

**‘THE LIGHT OF LIFE’
ISAIAH 53:7-12**

[St Mark’s Easter Day, Sunday April 4, 2021, All Services]

If I were to stand up here today/tonight and tell you I had a dream about a person who would be born in the future, and if I were to tell you what this future person would be and do, and if I were to tell you that I really believed my dream was an accurate reflection of a future reality, I wouldn’t expect you to buy it. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if you laughed at me. And yet, this is exactly the sort of thing we’re talking about here at St Mark’s this Easter weekend. We’re talking about the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah- recorded some 700 years or so before the birth of Christ.

And if you were here on Friday you would have heard the first half of this incredible prophecy read out. And you would have heard Pat share in his Good Friday message how this most remarkable prophecy points us towards a remarkable person whose life and death has deep personal relevance to us who live today. And that was an amazingly brave claim, was it not?

And yet, this morning/evening we’re returning to Isaiah 53 to see how this ancient prophecy ends. Because as we saw on Friday, Isaiah was talking about the coming of a servant. And through this servant of God, he said, God’s people would be saved. And what we saw on Friday, and what we see again today/tonight, is that stunningly, the story of Isaiah’s servant is the story of Easter. With incredible precision, Isaiah foretold what would happen. And what I hope to show you again this morning/evening, is that the story Isaiah told has deep personal implications for every one of us sitting here today/tonight. And yes- I am well aware of how big a claim that is. But I hope you’ll bear with me as I show you why I firmly believe it.

I want to review with you now just those last six verses of Isaiah 53 that we read today/tonight. And I want to do so under three headings- the story of the one, the story of the many, and then our story.

1. The Story of the One.

And the story of the one is the story of Isaiah’s servant- the servant who bears an unmistakable resemblance to Jesus Christ. And notice again how the end of Isaiah 53 describes his story.

- oppression

Firstly, he says, it’s a story of oppression. This is the word used at the start of verse 7, and at the start of verse 8. And it’s a word that captures for us not only the cruelty of the way Jesus was treated but also the great injustice of it. The servant Isaiah describes was an innocent man. He suffered things he didn’t deserve to suffer. As we read here in verse 9, he had done no violence. There was no deceit to be found in him. Yet he

was despised and rejected. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And no-one raised a voice in protest.

It's not hard to see how this servant is a picture of Jesus, is it? As we know, Jesus submitted to unjust and cruel oppression with incredible dignity and humility. He didn't protest either! He kept his mouth closed. He accepted his fate.

And that was a surprising development wasn't it? Up till that point Jesus had been in the centre of the action- teaching people, healing people, confronting hypocrites, attracting a crowd. In the gospel story up till this point he was the lead actor. But when the moment arrives for the oppressors to take centre stage, Jesus becomes a much more passive figure. Almost as if he knew to expect it? Almost as if he wanted it to happen?

- death

And as he quietly submitted himself to this oppression, the fate he was accepting became clear. His opponents would get what they came for. The slaughter of the lamb. He would be taken away. And killed. Cut off from the land of the living as verse 8 says here. And verse 9 only underlines it- dead and buried. And at this point, the story Isaiah tells about the servant is the story of that first Good Friday. It's a story about a death.

- life

But then, the story takes a very surprising turn. And somehow it becomes a story about life. Verses 10 and 11 contain a most unexpected plot twist.

[Read 53:10-11]

Though he is crushed in death, though he was offered as a sacrifice for sin on the altar with his blood poured out, somehow, somehow he would live after that to see his offspring¹. He would be a man whose days were prolonged. He would, after his suffering, see the light of life. Really? After his suffering? But we just learnt that his suffering would end in death! How is this possible? People don't normally see the light of life after they die. But Isaiah said this servant would. And we know, do we not, that Jesus did. Because after Friday came Sunday. After oppression and injustice came vindication. After burial came an empty tomb. After death came resurrection!

I can still remember May 26, 1999 very vividly. I woke up that day very early. I think around 5:30am. And I got up to watch a soccer match with some friends. It was the Champion's League Final- arguably the most prestigious football trophy going, after the World Cup. And Manchester United, my team, were in the final. They were playing a German team called Bayern Munich. Bayern Munich scored early and led 1-0 through most of the game. And as the minutes ticked away it seemed more and more certain that Manchester United would lose. They were peppering the Bayern goal but the Germans' defence held firm. And then injury time was signalled and we knew there were only 3 minutes of play remaining. And 30 seconds into injury time, Manchester United finally scored. I was elated. It looked like we had somehow managed to force

¹ A spiritual rather than a physical reality, in Jesus' case.

extra time. All of a sudden it seemed we had a chance again to win. But then the unthinkable happened. Just two minutes later Manchester United scored again. And then the game was over. No extra time. Manchester United had won. And I've never enjoyed a game of soccer more. It remains the most incredible ending to a match I've ever seen. And many called it a miracle comeback.

But of course it wasn't a miracle. As I often explain to the kids in my Scripture classes, a miracle is something only God can do. The Champion's League comeback of 1999 was definitely great, but it is dwarfed entirely by Jesus' comeback. That was something only God could do! And it sets Jesus apart as utterly unique. God raised Jesus from death, never to die again. God raised Jesus to a position of eternal greatness.

- greatness

And that's the fourth part of his story here. Verse 12.

