

Monday of Holy Week

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; John 12:1-11; Hebrews 9:11-15

Isaiah 42:1-9 is the first of four “Servant Songs” in the book of Isaiah (the others being 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13—53:12). This song, which introduces the concept of “the Servant” to Israel, concentrates upon the chosenness of this one, and is obviously spoken by God.

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in which my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth and the coastlands wait for his teaching” (42:1-4).

We learn a great deal about the Servant from this passage. First, he is chosen by God. Just as Israel is “the chosen people”, Jerusalem is God’s “chosen city” and specific individuals in Israel such as Moses, David and Jeremiah are chosen for God’s purposes, so the Servant is one who is chosen by God.

Second, the Servant is chosen for mission. Being “chosen” is not an honor; it is an obligation. One is chosen (whether a nation, a city or an individual) to serve God by serving humanity in a particular way. This is stated quite clearly in this Servant Song that makes up the Old Testament lesson for this day. The phrase stated in this translation as “in which my soul delights” or in other translations as “in whom I am well pleased” means much more in Hebrew than that God takes pleasure in the Servant. The phrase is meant to stand in parallel with the earlier “whom I uphold” (or, in other translations, “whom I hold fast”). It has the sense of being dedicated to a particular mission or task, and it is the Servant’s single-minded devotion and commitment to the accomplishment of that task “in which (God’s) soul delights”! The Servant is chosen to carry out a specific mission assigned to him by God, and God provides for that Servant “my spirit” (or charisma) which will empower and sustain the Servant as he seeks to faithfully carry out that mission.

Third, the Servant’s mission is one of bringing about justice for all the nations of the world. The task of the Servant is to work for justice. This is stated three times in the Song. “He will bring forth justice to the nations” (vs. 1b). “He will faithfully bring forth justice” (vs. 3b). “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (vs. 4a). This is clearly the dominant theme in the Song. The work of the Servant is the work of justice. The Hebrew word used here in all three instances is “*mishpat*”. “Mishpat” is the carefully weighed and considered ruling of a judge based upon the “Torah” that is designed to guarantee an equitable protection of the rights, privileges and the obligations of each person in Israel (whether rich or poor, whether an Israelite or an “alien”). Thus, the author of this Servant Song is saying that the Servant will administer the distribution of justice so that all people, no matter their rank, position, power or wealth, will be treated equitably so that wealth is equally distributed among all and the law is administered objectively.

What is particularly intriguing is that this Song presents how the Servant will practice “mishpat”. The author writes, “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street”. That is,

the Servant will not “talk” justice; he will “do” justice! He will not loudly proclaim by word or by symbolic gesture (especially in the Temple) his commitment to justice; in fact, he will rarely speak of it at all. He will simply do justice in all that he does. Those who have to talk about doing justice all the time or symbolically show themselves acting justly are likely not centering their work on acting justly but are rather making an occasion of it! As the old southern spiritual puts it, “Everybody talking about heaven ain’t necessarily going there!”

Likewise, the Servant will not impose his will upon the people he serves; he will not be a unilateral ruler, dominating the people and forcing his will upon them. This is beautifully stated in the symbolic words, “a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench”. This is a term occasionally used in both the Hebrew Bible and in other ancient literature for the poor and oppressed. So the author is telling us that the Servant “will not break” those who are already “bruised reeds” or “quench” those who are already only “dimly burning wicks”, hardly lit at all. Thus, he will not force his will down upon the people, but will rather work for justice for the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, the alienated and the oppressed.

Finally, it is intriguing to note in this segment on the Servant’s vocation of championing and liberating the poor and oppressed that the author is not saying that this is the role the servant plays with Israel. Rather, the Servant’s public goes far beyond the chosen people. He is to “bring forth justice *to the nations!*” He is to “establish justice in the earth”, so that “the coastlands wait for his teaching”. The work that the Servant is to do is to bring justice for the poor and oppressed throughout the world and in all nations. This is a departure from the long-term mission of God’s chosen as presented elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, for that mission had always focused upon bringing justice and equity only to Israel. But here, in this song, that mission is expanded to cover all the nations of the world. That is the mission to which God has called the Servant.

The author of this first Servant song ends it with a response, spoken by himself but also, hopefully, by those who would embrace the mission of the Servant. The song ends: “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them” (42:5-9).

