

Circuit Service – Bible Month in Isaiah No. 3

The Faithful Servant

Call to worship

Christ Jesus was in the form of God, but he did not cling to equality with God. He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and was born in our human likeness. Being found in human form he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth; and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Song of Christ's Glory, Philippians 2.5–11

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Hymn StF 1; HP 1: All people that on earth do dwell

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell,
come ye before him and rejoice. | 4 For why, the Lord our God is good;
his mercy is for ever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure. |
| 2 The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make;
we are his folk, he doth us feed,
and for his sheep he doth us take. | 5 To Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
the God whom heaven and earth
adore,
from men and from the angel-host
be praise and glory evermore. |
| 3 O enter then his gates with praise,
approach with joy his courts unto;
praise, laud, and bless his name always,
for it is seemly so to do. | <i>William Kethe (d. 1594)</i> |

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Father's pure radiance, perfect in innocence, yet learns obedience to death on a cross. Suffering to give us life, conquering through sacrifice, and as they crucify prays: 'Father forgive.'

Wisdom unsearchable, God the invisible, love indestructible in frailty appears.

Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly, lifts our humanity to the heights of His throne.

Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

In your presence, giver of all life, saviour of all lives, we draw on you and give ourselves to you. Let us see your glory in each other and in ourselves; let us hear your living Word in the voices and silences around us and within; let us touch you and let our lives touch those of others with your love. You are mine and I am yours. So be it. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory; for ever and ever. Amen

Reading – Isaiah 11.1-3a

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

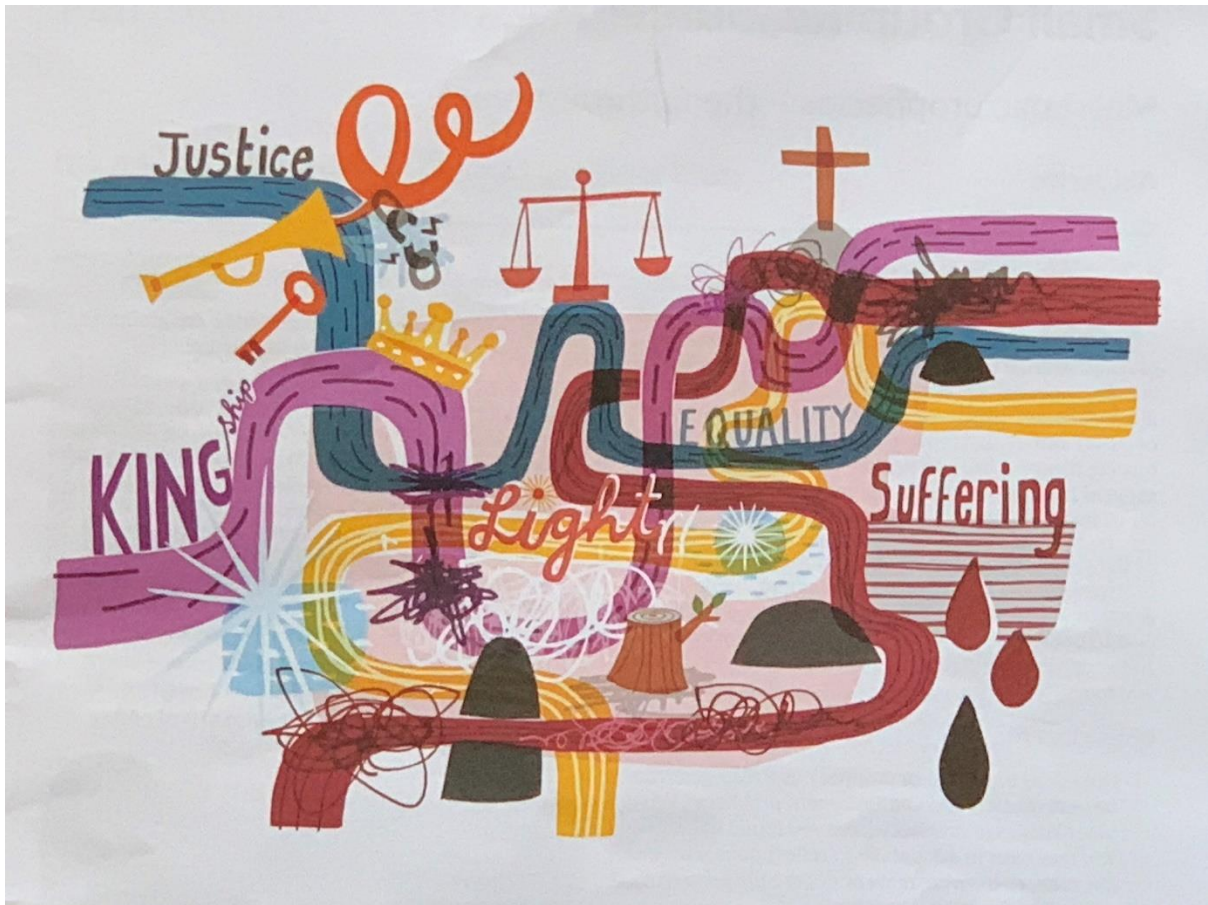
²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

