

THE SONGS OF THE SERVANT.¹ HOLY WEEK IN A PANDEMIC

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Sunday	Isaiah 50:4-7	3 rd Servant song
Monday	Isa 42: 1-7	1 st Servant song
Tuesday	Isa 49:1-6	2 nd Servant song
Wednesday	Isa 50:4-9	3 rd Servant song
Friday	Isa 52:13 – 53:12.	4 th Servant song

During this coming week we have as the first readings some of the most beautiful poetry in the Scriptures – known as the Servant Songs. These songs emerged during Israel’s darkest time – when the nation had been overrun by the Babylonian Empire; Jerusalem and its Temple was destroyed, and around 50,000 people taken into Exile in Babylon. All the things God had once promised – land to Abraham, kingship to David, a temple to Solomon – were now taken. Could God be trusted, when the promises meant to be eternal had been broken?

This Exile lasted not just for two weeks, or 6 months, but for over 50 years. And, from these years of apparent disaster, emerged Israel’s most creative theology, and these four Servant Songs. Israel’s reflection on this experience led her to a new sense of national and religious identity, and a profoundly different sense of God. This is the time of 2nd Isaiah – from Chapter 40 to 55. Isaiah chapter 40 begins with the exhortation – “Console ye, console ye my people.” Words we may need to read, and re-read, during this time of our forced exile.

The Servant Songs, express Israel’s new identity. Israel’s religious thinkers came to see that their time in Babylon, was a time when God was taking them from their own land, so that God’s salvific plan could be extended to *all the nations*. This was really at the heart of the great promise to the childless couple Abraham and Sarah, that through them, “all the families of the earth would be blessed” (Gen 12:3). Now, in Exile, Israel realizes that she is being God’s servant to bring this blessing to Babylon.

42:1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon her;
she will bring forth justice to the nations.
²She will not cry or lift up her voice,
or make it heard in the street;
³a bruised reed she will not break,
and a dimly burning wick she will not quench;
she will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴She will not grow faint or be crushed
until she has established justice in the earth;
and the *coastlands wait for her teaching*.

¹ For Presentation Sisters, you might recall the seminar we held many years ago with Dick Rice, and Mike Siskowski based on these four songs.

Then in the second song (49:1-6) the coast-lands are called upon to listen as Israel speaks of her mission to be a light *for the nations*, so that salvation might reach to the ends of the earth.

Listen to me, *O coastlands*,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb I was named.
God made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of God's hand I was hidden;
I was made a polished arrow, and hidden in God's quiver.

³And God said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

⁴But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the LORD,
and my reward with my God."

⁵ And now the LORD says,
who formed me as servant in the womb,
to bring Jacob back and gather Israel together.
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—

⁶"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;

*I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

This makes me wonder what more is being called forth from within me. How is this crisis impacting on me and changing me? I've met more neighbours in a week than in the last 5 years, and all asking, "how are you going?" or "Do you need anything?" It seems to be bringing out the best – not the beast, who hoards, and cares only for self.

In the third Song (50:4-7) the Servant speaks of the cost involved. Morning by morning the servant awakens to hear, and is given the tongue of a disciple, in order to sustain the weary with a word. Yet, even in the midst of this cost, the servant knows that God is near.

⁴The Lord GOD has given me a disciple's tongue
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning God wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.

⁶I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

⁷The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

⁸the one who vindicates me is near.

At the moment, in our crisis there are many who cannot self-isolate for their own protection, but each day they are needed to turn up to work – to care for or teach children, to clean shelves, to work in the hospitals, to deliver food, to keep a train or tram running. These valiant people cannot hide away and I am learning the value of all jobs, and not just the ones that carry prestige or high salaries. The meaning of “essential services” has changed.

Can you pray aloud these songs of the servant, placing yourself in the situation of Exile? Cut off and with no Temple rituals to sustain your faith. Does this sound familiar now?

And then the fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13 – 53:12), read every Good Friday and drawn on by the early believers to make sense of the cross. They found in this song the images of their experience in Jesus' death.

³He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;

⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

⁹They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

In their experience of Exile, when this seemed to be Israel's experience, the Song ends with praise, not desolation. The following chapter, 54, continues this extraordinary sense of hope after desolation, telling Israel to make her tents, her homes bigger so she can welcome more children. How will life be different when this crisis is over? What will we cherish and make more room for?

Isa 53: ¹⁰ My servant shall see her offspring, and shall prolong her days;
through her the will of the LORD shall prosper.

¹¹Out of her anguish she shall see light;

54: ²Enlarge the site of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;
do not hold back; lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.

This time of self-isolation could be called “soul” time – and some of us are used to taking time out for “retreat”. It reminds me of a prayer by Michael Leunig.

We give thanks for the blessings of winter;
Season to cherish the heart.
To make warmth and quiet for the heart.
To make soups and broths for the heart.
To cook for the heart and read for the heart.
To curl up softly and nestle with the heart.
To sleep deeply and gently at one with the heart.
To dream with the heart.
To spend time with the heart.
A long, long time of peace with the heart.
We give thanks for the blessing of winter:
Season to cherish the heart. Amen.

From Michael Leunig. *The Prayer Tree*.