

Readings for Lent 2 – Isaiah chapter 49

This week we jump forward in the Book of Isaiah to chapter 49. The “Servant Songs” in chapters 41 – 48 focus mainly on the ‘servant-hood’ of the people of Israel – those chosen by the Lord God to be “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exodus chapter 19, verse 6). They had been set aside to proclaim the glory of the Lord God in the world and proclaim him to the nations. As they had abandoned the worship of the Lord God they had forfeited their divinely appointed status and spent time in exile in Babylon. After their time of exile was completed the Lord God appointed Cyrus, the Persian conqueror of Babylon, to repatriate the Jewish exiles.

The “Servant” in these chapters is variously i) The people of Israel themselves – e.g. chapter 41, verses 8 and following; ii) The Messiah as an individual – e.g. chapter 52, verse 13 into chapter 53, and chapter 61; iii) Cyrus the Persian conqueror of Babylon and liberator of the Jewish exiles - e.g. chapter 45, verse 1 and following. In reading these chapters we need to look carefully at the context of the verses to ascertain the subject matter before making a judgement!

There are other questions which we can ask as we read:- i) What did this prophecy mean to the People of God when first given? ii) What did this prophecy mean to the Christians in the Early Church? Iii) What does this prophecy mean to us here and now? Do not forget to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God who inspired the writing of them so many years ago. - Isaiah lived and prophesied from at least the death of King Uzziah in 740 B.C. (Isaiah chapter 6, verse 1) until at least 701 B.C. (Isaiah chapter 37, verses 36 – 38), when Sennacherib was king of Syria. He probably lived on into the reign of the idolatrous King Manasseh when tradition says he was put to death by being sawn asunder (c.f. Hebrews chapter 11, verse 37).

Isaiah chapter 49, verses 1 – 13:- A careful reading of these verses of this chapter will show that the prophecy is addressed to an individual as the sole representative of the People of Israel. Read verse 3 in the light of verses 5 – 6. As a Christian prophecy we can read verse 1 as referring to the Incarnation and verse 4 could be read alongside ‘the cry of dereliction’ on the Cross (Mark chapter 15, verse 34).

Here in verses 5 – 7 we find that the Gentile nations were to be called and included in the ultimate salvation at the end of time. In verse 7 we find the first hint that the coming Messiah, the Anointed One of God the Redeemer of Israel, would be “*deeply despised and abhorred by the nations*”. We will find this thought expand and illustrated when we look at chapter 53. remember that ultimately Christ will conquer and kings and rulers will recognise him as Lord. (Philippians chapter 2, verses 9 – 11).

That the ultimate salvation will encompass the whole earth can be seen in verses 1, 6 and 11 – 13. In some commentaries “*the land of Syene*” is taken as Aswan on the southern border of ancient Egypt.

Verses 14 – 21:- The cry from the heart of the People of God - “The Lord has abandoned us” has an immediate reply! All peoples will be gathered into the rebuilt land and city. Those who are brought into the new relationship with the Lord God will be wondered at and questioned. When the Redeemer gathers all his people together it will need a New Jerusalem large enough for all to dwell in. (Revelation chapters 21 – 22).

Verses 22 – 26:- Although there was a return by the exiled Jews from Babylon (recorded in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah), there has never been an in-gathering on the scale of that described in these verses. Note the tender loving concern shown by the Gentile peoples to their Jewish brothers and sisters (verse 22), carrying and caring for the children of the exiles.

The closing verses of this chapter speak of a spiritual as well as a physical deliverance. Yes! The prey can be taken from the mighty! The captives of a tyrant can be rescued! (See Mark chapter 3, verses 22 – 27).

The Servant / Messiah will not only be “*a light to the nations*” (verse 6) but a Rescuer and Redeemer so that “*all flesh shall know that I the Lord am your Saviour, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob*”.

1) *Jesus, Thou all redeeming Lord,
Thy blessing we implore;
Open the door to preach Thy word,
The great effectual door.*

2) *Gather the outcasts in, and save
From sin and Satan’s power,
And let them now acceptance have
And know their precious hour.*

3) *The hardness of their hearts remove,
Thou Who for all hast died;
Show them the tokens of Thy love,
Thy feet, thy hands, Thy side.*

4) *Ready Thou art the blood to apply,
And prove the record true;
and all Thy wounds to sinners cry,
“I suffered this for you!”*

Charles Wesley 1749