Address 1 – Rivers

Just imagine a big river, flowing out to the sea, wide, powerful. It carries boats, perhaps

even ships, inland, and provides a way for them to access the oceans, the world. Where did it come from? It starts hundreds of miles away, in the hills and mountains, as springs bubbling up from the ground, perhaps disappearing again into a cave, to reappear a little bigger further down the mountain. Tributaries merge, and as the ground levels out, move onwards ever steadily towards their end.

Just like the river – which is so obvious and busy at its meeting with the sea, but which starts a long way off in quieter places which only hint at its greatness – just like this our Bibles tell us of Jesus a long time before he is born and lives and dies for us. These are the prophets, and Isaiah thrills in revealing to us something of the Christ, the anointed one, promised by God many centuries before his coming in the person of Jesus. Look at this picture:



How many rivers can you see? There are four, and they all have names: Justice, Kingship, Light, and Suffering. We can even see the “stump of Jesse” and its green shoot that our reading talks about – this is a new kind of king descended from the great line of kings given to Israel which started with David, who was Jesse’s son. Those kings had gone bad, moved away from God, and the line had been cut down, but this new shoot promises continuation in the form of a king of God, blessed with God’s spirit to be a blessing for the world. In different parts of Isaiah, these various rivers of promise appear suddenly, suggest an association, something special, and then vanish. But follow the themes through Scripture, just as one might a river from its source to its end, and they reappear, criss-crossing and eventually coming together in one place – can you see it? – at the cross of Jesus, the faithful, suffering servant.

Hymn StF 185; HP244: Sing we the King who is coming to reign

- 1 Sing we the King who is coming to reign,
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,
Joy to the nations when Jesus is King:
*Come let us sing: Praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King;
This is our song, who to Jesus belong:
Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.*
- 2 All shall be well in his Kingdom of peace,
Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
Justice and truth from his sceptre shall
spring,
Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King:
Come let us sing...
- 3 Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin,
Doubt shall not darken his witness within,
Hell hath no terrors, and death hath no sting;
Love is victorious when Jesus is King:
Come let us sing...
- 4 Kingdom of Christ, for thy coming we pray,
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
When this new song thy creation shall sing,
Satan is vanquished and Jesus is King:
Come let us sing...

Charles Silvester Horne (1865-1914)

Reading – Isaiah 52.13-53.12: The Suffering Servant

This is a long reading, and if time does not permit its use in full, then read 53.7-12 only. But you are urged to read the entire section. Take it slowly. Let the poetry wash over you; immerse yourself in its depths; share in the alarm felt by those who heard these words for the first time; enter the world of the servant...

