grab a hold of that idea. Because I want to give you another model.

As Christians we are meant to serve because we follow a servant. And this morning I want to unpack that idea of serving like Jesus. I heard Terri Culpepper speaking at Bethlehem College on Monday, and what she said summed up our calling so well. We're looking at Isaiah because he foretold the work of our Saviour Jesus. In fact, I believe that Isaiah helped Jesus understand the role that he was called to fulfil. And perhaps Isaiah can help us understand the role we are called to fulfil.



On the night before he died, Jesus gathered his friends for a special meal. The last supper, but I don't think they realised until later that this would be their last supper together. So often we don't realise that it's our last conversation, or our last meal, our last good bye with someone until everything changes. Karen's uncle died last week. We had no idea back

in December that that would be our last Christmas with Den.

So I think of the disciples and how they must have poured over those last hours thinking, what could I have done differently. And one thing they distinctly remembered was Jesus taking a towel and washing their feet. And they must have debated together, "what did he say". And I think having come to a consensus John recorded these words. A new commandment I give to you, love one another, as I have loved you. By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another as I have loved you. But that's not a new commandment, He'd been saying that for 3 years now hadn't he? Or had he.

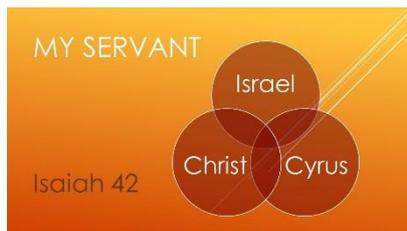
What had Jesus said up till then? Do unto other as you would have them do unto you. Love your neighbour as yourself. Same idea?

No, listen – As I have loved you. Christian love has just stepped up a gear, it is to have a particularly sacrificial nature to it. Jesus is not talking about a public servant, and he's not talking about a slave. He's talking about a serving love that puts the wellbeing of the other before my wellbeing, and sometimes at my cost and at some cost to my family and my

business interests. Christian service is not a marketing strategy for my brand. It's deeper, and it's for his Brand.

Jesus understood His role of serving would involve some degree of suffering, He accepted the role of being a suffering servant, and therefore God used Him as the amazing saving servant. For us serving might mean going out of your way for difficult people, angry people, mean people, dangerous people. Can you identify people like that in your life?

Let's dig into Isaiah and start to look at this idea of the Lord's servant. Which I am convinced God used to help Jesus understand His job. I think of Isaiah as a bit like the induction manual into being the Christ. Here son, here's a book that will help you understand your job as saviour of the World.



Servant is a major theme in Isaiah, particularly in the 4 servant songs in the latter part of Isaiah, that we are starting to look at today. But as I was coming at this topic this week, I was thinking you know maybe there is more than one servant that God is talking about in these passages. Maybe there are 2 or even three servants being alluded to, and

where it seems like the fit for one is not as clear as I might expect, maybe it's because God is wanting to communicate a little about multiple people through the Prophet. So here's my belief. You are welcome to test it.

I think that when we talk about servant in the second half of Isaiah there are 3 people we should have in mind.

The first servant is Israel, a personification of the Jewish Nation Is 41 8. But you O Israel my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend. I think it's pretty clear that at times the Prophet is addressing the nation of Israel as God's servant. Israel who have been given the task of being God's light to the whole world. Isaiah has a very clear view that God's purposes are for all people everywhere. Yahweh is not just a Tribal God, he is the God of the whole earth, and all peoples should respect him.

2 the Messiah, the Christ, the servant is referring to a coming leader who will embody the mission of Israel. As Christians we see Jesus foretold in vivid colour, but a Jewish audience will also see allusion to the expected Messiah.

Now thirdly – and this is important in Isaiah, I think there is some degree that Isaiah sees the Persian King Cyrus as also the Lord's servant. Obviously not in quite the same way, but Cyrus is called the Lord's shepherd and is seen as God's instrument and servant. I'm not suggesting the servant songs are written mainly about him, but when we look at the idea of God's servant in Isaiah, he's in the mix. Is 44. 28 who says of Cyrus he is my shepherd. 45.1 This is what the Lord says to his anointed to Cyrus. Isaiah was saying that Yahweh could use a foreign King to serve His purpose. Later Matthew sees God using Caesar Augustus also to achieve His plans.



Let's look at Cyrus. He is also mentioned in Daniel & at the end of Chronicles 36.22. Where it claims that the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus to decree that the exiles should go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Lord's temple. So Cyrus is a major player on the world scene who is seen as being used by God to achieve God's purposes.

Let me give you a little bit of the back story. Now this is according to Herodotus, who was a Greek historian, but didn't verify history in the way we do. This story might be a bit legendary.

Cyrus' grandfather was the Median king Astyages, and he had a couple of prophetic dreams. The first dream brought about the marriage of his daughter who was Median royalty to a Persian noble. So Astyages grandchild would be set to combine the empires. But the second dream revealed the grandchild as a threat; and so the King Astyages tried to have his grandson Cyrus murdered. The job is given to Harpagus, but he couldn't do it, so he kidnaped the lad and gives him to a cowherd called Mithradates, telling him to abandon Cyrus in the wilderness. But Mithradates' wife had just suffered a miscarriage, and so she persuades her husband to keep the lad as their own.