This response reminds us that it is God who is the creator of the heavens and the earth, the one “who gives breathe to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it”. In this passage, God speaks to his Servant, reminding him that God has “taken you by the hand and kept you”, that God has “made you a light to the nations” so that the Servant might heal the blind, set free the prisoner and liberate “those who sit in darkness”. That is the assignment of the Servant. But that work of liberation and justice that the Servant will do, he does in the name and under the authority of God. For it is God who must receive the praise for the transformation of the world, and not the Servant who is God’s instrument in bringing about that transformation. “I am the

Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other!” Through God’s choice and call of the Servant to this mission of justice, God has begun to do a new thing that will radically change the future of the world; “before they spring forth, I tell you of them”! So get ready, and join God’s program! Join the cause of the Servant, and begin work in concert with God to make this world the world as God intends it to be!

This is the first of the four Servant Songs. And, of course, it begs the question, “Who is the Servant?” That is not a simple question to answer. In the second Servant Song, the hymn directly states that Israel is the servant (49:6). And that conforms with other references in the prophecy of Isaiah to Israel as the servant (41:8-9; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3). Yet, elsewhere, Isaiah makes it sound like the Servant is part of Israel and is yet distinct from Israel; one who is “bone of Israel’s bone” and yet stands over against Israel and calls it to accountability (49:5-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12). In another part of the prophecy of Isaiah, an individual person, Moses is named as the servant (63:11). Of course, the early church saw the Servant as being Jesus himself. Thus, a portion of Isaiah 42:1 is directly quoted (along with Psalm 2:7) in Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, identifying him directly with the Servant (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35; II Pet. 1:17).

So who is the Servant? Is it Israel? Is it a portion or remnant of Israel, those who remain faithful to the Torah? Is it Moses? Is it Jesus? Or is it all of these at various times in God’s revelation of God’s self, when God calls upon God’s people to “act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”? When we stand for justice, particularly for the poor and powerless, are all of us in at least to a small degree acting in the tradition of God’s Servant, and being faithful to that mission to which we are all called and which is modeled for us in the likes of Jesus, Moses and Israel?

Psalm 36:5-11 begins, “Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens; your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep, you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life, in your light we see light” (vss. 5-9).

The psalmist rests on God’s chesedh bve – his grace-filled, forgiving, embracing love intended for God’s people. It is that love that enables “all people to take refuge in the shadow of (God’s) wings”. God gives his love to his people that results in love and light to them. “In your light we see light” – or, in other words, God’s love, redemptive and transforming work in and among us, builds upon itself in opposition to the wickedness and deceit of those who reject God.

The psalm then ends with a prayer to God. “O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart! Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me, or the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the evildoers lie prostrate; they are thrust down, unable to rise” (vss. 10-12). That prayer is one of petition for God to continue the impact of chesedh love upon God’s people while, at the same time, protecting them from the power of the

evildoers. Thus, this psalmist provides the promise to all those who believe in God that God will win and the arrogant will be defeated – and we can operate within that assurance.

John 12:1-11 is essentially the story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Although it is a similar story to that told by Matthew (26:6-12), Mark (14:3-9) and Luke (7:36-50), this story takes a unique twist because of the incident that immediately precedes it in John – the story of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:3-44). And, consequently, it ends with a unique twist, as well.

The story of Lazarus’ resurrection ends with Israel’s temple priests gathering to worry about what to do. They say to each other, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (11:47b-48). They knew that Rome would not long tolerate the disruption and threat Jesus’ mobilizing of the people was to both Rome and the Jewish clergy leadership of Israel.

The Israelite high priest, Caiaphas, responded to the pessimism of the other priests by saying, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (11:49b-50). With this telling response by Israel’s high priest, a plot by the Jewish elite to kill Jesus was set into motion. Thus, the Gospel of John now focuses upon the inevitable and immediate execution of Jesus. John 12:1-8 sets the stage by telling of Mary’s preparation of Jesus’ body for burial.

In the Johannine story of this act of anointing, we learn that Jesus is in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Mary takes “a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard” and anoints Jesus’ feet. It is important to emphasize both the intent and the extent of Mary’s grateful anointing. The Greek word translated “wipe” in the phrase, “Mary wiped Jesus’ perfumed feet with her hair” (12:5) is the Greek *ekmasso*. It is the identical word used later by John to describe Jesus’ wiping of his disciples’ feet in the foot washing event (13:5). That is a very intentional connection made by the author. Just as Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet and then his tender wiping of them is Jesus’ act of love toward his disciples, so Mary’s washing with the perfume and wiping with her hair of the feet of Jesus was her extravagant act of love toward Jesus! And the author of the Gospel of John wants us to clearly see Mary’s intention behind that act.

Judas Iscariot protests this intention by centering on its extravagance, noting that the cost of the perfume was equal to one year’s wages of an ordinary laborer. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” he declared.

But Jesus responds, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (12:7-8).