- ¹³See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up
and shall be very high.
- ¹⁴Just as there were many who were astonished
at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond
human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
- ¹⁵so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which had not been told them they shall
see,
and that which they had not heard they shall
contemplate.
- 53 Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been
revealed?
- ²For he grew up before him like a young plant
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look
at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should
desire him.
- ³He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with
infirmity,
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no
account.
- ⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
- 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.
- ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
- ⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
- ⁸By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
- 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.
- ¹⁰Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with
affliction.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his
days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
- ¹¹Out of his anguish he shall see;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many
righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
- ¹²Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out himself to death
and was numbered with the transgressors,
yet he bore the sin of many
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Address 2 – The Faithful Servant

“The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53.11)

The nation came together this June to celebrate the diamond jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. And everyone who said anything about the Queen – except those whose interest was perhaps more inclined towards her dress and hat choices or the shenanigans of her family – said something of her service to country and Commonwealth. Speaking at the Jubilee Service in St Paul’s Cathedral, Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York, said:

“For me, the best leaders – like Paul, like Jesus – are those who know how to be led. People who lead for others, not themselves. People whose heart’s desire is to serve the common good and build up the common life; ...and I say this today, knowing that in Her Majesty the Queen we see an example of this kind of service; a staunch constancy and a steadfast consistency; a faithfulness to God, an obedience to a vocation that is the bedrock of her life.”

Prince Charles, when his turn to speak came around, mentioned her “lifetime of selfless service”, and when we heard from the Queen herself, she said that “it is not enough simply to do our job: service demands sacrifice”.

It is true that many of those who serve us do so sacrificially, giving of their time and resources selflessly: those who empty our bins, care in our hospitals, govern our nations. But it is also true that the Queen’s example is extraordinary, and rather sadly it stands in marked contrast to that of many of our elected leaders.

And as in public life, so it is with all of us. Sometimes, we find serving others difficult – we know that they are wrong and that they should take up a load of our time isn’t actually going to help them or us! At other times, service comes more easily. It affirms our sense of who we are, gives us a satisfaction that we have done something good and worthwhile. We are, I’m sure, all a mixture of these people on different occasions and in different circumstances.

The rivers of promise within Isaiah point to a leader, but not one from within the generally understood mould of kingship. That mould relied upon the accumulation of wealth from taxes and tribute, military might and ruthless conquest. It’s what any sensible ruler would do in the circumstances of the age, just as the compulsion on a modern politician seems to lead them to do almost anything to stay in power. The popularly considered mould of leadership is the opposite of service.

The leader Isaiah sees a would-be king, true, but this is a servant king. His kingdom, although over all the earth, would not be of this world. Expectations of what kingship is about will be dashed, and what will unfold is something that no-one saw coming. This king will be “a covenant to the people, a light to the nations...” (Isa 42.6). Under his rule, “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (11.9). Rivers of promise, reasons for hopefulness.

From where does our hope derive? In Isaiah 52 and 53, we read of the alarm caused by the rising of such a Godly king. For God was meant to uphold the power and might of the king, right? But Isaiah sees in God’s king a servant of marred appearance, “beyond human semblance”, a shocking form of a man without majesty, in fact, completely undesirable. The sort of person who we might tentatively welcome into church, but then sit well apart because we really don’t know what to say or how to truly make them feel one of us. What are we like? This is our God! – in a form offensive, debasing, horrifying. What has caused such disfigurement? The answer is even more shocking, more scandalous: it was us! “He was wounded for **our** transgressions, crushed for **our** iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his wounds we are healed”.

“Service demands sacrifice”, says our Queen, and after 70 years of faithful service, she should know. Her leadership has been one of service, and discipleship to Jesus. The same Jesus who bids his disciples, on the night before his own disfigurement, suffering and death, “If I ...have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another’s feet” (John 13.14). The pattern of Christ’s service is to be ours. It does not seek popularity, personal gain, or even personal security; but it courts disfavour, disapproval and loss of all things counted as one’s own. It is the giving up of one’s identity and life for the other, and for the common good.

