Sermon for First After Epiphany RCL Year A

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

Isaiah 42 is one of the SERVANT SONGS that speak of the wonderful work of redemption God’s servant will accomplish in the future. It is a vision of emancipation, of justice, of a new and abiding covenant relationship. As Christians we are familiar with referring these passages to fulfilment in Christ – as Matthew clearly intends to do in his version of the Baptism of Christ.

Today I want to refer them to US. For as we know, “everyone who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1.12). And that we are baptised into Christ and share the mind of Christ; therefore by grace, not by our own merit, the words addressed to Jesus are also addressed to us.

“God is well pleased” with his children and God’s soul “delights” in his servant. Whilst we can see how this readily applies to Christ, through grace, God delights in all those who become his children through faith and baptism. This is the crucial thing: baptism is NOT primarily announcing what the servant’s mission is to be – but first it is a proclamation of a RELATIONSHIP. Christ is God’s SON; the phrase “Chosen One” of Isaiah has been rendered even more explicit and intimate than before by Matthew. And it is in this special unbreakable relationship that we share through our baptism. The Church baptises us as babies to make the point that we receive this special relationship as a gift. Because Christ is God’s Son, we also have by baptism become God’s children.

We know that children without a loving parent suffer irreparable harm; we know that children need the presence of a parent to develop and grow by imitation of the parent’s behaviour. We know children, even adult children, suffer through parental neglect and divorce. And we can see the damage done to lives that are lived with no concept of a Heavenly Father and no relationship with the nurturing of Mother Church. The modern world is full of insecure, grasping, selfish and unhappy people. The Gospel must start by proclaiming the possibility of establishing this crucial relationship for our spiritual happiness and worldly contentment: the knowledge that God delights in us – because we are his children. *And for CCA members here today – we seek to make migrants to this church feel like family. In Christ they are already our brothers and our sisters.*

SECURE in this unbreakable relationship we are free to work and act for God. The fear of failure is taken away. The worry that we must always get it right is removed. We need this secure base from which to act because the task is so monumental – to change the world.

We are called to bring “justice to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, free the captives who are in prison, release those in the dungeon and bring light to those who sit in darkness.” If we are to even dream of attempting such a feat, we must firstly be secure in our relationship with God. We must know ourselves to be God’s children in whom he delights. This is why Wesley insisted that personal renewal preceded Mission; that personal holiness preceded spreading social holiness. Without the secure relationship we burn ourselves out, we despair at our failures, we find ourselves distanced from God who becomes a slave-driver asking the impossible of us, rather than a Father who is with us every step of the way and who “takes us by the hand” (Is 42.6).

This was Wesley’s experience. He knew all that he wanted to do. He even went to America to try and convert the native tribes there, but he came back exhausted, ready to throw the towel in, until he felt his heart strangely warmed.

Without the RELATIONSHIP of grace, we too readily become judgemental do-gooders who know what is best for everyone; we become angry and resentful when they fail to see our good intentions for them. *For CCA members present – we have to have humility before we can truly minister to the migrant newcomer – otherwise we risk the danger of knowing what is best for them without listening to what they have to offer us.*

For the MANNER in which we are called to serve our heavenly Father is also based on grace, not condemnation. “He will not raise his voice or cry out in the streets” (v2). “A bruised reed he will not break off and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out” (v3). The poetry here is speaking of the lowest orders of society at the bottom of the pile, the broken reeds of this world, and of the upper echelon who are supposed to enlighten the whole nation, the wicks of the candles set upon a lampstand.

The child of God who has already received mercy goes about the task of bringing justice to the world not with angry raised voice condemning those who are often already doing their best, or those who just don’t see any way forward. The child of God is not judge and jury above the world, but is called to be like a beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

The child of God is not called to inflict harm on those, like the bruised reeds, whose position underfoot has already inflicted damage upon their lives. The child of God is called to nurse and protect the bruised reeds and bring them back to health – not inflict further pain in the name of doing them a favour – and the Church has failed a number of groups in this respect over the years from unmarried mothers to homosexuals, from elderly widows condemned for witchcraft to aboriginal children taken into care. *Let us not do harm to new migrants in our over-eagerness to do good, lest in knowing what they need without asking, we do more harm than good.*

Nor is the Church’s call to be biased towards the poor to be interpreted that we may demolish the lives of those called upon to be the leaders of society. Some leaders have been notoriously evil and their removal has been an act of moral responsibility. But this is to be a matter of last resort in the direst of circumstances. Revolutions rarely turn out as beneficial for the poor as those who send them to the barricades made out.

The dimly burning wick also needs grace; needs to be given a chance to try again, find a new life. Political leaders need our support and prayers also. We can afford idealism because we have no responsibility. Politicians have to master the art of the possible: that includes climate change, world poverty, immigration and refugees for which the Church has a ready supply of idealistic solutions. Nor are the wealthy and prominent members of society to be condemned for enjoying the privileges of hard work or their individual giftedness. They are to be nurtured back into giving the true light of leadership to society. They need to be taught what God’s justice means for them, but that does not always require that they should be condemned and replaced by others.

Changing the world to resemble the Kingdom of God is not within our own powers alone. If the Church manages to bring anything good to the state of the nations, then it is only through the power of the Spirit working within and through us. “I will put my Spirit on him – and he will bring justice to the nations” (V1). Likewise in Matthew, Jesus receives the Holy Spirit to be able embark upon his work as the Son of God. The Spirit alone achieves these things. Again, that is why our own personal relationship with God must be established first before we can become effective tools in God’s hand.