

4th February 2024 – Isaiah 40-55 (4) – Isaiah 53:1-12 ‘A new salvation’

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 the time of this famous prophecy in Isaiah, 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. As we've seen over the last few weeks, this passage is part of a much longer love letter from God – but here in ch53 we get to the heart...

A perfect human – described (as he is in the other passages we’ve looked at) as ‘the righteous servant’ who will die in our place to put things right between people for all time; as it says in verse 5: ‘he was pierced for *our* transgressions, he was crushed for *our* iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace is on *him*, and by his wounds *we* are healed.’ **God’s perfect justice and perfect mercy meet.** We *can* get off the helter-skelter, and run into the arms of a waiting God.

In our series thus far, we’ve focused on these prophetic promises, and we know that they are fulfilled in Jesus – but I’ve deliberately not dwelt too much on ‘the answer’, to make sure we engage with the passage afresh, on its own terms. But today, let’s acknowledge just how closely Jesus fulfils the extraordinary verses of this prophecy. God himself comes in human form, the true righteous servant of Isaiah, to put things right.

Jesus’ death fulfils all the promises of Isaiah – and I’ll partner each promise with text from Matthew’s gospel:

- (vv2-3) ‘He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him, a man of suffering and familiar with pain.’ Or, as Matthew puts it: ‘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.’
- (v3) ‘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.’
- (v5) ‘He was pierced for our transgressions.’ Or as Matthew puts it: ‘Then they led him away to crucify him.’ And of course, crucifixion entails the piercing of hands and feet.
- There are other passages directly fulfilled: (v7) ‘He did not open his mouth’ (note: Jesus’ silence throughout most of his ordeal, and his refusal of wine vinegar’, (v9) ‘he was assigned a grave with the rich in his death’ – think Joseph of Arimathea.

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.’

Isaiah 53 finishes with a triumphant conclusion: (v11) ‘after he has suffered, he will see the light of life...’ A hint of something glorious, unimaginable to the original readers: **resurrection**. Death leads into life, the pattern is broken, a new creation begins: *we step off the helter-skelter, and into the arms of a waiting God – into life, life in all its fullness.*

At some level, all of us have experienced the helter-skelter – it is the human condition. And we can’t create our own solution: that’s why the self-help shelves in a bookshop are so full – 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 the sacrificial gift of the righteous servant: ‘By *his* wounds, we are healed.’

Isaiah 53 is one of the great chapters in the bible because it points towards the source of true hope – forgiveness for all time, new life, a new restored community. But it can only happen through a person: the Word made flesh, the God-man Jesus Christ. Today is a chance to receive again the gift of Christ – or maybe for the first time. A gift freely given, but won at such a cost. May God grant us grace to say yes, to be healed by his wounds, to pray these words: ‘*Once again I look upon the cross where you died, I’m humbled by your mercy and I’m broken inside; once again I thank you, once again I pour out my life.*’ Amen.