

15 January 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

Knock, knock. [Encourage response...]

Who's there?

Shore.

Shore who?

Shore hope you like bad jokes!

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Goat.

Goat who?

Goat to the door and find out!

There is a knock at the door. As I go to the door I see through the glass a stranger on the doorstep. I open the door with instinctive questions already leaping into my mind: "Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want?" I'm unlikely to ask these baldly in this way, straight out; but these are the questions I need answers to. "Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want?" I need answers around the person's *identity*, their *purpose*, and *what is demanded of me*.

These same questions arise in various ways in our three readings today.¹

We start with Isaiah.

And we start with an identity question. Our question to Isaiah is, "Who is the Servant?" The figure of the suffering Servant appears in several prominent passages in Isaiah, which our lectionary compilers have us reading in the key seasons we associate with Jesus' identity – Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Week.

¹ This sermon owes its essential structure, and quite a bit of its content to Wright, *Twelve*, pp.20-21, with adaptation and expansion at many places.

“Who is the Servant?” we ask.²

And Isaiah answers, “Israel” [Isaiah 49:3].

But the far harder question is, “Who is Israel?”

To this, Isaiah gives three concentric answers. The outside circle is Israel as the nation as a whole, the people abhorred by the nations [v.7³]. The middle answer is those referred to as the “remnant”, those who remain faithful, whose task it is to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the survivors of Israel [v.6]. The last answer, the narrowest definition of Israel, refers to an individual. Over time this idea of a mysterious individual chosen by God – through whom, and by whose suffering, God will act to restore and redeem his people – came to be part of the cluster of ideas about the nature and role of the Messiah.

“Who is this Servant? Who is Israel?” we ask. “Nation”, “remnant”, and “individual” are Isaiah’s various answers. And these three answers form a lasting pattern.

So much for the *identity* piece. The answer to our other question about the *purpose* of this figure in Isaiah 49 is that the Servant will not only bring about the restoration of Israel, but will extend God’s saving work to all peoples: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light to the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” [v.6]. This purpose is actually a restatement of God’s desire from the beginning and the purpose for which he called out a particular people in the first place, going right back to God’s calling of Abraham, saying “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”⁴

² The discussion of the identity of the Servant figure in Isaiah here follows Wright’s way of setting out the issue [Twelve, p.20]. Driver “Commentary” approaches things in a different way, surveying the varying identifications of the Servant. See also Webb, *Isaiah*, pp.169-172, 193-193.

³ Wright assigns v.7 in support of his outer circle identification of “Israel” the servant as the nation as a whole. The Hebrew text is however ambiguous, and NIV and NJB for example provide the translation “nation” suggesting that v.7 could relate more to Wright’s third answer, while NRSV provides the translation “nations” which supports Wright’s first answer. In any case, this is certainly not the only Isaiah passage that reflects this wider identification of the Servant/Israel as Driver and Webb evidence in the references cited in the previous footnote.

⁴ Genesis 12:3

“Who is this Servant?” “Nation”, “remnant”, and “individual” are Isaiah’s various answers. But as Christians we want to add to the Servant list. From what I’ve said already you know the name of the one to add: *Jesus*, of course.

In today’s reading from John’s Gospel we also find the issues of identity to the fore. Immediately before today’s section, we find John the Baptist being questioned by priests and Levites about his identity: is John the Messiah, or an Elijah figure going before the Messiah, or the Prophet (likely meaning a Moses-like figure leading a new Exodus)? No, the Baptist replies. He is merely the voice of one calling in the wilderness, calling the people to prepare the way for the Lord. And then he has opportunity to point out the one he is forerunner to: the very next day Jesus comes along, and John points him out, saying “Look, the Lamb of God.”

“Lamb of God” evokes the Passover lamb from Exodus 12:1-13. There the Hebrew people living in Egypt are instructed to slaughter a lamb, put some of its blood on their doorposts, and eat the lamb. Those who do this will be spared the final plague of the death of the firstborn sons that God brings down on the Egyptian people who have enslaved the people of God.⁵ Jesus is undertaking a new, and better, Exodus story. Just as God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, so God is now bringing a new people of out an even older and darker slavery.⁶

John the Baptist goes on to testify that this Jesus is the “Son of God”.⁷ Various people have been described as “sons of God”, but John the Evangelist makes quite clear that in Jesus we have not just *a* son of God, but *the* Son of God. At the conclusion of the prologue to his Gospel, John writes “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, *who is himself God* and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” [v.18] We should have already made this identification from John’s “the Word was God” language in the very first verse of his Gospel: here the restatement removes any doubt.⁸

⁵ Jillian Engelhardt, “Commentary”.

⁶ Wright, *John*, p.11. See also discussion in Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 24-25 where he summarises “Taking the relevant evidence into account, we conclude there is little doubt as to what figure is in mind: the Baptist has in view the Lamb who leads the flock of God, and who delivers them from their foes and rules them in the kingdom of God.” As Engelhardt notes, the “lamb of God” phrase also evokes again the suffering Servant of Isaiah: in Isaiah 53 the Servant is described as being “like a lamb that is led to slaughter”, whose life was made “an offering for sin”.

⁷ John 1:34. The Greek manuscripts vary. Some have “Son of God”, while others have “God’s Chosen One” (which echoes Isaiah 42:1). For discussion on the manuscript evidence, see Beasley-Murray, *John*, p.21

⁸ Engelhardt, “Commentary”; Beasley-Murray, *John*, pp.25-26.

