

The Servant's Sacrifice: Isaiah 53: 4-12 & Mark 10: 35-45
Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for Sunday 17 October 2021

One of the joys of a church diary is that it tells you when all the saints' days are, and also the days to commemorate people who have not made it officially to saint-hood but are really worth remembering. Last Tuesday, we remembered Edith Cavell. If we had been around 100 years ago, we would have had no difficulty in remembering Edith Cavell: she was a real popular hero. She had been a nurse working with the Red Cross in Belgium when the 1st World War broke out. German armies swept across that land. The British Expeditionary Force went to help the Belgians resist. Edith Cavell cared for the wounded on both sides of the struggle. That was her vocation as a nurse and as a Christian. As the German advance continued, she refused repatriation, and got involved behind the lines in smuggling British soldiers to safety in Holland. She was arrested, tried and executed by firing squad on 12 October 1915. It caused an outcry in this country – clear proof to many of how vicious an enemy they faced. But Edith Cavell went to her death calmly, forgiving her executioners, convinced she had been doing her duty as a Christian.

Over the last couple of years, nurses have once more been regarded as the heroes of our times. We admire more than anything else those who serve others with little reward for themselves, and who put themselves in harm's way for the sake of others. Jesus enjoined his followers – specifically James and John whose eyes were on the prize of royal thrones – to seek not to be served but to serve, for that is the way of the kingdom of God. Then Jesus adds a further saying: the Son of Man not only came to serve, but to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus never explained exactly what he meant. He repeatedly said it was written the Son of Man must suffer and die at the hands of sinful men, but never says exactly why or where it is written. But, putting together the ideas of service, the giving of his life, and being a ransom, the Bible scholar recognises the Book of Isaiah – the part commonly known as Second Isaiah (chapters 40 to 55) – the four 'Servant Songs' and specifically the fourth of those great poems, part of which we heard as our first reading this morning.

The first thing to say is that this is great poetry – the imagery, the succinct language, the circling themes. As with all good poetry, the meaning is deeper than anything you can pin down in a simple sentence. It's poetry that has inspired great music: many people cannot read the words without hearing in their heads either classical oratorios or modern choruses. But it also leaves significant questions: what did the prophet mean? When is this to happen? Who is this servant? The prophet himself, the king, the nation (Israel) or someone in the future? Nobody, it seems, linked this 'servant' to the Messiah – nobody, that is, until Jesus meditated on these verses, and in them discovered his own vocation.

Why didn't other Jewish thinkers see this as Messianic prophecy? Because the prophecy said this servant was going to die. A dead Messiah is no Messiah. Losing and dying was proof you'd got the wrong person. However, Jesus found in Isaiah's poetry this apparent defeat was predicted: Verse 4 – 'We (God's people) considered him stricken by God and

afflicted.’ The people will write off God’s servant as a failure. Be ready for that. However, the prophet has told us (52: 10) this is how God will ‘bare his holy arm’. And at the end of today’s passage, we have hints of the strange victory he will achieve.

The crux of this passage is about how this servant will sacrifice himself for the sake of others: ‘the punishment that brought us peace is upon him;’ ‘he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;’ ‘by his wounds we have been healed;’ ‘the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ Most of us brought up in the Christian faith hear these words and see Christ on the cross. For us his crucifixion clearly fulfils the prophet’s words. We imagine the searing pain of crucifixion, the gut-wrenching agony, and we think of how Jesus has gone through this for us, so that our sins should be forgiven. Many of us know the wonderful sense of our guilt being removed, an enormous burden lifted, a great liberation, as we come to him in penitence and faith, and accept all he has done for us.

Others find this a difficult idea to take on board. I want to try to answer three problems that have been raised. First, the idea that it was God’s ‘will to crush him and cause him to suffer’ (v10) can sound almost sadistic – God enacting his vengeance on his Son. I don’t think that if you read the whole of Isaiah’s message (as Jesus must have) you’d think like that. The context is the covenant – the deep and binding expression of God’s love for his people. This is God’s love reaching out beyond boundaries to a broken and defeated people – a people who have recognised the cause of their problems is their own sin. In Jesus, God takes it on himself to take action. Father and Son act in unity of love – there is no separation. This is God acting with sacrificial love.

Second, people sometimes say, ‘Why can’t God just forgive? It’s supposed to be his nature. Why does anyone have to die?’ This is to under-estimate sin, and the deep rupture in the fabric of reality sin causes. Sin is the abuse of God’s good world. Imagine an expert violin-maker completing the most perfect instrument ever, and then finding someone using it as a tennis racket. Or imagine Leonardo da Vinci finding someone using the Mona Lisa to wrap their fish and chips. That’s what we see when human beings destroy God’s creation. That’s what we see when the powerful treat the weak with injustice and cruelty. That’s what we see when people disregard one another because they disregard God. There is a great price to be paid to put it right. It can only be paid by One who can represent us all, and yet has no sin himself, One who is both Son of God and Son of Man.

Thirdly, some people say that so much emphasis on forgiveness removes the need for personal responsibility. But that’s not how it works. If we go back to the Gospel, Jesus is the servant who gives his life as a ransom. If we accept his ultimate service for us and receive the forgiveness of our sins, we have no need, and should have no desire, to seek out normal human agendas – like James and John wanting power and prestige, or even just a quiet life. Instead, we have the true freedom of being the Lord’s servants too. That’s what Edith Cavell did. It’s what many in today’s nursing profession have done. And it’s what so many more in all sorts of walks of life, have done and continue to do, in past generations and in present times: receive the forgiveness of sins, and give their lives as servants of all.