It does sound a bit like the Biblical stories of divine protection. Cyrus grew up well looked after. In time Cyrus appears before his grandfather, there was great trouble and then a battle and Cyrus emerges as King of the Medes and Persians. He went on to win many battles and eventually overthrow the Babylonians. My point, and the point of Isaiah is that we can sometimes see the work of God's hand in the camp of our enemy, bringing great change. On a global scale Isaiah taught us the idea of the Sovereignty of God, that God has an influence everywhere, and on a personal scale this should teach us to be careful of too quickly dismissing our rivals and our enemies as if God could not have anything to do with them.



Let's jump back to Is 42.3 I love this verse, A bruised reed he will not break, a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. Clearly we are not talking about Cyrus the warrior here, we are I believe reading a prophesy about God's Messiah, in faithfulness He will bring forth justice. Perhaps I could say in gentleness he will bring forth justice. ...

The image that this gives me is of a teacher, of a ruler whose concern is to draw out the best in a person, even if there is only a slim chance. If a person has fallen a long way down towards a precipice, to still try and rescue them, if a person has headed down the path of drugs and alcohol abuse, they have become violent and very difficult to work with, still to hold on. Perhaps a person who has a fragility about them, an advanced mental illness, but still a light of hope. I read one comment where the analogy was to a smouldering flax with an acrid smell, unpleasant, yet a hope to hold on to.

My friends if we are to be servants of God in the Isaiah- Jesus frame, we need to hold onto hope for people. To care for the fragile and fan into flame even the smallest puff of faith, the deepest cynics often have a puff of faith left to hold onto. And remember Isaiah has a wider picture than just the community of faith, faith was to be a light to the Gentiles, and Gentiles in Hebrew the go, the nations, the others.



Verse 7, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, to release from the dungeons those who sit in darkness. Then verse 16, I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them. I will turn the darkness into light before them. – wow! that is a fantastic vision. Inviting people that look at faith as a dark

cave with nothing worth seeing in it, and switching on a light, to a God of wonders.

I know some of you are doctors and I know part of Ken and Penny's professional life has been to open the eyes of the blind, I've heard the joy of people who have had cataracts for example removed. This is one form of service, of being a servant, to pursue a vocation with passion and skill.

I know some of you, perhaps many of us are educators of some form. Surely this is an amazing passage for educators, to take people who are beginners, blind to knowledge and to lead them into unfamiliar and wonderful new paths. To teach fractions to 7 years-olds, teaching Chemistry to 12 years-olds, trumpet to 14 year-olds, teaching Shakespeare to 16 year-olds, teaching trades to 18 year-olds, cooking to 30 year-olds, the love of working with wood to 40 years-olds, business strategy to 50 years-olds and life-skills to 60 year-olds, teaching French poetry and Euclidian geometry. Turning the darkness into light before your students. That is what the servant teacher does.

And then of course this passage is ultimately a spiritual metaphor, taking minds that have been blinded by the spirit of this age, the sceptical, godless, selfish spirit of this age, and inviting people to believe. To believe in a God who loves them. A God who has created a universe that bears so many markers of design. To believe that actually people will sacrifice without an ulterior motive. Inviting people that look at faith as a dark cave with nothing worth seeing in it, and switching on a light, to a God of wonders.



Verse 19. Who is blind but my servant and deaf like the messenger I send? You have seen many things but have paid no attention; your ears are open but you hear nothing. Here I believe Isaiah is speaking to Israel, and Israel is often portrayed as the unfaithful servant. Now we need to be very careful here. Because as the church we should hear the

warning ourselves and not think – Oh that’s Jews. That is the danger towards anti-Semitism which is clearly not Isaiah’s intention. So the warning, my brothers and sisters is that we who have been exposed to God’s glory, must live as children of His Glory. Jesus says this incredible thing. By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another. Jesus’ strategy for spreading the word is our love. I was positive a second ago, now I want to be firm. God has placed us together as a family. We are to love each other, we can smile at each other’s faults, but we have to love each other. That means helping each other when we are down. Not back biting each other. Hoping the best for each other. And being kind but firm.



Isaiah sees strong consequences when Israel failed in her task. He identifies the violence and flames of war with Yahweh pouring out his anger on his disobedient people. There is a whole pile of things to unpack there, and I’m not going to talk a lot about that today. But I do want to hold up this truth that there are consequences if we hold on to our

blindness and our deafness. When we ignore God’s way there are costs, if we backbite and are petty and selfish – there will be consequences involving the down turn of God’s mission. Isaiah is God’s instruction manual for service and, if we want to be followers of Jesus, we will need to be servants, and not domestic servants, not public servants, not slaves from antiquity; but people who are willing to sacrifice for the sake of others. People who will not break a bruised reed, nor snuff out a smouldering wick. Who is that to you?