

ISAIAH 42. 1-17

At 42.1-4 we encounter the initial poem related to the mysterious, fascinating figure of the Servant. A 19th century scholar first isolated this passage and three subsequent poems as a literary unit (49.1-6, 50.4-9, 52.13-53.12). He thought they were from a hand later than the original author. Others believe there was a variety of material available from separate but sympathetic sources which a final prophetic writer wove into an effective whole.

Warnings against artificially separating out these poems from the whole of the prophecy should be taken seriously: would, for example, first-century Jews have thought in terms of the "four poems of the Servant"? It is in fact very difficult to imagine the depth and vigor of the overall prophecy without the presence of the poems. They are like major peaks rearing signature heads along a mighty mountain-chain.

A further nuance is the near-impossibility for the Christian reader to study the figure of the Servant in abstraction from the gospel record of Jesus. So deeply interwoven are the prophecies and features of the Servant in the text of the New Testament it is very difficult to mark off in our minds where the prophetic portrait of the Servant ends and the gospel figure of Jesus begins. All the same, if we exercise a deliberate effort of restraint and concentration it is possible to identify the startling role of the Servant in the sixth century prophecy of Second Isaiah.

At once the key characterization of the Servant that leaps from the page is his nonviolence. It is this feature that is qualitatively new and distinguishes the Servant from quite anything that has been seen in Israel before. "Not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench..." (42.2-3). Unlike the echoing pronouncements of traditional prophecy or the public officials of the king the Servant's words will not be imposed on his listeners. Neither will he act against the weak, as do the powerful, to render their weakness definitive. Instead there is the opposite suggestion: he will seek to preserve them by means of a solidarity with their situations of vulnerability. For he refrains from violence over a long duration marked by his own suffering commitment to justice and refusal to be crushed, just as he has refused to crush them: "He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth" (3c-4 NRSV).

This is truly astonishing. Out of the crucible of the destruction of Jerusalem and the ignominious exile followed by the return of a remnant marked by a complete lack of military force there arises a new theme in Israel. The title "servant of God" has been applicable to king (David, 2 Sam 3.18) and to prophet (Elijah, 1 Kgs. 18.36); here it denotes a figure with characteristics of both but differing from them by an absolute qualitative difference. Unlike the king the Servant will not use violence, and unlike the traditional prophet he achieves his mission by a testimony of silent faithfulness as much as by words. And yet such is the power and reach of this mission that it establishes justice on the whole earth. "And the coastlands wait for his teaching" (4c). The furthest limits, the ends of the earth are waiting for his teaching and judgment, his *torah*, on a par with the intervention of Moses, but now a word that speaks to every human condition everywhere. And all this expressed in the brilliant economy of four verses only. In a single moment of historical lucidity the prophet has found

a word to reach to the *eschata*, the ends of everything, a final word of truth and meaning to the whole tottering human condition.

The only reason this qualitative breakthrough is not highlighted by commentaries is the way it does not fit a culture of generative violence. It is wrapped almost unconsciously in the interpretation of the Servant as "necessary victim" derived above all from the fourth poem. We will return in later studies to this discussion but we can see at once how the gentleness, compassion and nonviolence of the Servant could be seen not for their own sake but as byproducts of a necessary victimhood, as of one "smitten by God." It is astounding that the prophet himself underlines this as a *false* interpretation (53.4c) and yet because of the enormous power of the scapegoat mechanism to generate our range of meaning, we have continued to construe the Servant in precisely this logic (only now grotesquely explicit unlike the archaic covering-over of the victim). His work of suffering is somehow to satisfy, appease, pacify the enraged violence of God. Yet, in contrast, we hear right at the outset of the first poem that the dynamic appeal of the nonviolent Servant is to human beings, rather than directed toward God. The "coastlands" represent an anthropological truth as much as geographical, humanity at its most essential, in its elemental constitution as human. The Servant appeals, therefore, to the human as human.

The relation to humanity is made emphatic in verses 5 to 9. These lines are understood by scholars as a response to or commentary on the poem. The second and third poems have similar responses; in all three the ideas of the preceding poem are expanded and to some degree explained. At verse five God YHWH, the creator, is introduced as the speaker: "Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spreads out the earth with its crops..." We have seen in previous studies how the creator God is the same as the God of history, and, more specifically, of a radical challenge to history. His creative power is absolute because his historical intervention brings something absolutely new to the world. Here the same dynamic equation is expressed but the hinge of universality is the role of the Servant. At verse 1 we heard how the Servant is one upon whom God has put his spirit. This is in the pattern of spirit-anointing of kings (e.g. Saul and David, 1 Sam 11.6, 16.13) but then we also heard directly that the spirit-endowed Servant "shall bring forth justice to the nations." Now there is a slight but real hint--at least through the proximity of the text--that the spirit given to the Servant is somehow continuous with what the creator God has given to all people. YHWH creator is the one "who gives breath to (the earth's) people and spirit to those who walk on it" (5c). The argument works, therefore, in the same fashion as before when the prophet has spoken of creation and redemption together: YHWH is the creator and life-giver of all because he has, through the Servant, a project of redemption and healing spirit for all. And consequently, at some mysterious level, the spirit given to all is essentially in tune with the Spirit of the Servant.

The address to the Servant develops precisely in expression of this theme: "I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light to the nations" (6). Literally the Servant is himself "a covenant of (a) people," that is a coming together of a people through and by him; in and by himself he is a bond of union for all. In the same way the Servant is a light of nations. By means of this individual God gives a brilliant new possibility to all humanity. His effect is: "To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness" (7). These phrases have broad existential reference for

they apply to all humans everywhere. They signify the multiple levels of human imprisonment and alienation and the Servant's ability somehow to penetrate them and lead their victims to light and freedom.

