

## Isaiah 53: the suffering servant

We began by listening to a movement from Handel's *Messiah*...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73hv1BL2aJU>

*Surely he hath borne our grief and carried our sorrows...* That's how Handel has set those words Hugh read to us earlier ... words that first appear in the book of Isaiah... but that echo through the Bible, quoted by the Gospel writers and others ... making connections between a mysterious suffering figure (often called the suffering servant) ... *who was wounded for our transgressions* ... making connections between that figure from ancient times with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus...

Of course, this was not how people first thought about these words, which were probably written around 500 BC ... so around half a millennium before Jesus was born and more than two thousand years before Handel's librettist, Charles Jennens, adapted the text ...

Who were the first readers of this book? It's thought they were God's people in or around the time of the Babylonian exile.... This is the time when the dominant power in the region, the Babylonian Empire, had swept down on tiny little Judah (the last tribe left standing of the people of Israel) ... decimated their cities and carried off their elite into exile. So, the prophet's words were addressed to people who were themselves suffering (whether they were left behind or had been dragged off into a strange land) ... people who were looking for answers... people who were wondering where God was in all this...

And into this terrible, messy situation, the prophet writes a sequence of poems...about someone described as a servant... *my servant*, the voice of God says...

This unnamed servant has suffered... they bear the physical scars... Their suffering is unjust: but even though they don't deserve it, they are silent in the face of attack... And their suffering is vicarious: it has positive effects for others –

*And with his stripes we are healed*, the next chorus of the Messiah says, quoting Isaiah chapter 53 again.

Then, finally, the servant is vindicated - *Out of his anguish he shall see light*, Isaiah writes.

But who might this servant have been? Now this is poetry, so there are lots of possibilities... could the servant be not an individual, but all of God's people, Israel? That would fit with where things were at the time, whether we're thinking about the people in exile or those left behind... Or a prophet? Perhaps even the writer themselves ...Or maybe Isaiah refers to a promised rescuer who is to come... elsewhere the Persian King, Cyrus, who overthrew the Babylonian empire and enabled God's people to return home is called by Isaiah God's anointed – God's *Messiah*, just like the title of Handel's oratorio...all these have been considered... all these are entirely reasonable interpretations...

But the thing that changes the game for us Christians is how the writers of the New Testament read this text...The poetry gets a new life as the gospel writers make connections with the life and death of Jesus... They see in these patterns and ideas that had been expressed long ago a new meaning for their own time... They find in the prophet's words a way of describing and explaining what is going on as Jesus moves inexorably through suffering and death to resurrection...

Isaiah is one of the books of the Bible most frequently quoted by the New Testament writers... whatever it meant before.... Whoever the servant was for Isaiah's first readers... the servant's suffering becomes the paradigm to explain or describe what happens to Jesus by those who write the story of his life and reflect on what that means for the first Christian communities...

It takes us to the heart of Jesus' passion... the lonely figure, accusers on all sides, who does not speak out to defend himself, but remains silent... *like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*

but it also lifts us up... brings hope as well as despair... just as the suffering servant is vindicated, so -in his resurrection and ascension – is Jesus.

Thus, Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth: *I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures....* Arguably the scriptures Paul is here thinking of is the bit we read this morning...

Now this pattern... from weakness to greatness... from rejection to vindication... from despair to hope ... This is a repeat pattern in the Bible... This is the shape of the life of Ruth, whose story we remembered at our

harvest festival here... it's the shape of the life of David and Esther and Moses... it's in the song that Mary sings, the Magnificat, and pre-eminently it's the shape of Jesus' life...

A shape that is the inspiration for all who follow him...

Just as he himself says to his disciples and to us in today's gospel reading:

*'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'*

As followers of Jesus, we are not asked to give our lives as a ransom for many, like the suffering servant in Isaiah... that is exclusively what Jesus does... But we are – as our lives have been ransomed, freed from the consequences of turning away from God, of turning our own way. Freed not to become great as the world understands greatness, but to serve others as servants of Christ. We'll each find our own shape to that calling, but make no mistake, for every one of us it means putting aside our concern for our own status and comfort... it means making someone else's needs and preferences our priority... we pray for God's grace to learn to reshape our ambitions and desires... in the pattern that Jesus has shown us, who gave up his life that we should live. Amen.