John the Baptist made two strong, exalted, statements about Jesus' identity. Those among the Baptist's disciples start a little more tentatively. Told that this is the Lamb of God, they follow Jesus. On being asked what they want, they reply "Rabbi, where are you staying?"

The "where are you staying" bit is not to be understood as a nervous attempt to deflect Jesus' question. It actually goes hand-in-hand with the disciples' identification of Jesus as "Rabbi". If Jesus is indeed a rabbi, a teacher, then anyone wanting to become a disciple, a learner, wants to know where the teacher is staying, where the teacher will be offering his teaching.⁹

"Rabbi" is a start. But it is not long before Andrew has made a huge leap: "We have found the Messiah" he tells his brother Simon Peter. Somehow, Andrew has picked up the implications of what John the Baptist has been saying: this Jesus, this Lamb of God, this Son of God, is also going to be the one who will fulfil the long-held hope for a new godly king, the one who would fulfil God's promises to redeem Israel.

As Christians we happily add Jesus to Isaiah's Servant list. It would be appropriate for us to also add the apostles – Paul, for example, often uses the servant-language of Isaiah to describe his own work.¹⁰ So we happily add Jesus and the apostles to the list. But worryingly, the New Testament also adds 'ordinary' Christians to the servant list. We can't get off the hook of the demanding servant-vocation by supposing Jesus has done it all. The pattern of Isaiah still awaits fulfilment: if God's justice and salvation are to reach to the ends of the earth, it will be through servants, equipped with the spirit of the Servant.

If God's justice and salvation are to reach to the ends of the earth, it will be through servants like the church in Corinth. At the beginning of a letter in which he will address a number of issues and points of contention facing the Corinthian church, Paul starts off making amazing affirmations of them:

⁹ Engelhardt, "Commentary"

¹⁰ As just one example, in 2 Corinthians Paul writes "as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger ..." [2 Corinthians 6:4-5]

- They are sanctified in Christ Jesus [v.2]
- They are called to be God's holy people [v.2]
- Paul thanks God for them [v.4]
- They have been enriched in every way, with all kinds of speech and all knowledge [v.5]
- They do not lack any spiritual gift [v.7].

It is very elevating for the people of Corinth, and I was tempted to re-write these attributes as affirmations of us, the people of St Peter's.

And before you shrink under that thought, and think it would be lacking in humility, we should note that as he affirms the people of Corinth – and as he would affirm us – Paul is constantly talking about Jesus. It is Jesus who is the source of all that Paul properly affirms in the church; it is by the grace of God and through the operation of the Holy Spirit that the Corinthians have the qualities that Paul rightly celebrates. Paul's central concern is Jesus. Paul can't stop talking about Jesus, because without Jesus nothing else he said or did made any sense. And what he wants the Corinthians to get hold of most of all is what it means to have Jesus at the middle of your story, your life, your thoughts, your imagination.¹¹

We could ask the Corinthians, "Who are you?" and on the basis of Paul's understanding they would be justified in answering "we are those sanctified in Christ Jesus", "we are those called to be God's holy people", and so on. And having addressed this question of identity, we would find that the question of purpose is now in front of us. This is the basis of Paul's appeal to Corinth. Before he launches into the letter's many problems, he lays down a foundation. God's people in Corinth are summoned to be saints and worshippers [v.2]; God has given them many gifts of speech and knowledge [vv.5-7]; God will give them strength [vv.8-9]. All of which is for a purpose: that they might be servants, continuing in the servant-vocation of Jesus.

Paul emphasises that God's people in Corinth belong to the *koinonia*, the partnership, of God's Son, King Jesus, the Lord [v.9].

¹¹ Wright, *Paul*, p.2

But that partnership is not just a dining club where one can settle down and enjoy fellowship. Fellowship is certainly part of it – a necessary and vital part, given that is about a people gathered to a common cause, and given the message and ministry of reconciliation.

Fellowship matters.

But fellowship is only part of the partnership with God's Son. For it is a *business* partnership with a purpose: to address the sin and pain of the world with the love of God unveiled on the cross. Paul is about to call the Corinthian church to model and implement the genuine new humanity through which alone God will overturn the wisdom and power of the world. This is the servant-vocation, first-century style. It remains the servant-vocation still.

The fluidity of Isaiah's servant-concept therefore has nothing to do with the prophet's being unable to make up his mind or to bring the picture into clear focus. It has to do with God's continuing determination to work *through* his created order, *through* his chosen people. *Through* Jesus, yes, as the true Israelite, the firstborn of all creation, but also now through those who belong to Jesus: lest, salvation having been accomplished in Jesus, the world and the human race go on to be merely passive. So, in John's account of Jesus' baptism and his first disciples, Andrew's announcement – "we've found the Messiah!" – is matched, balanced, by Jesus' comment – "Simon, eh? I'm going to call you Mr Rock".



Jesus stands at the door and knocks. We open it. We want answers to the questions "Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want?"

This is Jesus, Lamb of God, Son of God, rabbi, Messiah.

Why is he here? He is here to save the world God loves.

What does he want? He wants us to join him in the task.

And in the answers to those questions we find Jesus is actually in dialogue with us around *our* identity, purpose, and what is demanded of us.

For when, through the front-door window of God's revelation, you recognise the unique Servant, you will also glimpse your own reflection in the glass.

Knock, knock?

Who's there?

You.

You, who?

It's all very well to call "yoo-hoo" to me, but actually I'm calling *you!*

Sources:

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