The suffering of Isaiah’s servant, the promised Christ, doesn’t end in his death. Rather, “See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high.” As the pattern of leadership does not conform to the standards and patterns of this world, neither is the life of the true servant limited by the life of this world. His dwelling shall indeed be glorious, and we, his disciples, are invited to follow him there, just as we also follow him here. For servanthood in God’s way may well demand sacrifice and involve suffering, and this cannot be diminished in human terms, but beyond is the Kingdom of God which Jesus brings in, where there shall be no suffering and no tears. And even in the harshest moments of our lives today, those whose follow Jesus in the way of servanthood will catch glimpses of that glory, moments of joy, and enduring peace. It’s because we wash the feet of others, as he has washed ours. In that company, we are exalted. That is the promise, and that is the gift. Amen.

Hymn StF 546; HP 788: Behold the servant of the Lord!

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 Behold the servant of the Lord!
I wait Thy guiding eye to feel,
To hear and keep Thy every word,
To prove and do Thy perfect will;
Joyful from my own works to cease,
Glad to fulfil all righteousness. | 3 My every weak though good design
O’errule or change, as seems Thee meet:
Jesus, let all my work be Thine –
Thy work, O Lord, is all complete,
And pleasing in Thy Father’s sight;
Thou only hast done all things right. |
| 2 Me if Thy grace vouchsafe to use,
Meanest of all Thy creatures, me.
The deed, the time, the manner choose:
Let all my fruit be found of Thee.
Let all my works in Thee be wrought,
By Thee to full perfection brought. | 4 Here then to Thee Thine own I leave;
Mould as Thou wilt Thy passive clay;
But let me all Thy stamp receive,
But let me all Thy words obey,
Serve with a single heart and eye,
And to Thy glory live and die. |

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Prayers of Intercession

As we recall the extent of God’s love for us, let us pray.

Gracious God, if we as the Church are truly to be the body of Christ, then let us stand at the foot of the cross and learn what it means to love and keep on loving; to serve and keep on serving.

God our Father: **LET YOUR WILL BE DONE IN US**

If the world is ever to see real hope, then purify and transform our lives and stretch out our arms in loving forgiveness, with no exceptions and no small print, so that we shine as lights in the darkness.

God our Father: **LET YOUR WILL BE DONE IN US**

If our work places and neighbourhoods and homes are to display and respond to your values, then make us more fervent in prayer, more courageous in self-discipline and, above all, more loving in outreach.

God our Father: **LET YOUR WILL BE DONE IN US**

If the terrible suffering of extreme poverty, injustice and oppression is to be addressed realistically, then take away our greed and complacency and our assumptions about

appropriate living standards, and teach us sacrificial self-giving of time, energy and resources.

God our Father: **LET YOUR WILL BE DONE IN US**

Through the life-giving death of Jesus, may the dying turn to you and know your merciful love; may the grieving be comforted, and may we all one day share with those who have died the eternal joy of your heaven.

God our Father: **LET YOUR WILL BE DONE IN US**

Such amazing love is hard to grasp and impossible to repay. In thankfulness for lives set free to live we offer you ourselves.

Merciful God, accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

Based on material copyright © 1998 Susan Sayers

Hymn StF 340; HP 278: Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad his wonderful name;
the name all-victorious of Jesus extol:
his kingdom is glorious, and rules over all. | 3 Salvation to God who sits on the throne!
Let all cry aloud, and honour the Son.
The praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces, and worship the
Lamb.. |
| 2 God ruleth on high, almighty to save;
and still he is nigh, his presence we have;
the great congregation his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation to Jesus our King. | 4 Then let us adore, and give him his right:
all glory and power, all wisdom and might,
and honour and blessing, with angels above,
and thanks never-ceasing, and infinite love. |

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Blessing

Trusting in what is unseen,
believing the best is to come,
in hope the universe waits:
God's purpose shall be revealed.

Copyright © 1997 WGRG, Iona Community, Glasgow G51 3UU, Scotland

May you know the enduring friendship of the Christ who died for you, the close companionship of the Spirit who dwells with you, and the eternal love of God who holds you close, today and every day. Amen.