

14th January 2024 – Isaiah 40-55 (1) – Isaiah 42:1-12 ‘A new Servant’

If we're honest most revolutions could be summarised as: different face, same old problems. A brutal dictator is overthrown and replaced by someone who makes great promises, but turns out to be just as bad. A new technology comes in and two years later life quickly turns out to be no better than it was before. Or, if you're a fan of a football club, a new manager comes in, to great fanfare, and then departs out the same door a few months later, only to be replaced by the next Great Hope. As they say, there are only two types of football manager – those who've been sacked and those who are going to be sacked. (My own boyhood club has had 20 different managers since 2011 – to use a recent political analogy, we really should have bought a lettuce for each one!)

But some revolutions really do change history. Whoever invented the first wheel definitely changed the course of human society. Or Gutenberg with his printing press. Or the internal combustion engine. And, for good or ill, I suspect they will say the same about the mobile phone.

There is one revolution, though, which sits above all the others. One person, in fact, who dramatically changed the course of history: so much so, that large portions of the world divide time into the period before he arrived and the period after. And you can guess who that was! But unlike, say, the wheel or the mobile phone, his coming was expected hundreds of years before it happened. We have multiple promises, from many people, written down in evidence: prophecies which were heard, read, at least partially understood and anticipated with growing excitement.

And today we re-commence a new series in perhaps the most famous such prophecy of them all – the section of Isaiah which starts at chapter 40. We spent three weeks looking at the first chapter in December, and now we return for the main course. I'm calling this series: The Shock of the New – and deliberately so, because I hope that some of these passages come to us again with fresh power. They were a huge shock in their day – and we can get comfortable with these promises which seem so familiar to us now. Let's hear them again with new ears, reflect on them with new minds, and receive them with new hearts. Their purpose is always to bring us new life.

Let's begin with a quick recap of the context of this amazing prophetic vision. The setting is the 6th century BC. God's people were in crisis. They had been judged by the Lord, conquered by the Babylonians and the kingdom of Israel had effectively been destroyed. The capital city, Jerusalem, was a smoking ruin, the temple was reduced to rubble, the leadership, nobility and thousands of others had been carted off into exile by the Babylonian army, and all of it – *all* of it – had been given as warnings by previous prophets – including Isaiah himself – for well over a hundred years, if Israel didn't mend her ways.

As I mentioned last month, scholars debate whether this section of Isaiah was written by Isaiah himself or a different later prophet in the tradition of Isaiah – but for our purposes, it doesn't really matter, because it's clear that the prophecy is directly addressed to God's people *after* their exile, and, whoever wrote it, the message is exactly the same, it doesn't really matter that we don't know for sure which of those scenarios is true. **It is God's great love letter to his people, his reminder that he has not forgotten them,** and his promise of a hopeful future which lies ahead.

As we saw in Advent, the prophecy begins in chapter 40 with a new herald – whatever was coming next, someone would come before the event, declaring that the new thing is about to take place. It also reminded us that God was in control and that he still carried his people close to his heart. Chapter 41 imagines a heavenly courtroom (and, if you're reading the daily inspirations, we covered this on Friday and Saturday just gone) where God challenges the false gods of the world to a parley and calls his people to trust in their true Lord, to choose the only one who reigns over the universe.

And now, today, here in chapter 42 we get the great introduction to what this glorious new message, ignited by the herald of chapter 40, actually is; and **it's not an idea or an invention, it's a person – it's a new servant of the people:** (v1) 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him.'

It's hard to do justice to Isaiah 42, because from this point it reads like a 'greatest hits' of God's promises, I could literally have preached a 9 or 11 point sermon today. They come thick and fast, but let's at least mark the highlights:

Firstly, let's note that God confers his blessing on this servant in three ways right at the start: the Lord upholds him, the Lord delights in him, and the Lord puts his Spirit on him. This servant doesn't appear by accident, or human choice – it is God who ordains him, who empowers him and – what a beautiful image this is – delights in him.

And this servant has a whole host of amazing attributes: **he will bring justice** – and again, let's be struck at what a big billing justice gets in the vision of the Messiah. We rightly emphasise grace, love, joy and peace – but the prophecies of the Old Testament give at least as big a billing to justice. Which is good news if you're a Subpostmaster, or a relative of all those killed in Christmas attacks on Christians, or indeed one of the countless millions living in the forgotten conflict zones of the world. God will put things right: those who deserve justice will get it eventually – in the kingdom of God, if not in our earthly kingdoms.

But **it's a justice tempered with mercy.** I love the verse which declares: (v3) 'A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.' This anointed servant will do things gently. And as an aside, the Hebrew word for 'reed' is very similar to the Hebrew version of the name Simon. When Simon Peter – Reedy Peter – denies Jesus, does Jesus bruise the reed? No, a bruised reed he will not break – not Simon's, not ours.

This servant also communicates – the islands (code language for the scattered people of God) will **put their hope in his teaching. He will be a light and bringer of renewal** – opening eyes and freeing captives. He will represent the restoration and fulfilment of God's solemn commitment of love to his people – or, to use the language of the text, 'a covenant' – and he will also reach out to the whole world.

Ultimately, this Spirit-filled servant represents a completely new era, a new chapter in human history – 'the former things have taken place' (a phrase which occurs again in chapter 43), 'new things I declare.' New things! New hope, a new future – all ushered in by a new servant.

And when, approximately 600 years later, the new herald of Isaiah 40 meets the new servant of Isaiah 42 on the banks of the Jordan, it's natural that what we see is the very first thing we learn about the servant: the Spirit descends on him like a dove: 'Here is my servant – only, when it happens, the divine voice says Son! – 'I will put my Spirit on him.' (Cindy and Jack segment.)

Jesus' baptism is Isaiah 42 enacted – and to the Jews gathered round who knew their scriptures, the implication is: join the dots; do the math. If this is how it starts – what else do we learn about this new Servant? Justice, mercy, teaching, light, renewal – read the rest of the gospels, it's all there!

And, as I close, **our response to this glorious new servant? A new song!** 'Sing to the Lord a new song.' It is the calling for the whole world: by the sea, on the islands, in the wilderness and the towns, on the mountaintops. We are all to sing his praise from the ends of the earth (v10) and give glory to the Lord alone (v12). I'm not musical, but this this song is about more than just tuneful notes: it's a song of the heart, of our lives. This is my story, this is my song, praising my Saviour all the day long – may God grant us grace to have our eyes opened afresh today, singing a new song to this glorious Spirit-filled servant. Amen.