[Read 53:12]

I hope you noticed there that his resurrection to life makes his enduring greatness possible. But his resurrection is not the reason for his greatness. I'm making a very nuanced point here but I don't want you to miss it. The reason Jesus is great is because he poured out his life unto death, because he was numbered with transgressors, and because he intercedes for them. But nevertheless, without the resurrection, there would be no greatness.

Right back at the start of the section we read on Friday we heard that the servant of God would be raised, and lifted up, and highly exalted. We heard that kings would shut their mouths because of him- that is they would recognise they were in the presence of a much greater king! Isaiah painted a picture of majestic ruler all would respect. But then we heard about his suffering and pain, his rejection and oppression, his descent into ignominious death. So how would those lofty assessments from the end of Isaiah 52 ever be realised? How can someone who descends into ignominious death be lifted up and highly exalted? How could they become the king of kings? Only through resurrection. Only by virtue of the fact that after he suffered, he would see the light of life, and be satisfied.

2. The Story of the Many.

That's the story of the one- the servant Isaiah spoke of, the one we know as Jesus the crucified and risen king. But of course, what Isaiah makes clear, and what we saw on Friday as well, is that the story of the one is also the story of the many.

And the line in today's reading that gives this away is that line at the start of verse 10. 'Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer'. What an astounding thing for Isaiah to say. What a staggering thought! That all the cruelty and injustice of Christ's oppression and death was exactly what God purposed. And if that's true then he'd want to have an incredibly good reason?! Indeed he did. He had a reason rooted in deep and uncompromising love. Love not just for the one, but for the many- for the

many who turned their backs on his beloved son². For the many in need of forgiveness and healing and hope.

And Isaiah tells us that this is what the servant will do- he will bring through the one, exactly what the many needed. And there are two expressions along these lines here.

- he will justify them

Firstly, in verse 11. Isaiah says he will 'justify many'. To justify is to make right. It is to declare someone innocent. It is to give people who by nature ought to hang their heads in shame before God a real confidence when they stand before him³. So, if the servant of whom Isaiah speaks lives to justify many, then we learn that justice can be won even through injustice, and that power can emerge even out of powerlessness⁴. And is that not the Easter story? Jesus' encounter with bitter injustice is the way of God to justly deliver sinners into his kingdom. And it is by him willingly making himself powerless, by him willingly submitting to death, that he is raised with the power to bring people into God's throneroom. He will justify many.

- he will bear their sin

But the second expression here that speaks to the story of the many is in verse 12. There it says he 'bore the sin of many'. And this picks up on language that runs right through the whole chapter. To bear is to carry. It's to be weighed down by that which might otherwise weigh another down. And this is what Jesus did for us. He bore our suffering⁵. The iniquity of the many was laid on him⁶. He carried our sins. And that is why for all who turn to him there is now no guilt in life. And there is now no fear in death.

Hundreds of years after Isaiah's prophecy, when the Apostle Peter wrote about what Jesus accomplished for the many, he drew on this language. This is what he said in 1 Peter 2: 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.'

3. Our Story.

Do you see what Peter did there? He took the ancient words of Isaiah, and he thought about how Jesus brought them to fruition that first Easter, and then he told his readers that the story of Jesus was deeply and personally relevant to them. This was claim- that the story of the one and the many was their story. And he says the same to us this morning/evening. He himself bore 'our' sins. By his wounds 'you' have been healed. 'We' were like sheep going astray. But now we have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. Who's that? The Shepherd and Overseers of our souls? Jesus

² See 52:14.

³ I presume that 'by his knowledge' here refers to his intimate knowledge of suffering.

⁴ I owe this language to Kirk Patston- *Isaiah: Surprising Salvation*, p.277).

⁵ 53:4

⁶ 53:6

of course. And he can only speak of him like that because he lives. He lives. Lives to shepherd us. Lives to watch over us. Lives to help us live- righteously, following in his steps.

- his reign over us

And so this is our story. It's a story about his reign over us. Because the resurrected Jesus has been raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Kings shut their mouths because of him. For he is their king, and ours. He has a portion among the great. But remember, he's a shepherd king. He exercises his authority over us with indescribable tenderness.

And if our story is a story of his reign over us, then it can only be a story in which we submit ourselves to him- gladly and entirely, hanging on every word he speaks, longing to obey, humbly following where he leads, worshipping him for his unmatched greatness.

But, at this point, it would be remiss of me, not to also sound a warning. Because the story of the many is not the story of all. Jesus bore the sin of many. And he justifies many. But not everyone. And that's because not everyone turns to him- not everyone wants him to be their overseer, the shepherd of their souls. Not everyone wants Jesus to reign over them. And if there are some here this morning/evening who have been resisting the rule of Christ, then I can only hope and pray, as I do most earnestly, that today might be the day you stop resisting and you turn to Jesus. Will you? I can promise you that if you will, you will never regret it.

- his mercy towards us

Because this is not just a story about his reign over us. It's also a story of his mercy towards us. This is the magic of Narnia. The great Lion is also a slain lamb. Such is his love for us. He poured out his life unto death. He was numbered with the transgressors. He bore our sins. He intercedes for us- even now, because he was raised from the dead and sits at God's right hand.

And if our story is a story of his mercy towards us, then it can only be a story in which we spend our days in humble praise- thanking him without end for his goodness, knowing with unthievable joy that because he passed through suffering into the light of life, we too now know the light of life, and are satisfied. Deeply, deeply satisfied.

[Read 53:11]