

God's perfect justice and mercy – Isaiah 53:1-6, Matthew 27:31-44

One of the sadnesses to me of getting older is that you can't get away with going on playground equipment any more. Does anyone else miss the simple joy of the playground? When I was a kid I used to love it – these days you get all kinds of weird and wonderful, *exotic* equipment to play on, but for most of us growing up the three staples were: the slide, the swing and the roundabout. I could enjoy myself for hours just going round and doing all 3. Up and down, forward and backward, round and round.

That's all it is, really, isn't it? Up and down, forward and backward, round and round. It's the hypnotic repetition, the sense of acceptable danger. Today, I can just about manage a swing, but if I try to climb up the ladder for a slide my knee usually gives way, and even if it doesn't I get stuck coming down and have to inch forward on my bottom; and if I get on a roundabout – well, 30 seconds later I want to puke. As you get older, your body just can't do that stuff anymore, can it?

As my kids grew up, I also spent many hours taking them to the playground and watching them. And one of the things you get used to is that once they're on the swing or the roundabout they can't get off unless it slows down. I'm sure those of you who are parents have had the same experience. Mum, dad! Help! I can't get off! And you'll walk over and slowly grab the handles of the roundabout, slowing it down bit by bit, until it's safe for them to stagger off. It usually buys you about 5 minutes before it happens all over again.

But what if the roundabout doesn't slow down? How do you get off? Round and round you go, stuck in the same never-ending loop, and always coming back to where you started.

'When you get to the bottom you go back to the top / of the slide / then you stop / and you turn, and you go for a ride / then you get to the bottom / then you see me again....'

You might recognise that was the start of '**Helter Skelter**' by the Beatles – a song about an endlessly repeating negative loop in a relationship – a fairground ride turned into a metaphor. Round and round the same loop we go and every time we get to the bottom, there I am again, waiting for you, offering my love – will you take it, or go back to the top / of the slide....

It's a love song of sorts, but it's also a song God could have written about His people. The whole Old Testament is really like a 1,000 year version of Helter Skelter. God offers his great love to his people if only they will live his way, but they keep heading back up to the top of the ride, only to slide down to the bottom where they meet God again, waiting for them. But off they go again, heading off on their own, only to end up back at the bottom again. A constant round of rebellion and atonement, rebellion and atonement. God's perfect justice quite rightly demands punishment, and then His mercy paves the way for a fresh start.

But the helter skelter can't on forever. Round and round, round and round – and by 600BC everyone is feeling sick. How can God satisfy both his justice and his mercy? If he doesn't punish wickedness he is not just, and therefore cannot be loving.

On the other hand, if He is not merciful, His eternal plan to fashion a people who will walk in love and trust with him for eternity fails, and He is left with no-one to love.

There has to be a solution, and Isaiah 53 is it. If there was time, you have to read a much longer part of Isaiah to get the full picture, as God promises via the prophet a righteous servant who will come and put things right on many levels. But the promises of ch53 lie at the heart of it. Thus far, Israel's atonement rituals have always been temporary – enacted annually to remind God's people of his mercy. But here in ch53 we get something much greater. A perfect human who will die in our place to put things right between people for all time: **READ v5-6. God's perfect justice and perfect mercy meet.** We *can* get off the helter skelter, and run into the arms of a waiting God.

For 600 years humanity was waiting for this servant. And then along comes Jesus. And the final piece of the puzzle falls into place. Because God could have been accused of being unfair in sending an innocent person to die in our place. *Except Jesus wasn't just an ordinary human – Jesus was God himself.* God himself comes in human form, the true righteous servant of Isaiah, to put things right.

And notice how **Jesus' death fulfils all the promises of Isaiah:**

- 'He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him, a man of suffering/sorrows and familiar with pain.' Or as Matthew puts it just before our passage: 'They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisted a crown of thorns and set it on his head. Then they mocked him.'
- 'Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised. We considered him punished by God.' Or as Matthew puts it: 'Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads.'
- 'He was pierced for our transgressions.' Or as Matthew puts it: 'Then they led him away to crucify him.'
- The fulfilment continues beyond our passage: 'He did not open his mouth', 'he was assigned a grave with the rich in his death', 'he will see the light of life'...

But then comes the great denouement: 'By his wounds we are healed.' Or as Matthew puts it: 'At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.' The veil that separated God from people was torn open – and not by people, from the top. *God* came down, *God* acted to remove the veil. God's perfect justice and mercy fulfilled in the cross. 'And by His wounds we are healed.'

Today we have the great joy of baptising Moremi and welcoming her into God's family. And what we have done is re-enact this passage in a spiritual sense. That's why we make the sign of the cross on her forehead, and use the words 'dying to sin that we may live Jesus' risen life' – Moremi joins Jesus' family spiritually because of what Jesus did literally – dying and rising again. The water is a sign of cleansing, but also of crossing from old life to new life. We step off the helter skelter and into the arms of a waiting God.

In a few moments we will fix our eyes again on the cross, as we eat bread to remind ourselves of his body, and drink wine to remind ourselves of his blood. We do this to remember him, *and* to declare that the prophecy of Isaiah 53 is true – by his wounds we are healed.

And maybe for some of us, this is a moment to step off the helter skelter. We've gone round and round the same loop, and never broken free. We've tried hard to do the right thing, but so often ended up doing the wrong thing. The good news is that God offers us a different way. We can't make ourselves good – that's why the self-help shelves in a bookshop are so full. There's so many gurus offering us things that don't ultimately work. They might make a modest difference for a while, but if any of them really worked those shelves would be empty.

What we need is divine help. We need a fresh start, a start that only God can give. We need to admit that there's no point going back to the top of the slide, only to end up back at the bottom again. We need to let Jesus fulfil God's perfect justice, that we can receive his perfect mercy. 'By his wounds, we are healed.'

It doesn't fix every problem, it doesn't make us perfect people, but that's the point: we rest on Jesus' perfection, not ours. And to use the beautiful words of the prayer I prayed over the baptism water: we are loved as God's children, safe in Christ forever.

I'm going to close by offering us the chance to finally get off the helter skelter. God is there, waiting for you to run into his arms. What will you choose?

PRAY