In the face of Judas’ protest, Jesus defends the extravagance of Mary. Judas is really acting like the priestly and Pharisaic systems of Israel, in that his protest is voiced on the acceptable grounds of mercy for the poor while, in reality, it is truly motivated by very ulterior motives. John 12:6 tells us, “He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, he kept the

common purse and used to steal what was put into it”. Judas protests about the perfume being used to anoint Jesus when it could have been used to support the poor. In reality, he wanted to get his own hands on the money and steal it. Likewise, the Jewish political, economic and religious systems protest about Jesus on the religious grounds that he was breaking the Law of Moses. In reality, their real opposition to him was his threat to their dominance of Israelite society that brought them great wealth and power. Thus, it is here foreshadowed that Judas has already psychologically given himself in service to the systems. There is no real difference between him and them!

Jesus affirms Mary’s generosity. His statement, “she might keep it for the day of my burial” is the first time Jesus actively speaks in the Gospel of John of his rapidly approaching death – for it is only six days away (see vs. 12). What Jesus is centering on is the reality of that approaching death at the hand of both Roman and Jewish systems. Mary, of all of Jesus’ followers, has the spiritual depth and sensitivity to discern that Jesus will have only a very limited time remaining for him to be among them. It is she, through her generosity, who acts in reckless and abandoned love, and thus helps prepare Jesus for his inevitable burial.

Jesus then says, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (vs. 8). This is, in part, a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11, one-third of its comprehensive instruction to Israel regarding the poor.¹ Jesus’ use of it is not meant to be – and cannot be used – as a justification for doing nothing about poverty; otherwise, Jesus is being faithless to the remainder of the Deuteronomic commandment. And if Jesus’ ministry demonstrated anything, it was his commitment to the poor and hurting of Israel.

What Jesus is actually saying in this passage is, “Your excuse, Judas, for wanting this money by evoking the needs of the poor isn’t going to work. I can see right through your transparent words. The reality is there will always be poor people, no matter how we organize society to eliminate poverty. That is simply a fact of life. But you won’t always have me! In another six days, I will be dead. So celebrate me and my ministry while you still have time!”

This story is then immediately followed by the fateful words, “When the great crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Judeans were deserting (the priests) and were believing in Jesus” (12:9-11).

Not only was Jesus a threat to the systems, but Lazarus was also becoming a liability. Because he was a living witness that Jesus was indeed “the resurrection and the life” (11:25-26), the chief priests decided that he, too, would have to be killed. The systems were determined to leave no witnesses to Jesus’ miraculous power!

¹ (1) “There will be no poor among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you if only you will obey this commandment (i.e., “there will be no poor among you”) that I command you today” (Deut. 15:4-5). (2) “There will never cease to be poor on the earth” (15:11a). (3) “I therefore command you, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land” (15:11b).

Hebrews 9:11-15 describes the atoning work of Christ by using the metaphor of the Temple sacrifices. In the ancient Temple worship of Israel, a limited atonement would occur for the people each year when the high priest would enter into the “Holy Place” of the tent or tabernacle of the Ten Commandments (later, to be replaced by the Temples of Solomon and Herod). There, he would slaughter “goats and bulls” as a sacrifice for sins, and “with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer sanctify those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified” (Heb. 9:12-13; cf. Lev. 16:15-16 and Num. 19:9, 17-19). In this way, those who had paid for this sacrifice were cleansed of their sin for the past year. But next year, it would have to be the same thing done all over again.

In like manner, the author of Hebrews suggests, Jesus was the sacrificial lamb for God’s chosen people. The “Holy Place” where he was slain, however, was not the Temple but Gethsemane. His blood shed upon the cross was as the blood of goats and bulls sacrificed for sins, and his flesh, sacrificed for humanity, cleansed the people of their sin.

But the analogy only goes so far, the author of Hebrews suggests. For this was God’s Christ – the Messiah or Suffering Servant who was being slain – not some animal. Those animals might be without physical blemish, but Jesus was without spiritual blemish for he was without sin. The sacrifice performed by priests was only a limited external cleansing, but Jesus’ death was an atoning death, for his blood purified the “conscience” or inner person. Finally, Jesus’ death was, through “the eternal Spirit”, brought about God’s saving will as the Spirit woos us irresistibly to Christ.

“For this reason,” the author of Hebrews concludes, “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant” (vs. 15). Those who are chosen unconditionally by God to become God’s people, the author is saying, have been provided with a sure and certain atonement through Christ’s death and have been irresistibly wooed to Christ so that it is beyond them to reject such a pure and perfect salvation. It is such people who make up the “new Israel”, the “elect” for “those who are called will receive the promised eternal inheritance”. That is the power of this new and eternal sacrifice that God has made for the world!

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