How marvelous is this? Simultaneously a fresh figure and theme leaps out of Israel, out of its worst abjection, and the Exodus blessing of liberation typical to Israel becomes a universal possibility. The one consistent note that makes possible this universal expansion is the suffering nonviolence of the Servant. Through his abyssal witness to nonviolence and compassion a complete human liberation has become possible for humanity.

There **follow** logically very special claims made by the God of Israel, claims to singular divine reality and at the very same moment the proclamation of new reality: "I am the Lord, this is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the earlier things have come to pass, new ones I now foretell. Before they spring into being, I announce them to you" (8-9). The God of Israel said in advance the terrible events of the exile would occur but also there would be an eventual return from exile. And now, on the basis of this proven sovereignty within the course of history, including crucially a pathway of liberation from its mechanisms of violence, something categorically new is promised to the world.

It is not surprising that after these extraordinary claims the prophet speaks a hymn of ecstatic praise to God (10-17). The whole of creation is invited to sing a new song to God in response to the new thing he has done. The sea is the element of chaos or natural violence but it is exhorted to join the celebration (10). The coastlands are mentioned twice again but also the desert regions to the south; all these places and their inhabitants are called on to cry out in praise to God (11-12). The prophet invokes the traditional image of the God of Israel as a warrior: war or battle is of course the classic situation in which generative violence is in motion and Israel has always understood God as fighting on its side for the sake of his purposes (13; cf. for example Exodus 15.3). The prophet invokes this traditional image but then at once shifts to a qualitatively new metaphor that is consistent with the whole tenor of the Servant poem. God speaks of herself as a woman in childbirth, referring to an apparent silence and lack of activity which was really "holding myself in" (14a). "But now, I cry out as a woman in labor, gasping and panting" (14b). Rather than moving precipitately to attack God in fact is laboring over lengthy time in a deep struggle of gestation.

Giving birth is the truly alternative act of human generative suffering. In fact it is the only theme in the human repertoire that can challenge the generative power of violence, occurring with as much of a continuous rhythm as violence but always stretching to give life rather than reaching to take it. The shift in metaphor itself signals a cultural change of truly epochal dimensions. God-in-labor within history is a God who changes the very meaning of being human. This is the significance in the next verse of the mothering God laying waste to mountains, hills and herbage, and drying up rivers and pools (15): even the fertile creation is overthrown where it is structured according to the old order. It becomes instead the desert where the truly new arises. Those who do not understand this, the blind, will be led in their darkness until it is turned to light (16). Those who continue to trust in the idols of generative violence will inevitably be shamed before the final transformation of history brought by the God-in-labor (17).

Here then is a definitive rebuttal of all facile Old Testament/New Testament or God-of-wrath/God-of-mercy distinctions. Already in the sixth century before Christ the prophet of Second Isaiah had produced a seismic upheaval in the understanding of God and the anthropology that shapes and expresses it. The triumphalist distinction between Old and New Testaments is itself a function of the old order that the Servant and God-in-labor are in process of overthrowing. The deepest inspiration of Hebrew thought is a radical break with all forms of domination, violence, the surrogate victim, and human culture based upon them. And at the risk of laboring the point it should be stated once more that the "wrath of God" is a theological-anthropological construction that we ourselves produce, and is referenced in this sense in both Testaments. It is a kind of anti-matter of biblical revelation, what happens once we are confronted by God with our own violence and yet hang on to its generative function. "God" then appears only as violence because we have chosen him perversely and deliberately to be such. Needless to say this has catastrophic spiritual and historical consequences, and is powerfully reflective of our contemporary situation.

It is the figure of the Servant that guarantees a new theology. The Servant is like a new element, a new physics, because he is in fact a new anthropology. He is a covenant of people, a breakthrough that enables a new union based on the overturning of universal victim-making into love. Alongside him the sense of God is changed from warrior to mother-in-labor. This is it, nothing more or less. Do we not feel the red-letter power of the Isaianic prophecy?

Isaiah 42:1-17

- ¹ Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
- ² He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
- ³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
- ⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
- ⁵ 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:
- ⁶ 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,
7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
- 8 I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
- 9 See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.
- 10 Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar^o and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
- 11 Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.
- 12 Let them give glory to the LORD,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.
- 13 The LORD goes forth like a soldier,
like a warrior he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes.
- 14 For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,
I will gasp and pant.
- 15 I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their herbage;
I will turn the rivers into islands,
and dry up the pools.
- 16 I will lead the blind
by a road they do not know,
by paths they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do,
and I will not forsake them.
- 17 They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame—
those who trust in carved images,
who say to cast images,
“You are our gods.”

Questions for reflection/discussion:

1. Dr. Bartlett says above that the prophet's new insight into the activity of God comes "out of the crucible of the destruction of Jerusalem." In the same way, we could never have appreciated God's victory (the Resurrection) on our behalf apart from the events on Golgotha. Is there a necessary relationship here? Can we perceive those moments of exile and crucifixion in our own lives that make available to us the same vision that Isaiah had?
2. Isaiah fills the traditional metaphor of God as "warrior" with new meaning by substituting the image of the mother in labor. The images share the sense of struggle and sacrifice, but in one, the struggle and sacrifice are in the service of death, in the other, in the service of life. If violent images of God have served to justify, even command us to violence, how then shall this new image reshape us? To what are we commanded? How do we continue to take struggle and sacrifice seriously without finding ourselves in the service of death?
3. Though we have come to associate these songs of the Servant with the life and ministry of Jesus, we are also reminded that the Servant also has a collective identity, that of the gathered people of God. As Jesus continues to live through the Body of Christ gathered in his name, so also the Servant, seeking to bring justice. Do we dare to imagine Isaiah speaking of us, as well as Jesus?