

ALDHAM and MARKS TEY Good Friday 2009

Christ the Servant

About 25 years ago, **Graham Kendrick** gave the church what must be one of the seminal hymns or songs of the era of what is to us modern church music. A hymn which, I believe, will stand alongside hymns like **Wesley's** "*Love divine, all loves excelling*" and **John Newton's** *Amazing Grace*. I am referring, of course, to "*The Servant King*". It traces the purpose of Jesus' life from manger to the cross as seen from the perspective of Mark 10:45.

For ... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The words are on your service sheets. The first verse is:

FROM HEAVEN YOU CAME,
Helpless babe,
Entered our world,
Your glory veiled;
Not to be served
But to serve,
And give Your life
That we might live.

And the chorus:

*This is our God,
The Servant King,
He calls us now
To follow Him,
To bring our lives
As a daily offering
Of worship to
The Servant King.*

In the **world view** the idea of a Servant-King is an **irresolvable contradiction!** A king's subjects serve and pay dues to the king; the king does not serve, and does not pay dues to his subjects.

By thinking about ***Christ the Servant*** today, and ***Christ the King*** on Easter Sunday, with Revd. Peter Adams, we will try to resolve this apparent contradiction.

Servants in the OT

In the Psalms, the psalmist often sees himself as the servant of God. For instance:

Ps. 69 V. 17
*Do not hide your face from your servant;
answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.*

There's no problem here. God called **Abraham** "my servant". **Moses** was called "the servant of the Lord"

by Joshua who succeeded him. God called **David** “my servant”, to mention only a few.

The Servant in Isaiah

Then suddenly, in *Isaiah* chapter 42, the passage we have just read to us, we meet quite a different Servant in what is sometimes called the *First Servant Song*.

*ISA 42:1 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him
and he will bring justice to the nations.*

This is a servant with a big job description. **“Bring justice to the nations.”** It seems comparable with the remit on the G20 meeting, perhaps? But read on. The servant is not a bully, not a pushy kind of a person.

*ISA 42:2 He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.*

*ISA 42:3 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;*

Read on, and we find that he is to be a **healer** as well as a bringer of justice.

ISA 42:5 This is what God the LORD says-- ...

*ISA 42:6 "I have called you ...
ISA 42:7 to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in
darkness.*

A Servant who is

- chosen by God,
- who has God’s Spirit upon him,
- who without force of arms will bring justice to the nations,
- who has the support of God as Creator and Lord
- who will be a light to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

That’s pretty all-inclusive to me. A big Ask, as they say.

Who is this Servant?

Jesus knew who it was. It was him!

*LK 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,*

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

How will God's Servant achieve this?

The method of this Servant is made even more explicit in the *Fourth Servant Song* in **Isaiah chapters 52 and 53**. It is totally counter-intuitive.

The Servant in this song **suffers**. He is humiliated, despised, rejected,

*ISA 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

This was **not a consequence of anything he has done**, for

*ISA 53:9 he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

(just like the servant in chapter 42.)

but for what **we** have done.

*ISA 53:4 Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.*

*ISA 53:5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;*

And the reason - **to heal us of the consequences of our rebellion against God's will** by taking on board those sins.

*the punishment that brought us peace (= reconciliation) was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

Again Isaiah repeats this key point. **Everybody needs this healing**. - this is a major stumbling block in today's society. It's available to everybody.

*ISA 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

This prophetic passage has such detailed fulfilment in the Passion narratives, that you would be forgiven for thinking that it was in one of the Gospels.

Paul, writing to the Philippians, recognises Jesus as the Servant.

*PHP 2:7 but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

*PHP 2:8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became **obedient to death--**
even death on a cross!*

According to Jesus himself,

*MARK 10:45 For even the Son of Man did not come to
be served, **but to serve**, and to give his life as a
ransom for many."*

What about us?

Why did Jesus say this?

Why does Jesus draw attention to his **OT heritage** as a Servant? He is about to make the last journey of his life - to Jerusalem where he will certainly give his life. But it seems he has a **final lesson** for his (chief) disciples.

A few verses back we read of an incident in which James and John come to Jesus with a request.

It was James and John, together with Peter, who formed the inner circle of close friends of Jesus. Jesus took these 3 with him when he resuscitated the synagogue ruler's daughter. These 3 had the privilege of being with Jesus at his Transfiguration - when he was visibly covered in the glory.

One would expect them to have much more insight into the teaching and mission of Jesus than almost anyone else. But in Mark's gospel, we find quite the opposite.

While Peter recognised that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, he failed to see that Jesus' mission was to end in his death.

In our second reading, we see that James and John were not much better. **They wanted to be assured of their status.** Not in this life, but in the next which may not have seemed very far away. "We'd like the best seats in house of the next life, please. One on either side of you."

(According to Matthew, it was their mother who asked Jesus for this on their behalf.)

Personal Status is a feature of the world view of the majority.

- It's typified in cartoons making fun of the entitlement to the executive toilet.
- I have overheard employees discussing with great seriousness, which specification they are entitled to choose in their next company car.
- In the Health service: junior doctors paying homage to consultants.

- The church is not immune from it either. The “I am more important than you” attitude.
- And it pops up in non-institutional contexts as well.
 - on the roads;
 - on the soccer field;
 - and sadly, all too often in the home.

Jesus’ response to James and John is that they don’t know what they are asking for. The “cup” that Jesus is about to drink is the bitter cup of wrath - being forsaken from his father on the cross. He says

You will drink the cup I drink

It is very probable that James and John did learn this lesson and “drink from this cup” for they went on to be faithful servants of their Lord and both met premature deaths for the gospel’s sake. But elevated status? - No.

In the past, many critics of the NT have tried to set Paul against Jesus. I find exactly the opposite.

GAL 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

The Scope of our Service

Let me finish with an important comment on this verse and the OT law on which it is based.

I have nearly finished reading “The God Delusion” by Richard Dawkins. ...

He has a section on the biblical phenomenon of “love thy neighbour”. He tries to argue this is just another example of Darwinian Natural Selection amongst what he calls “in-groups”. He says that loving one’s neighbour - that is a neighbour in the “in-group” of Christians is a behaviour that favours the “in-group” of believers, and so survives, but he claims, often at the expense of the “out-group”.

One of the problems with Dawkins is that he doesn’t apply the same degree of rigour to the investigation of religion, and in particular the Bible, as he does to his field of science. The Bible has quite a lot to say about “out-groups”.

Israel was told to be hospitable to “out-groups”.

LEV 19:33 " `When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. 34 The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

And they were - most certainly to **Ruth** an alien from Moab.

Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well. She was certainly an “out-group” person.

Peter did not hesitate to go out of his “in-group” to Cornelius, the Roman Centurion in spite of being principally called to take the gospel to the Jews.

The challenge for us is that, being a community that serves each other well, we must not stop at the church door, or the parish boundary.