Sermon for 2nd in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42.

i

At a time when the news channels are often full of terrible terrorist atrocities committed in the name of religion, it is tempting to put aside the military symbolism we find in the bible and pretend it isn’t there. But that would be the coward’s way out and Jesus expects us to be better than that. So what do we make of Isaiah’s servant song which features both sword and arrow?

Well, the military metaphors found in both the OT and NT are not rallying cries for Jihad. When Jesus said, “I did not come to bring peace on earth, but a sword (Matthew 10:34), he was speaking metaphorically of the struggle and opposition that the gospel will face in the world.

Whenever real swords are wielded, rather than metaphorical ones, Jesus is quite firm in opposing them. When a disciple drew a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane to defend Jesus, he is told to put it away, and the victim of the attack is healed. Jesus said, “He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.”

Yet military images abound nonetheless. In our Isaiah reading we hear of the servant whose mouth is “like a sharp sword” (Isaiah 49:2); Ephesians speaks of the sword of the Spirit being the Word of God (Ephesians 6.17); Hebrews likewise refers to the Word of the Lord which “is sharper than a two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12).

We may shy away from such violent imagery, but it is there to warn us that we face great opposition in the world.

In 1 Corinthians 1 we are introduced to Sosthenes who may possibly be the same Sosthenes who was the synagogue leader who tried to bring Paul to court, but who was beaten severely by his own supporters when Gallio the magistrate threw the case out (Acts 18:17). If that is so, it is a timely reminder of the confrontation the gospel can provoke. If it is he, Sosthenes comes across to join the Christians after his failed prosecution, bringing his bruises with him.

Even the story of Andrew taking his brother to meet the Messiah is not without its implication of hard times ahead. Simon meets the Messiah and immediately is told that he shall henceforth be known as Peter, the rock. This is an image that hints of a need for solid foundations to withstand earthquake, flood and gale. Peter will need to be hard and stand firm. Following the Messiah is no walk in the park. Military metaphors are used for a reason. Let would-be disciples of any epoch take note.

The British Methodist baptism service published in 1975 used to include a prayer that the child baptised would be “a faithful soldier and servant to his life’s end”, but by 1999 the new *Methodist Worship Book* liturgy omits such military imagery.

If only it were so easy to make following Jesus safe. Christians throughout the Middle East and parts of both Asia and Africa know otherwise.

ii

Chapter 49 marks a change of perspective in Isaiah of Babylon’s thinking. He moves on from talking about Babylon, Cyrus or the imminent journey home across the desert and over the hills which featured in last Sunday’s passage from Isaiah 42.

Now Isaiah addresses the long term prospects of what it means to be a Servant of the Lord. It is not the prospect of a happy homecoming that possesses Isaiah, but the realisation that Israel must now once again shoulder the covenant responsibilities laid upon them in Abraham’s day to be a light to the nations.

Their calling will lead to further pain and suffering, culminating in the most famous Servant Song of Isaiah’s prophecy in Chapter 53:3 in which the servant is “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”.

In Chapter 49 he hasn’t got to that dire warning yet, but he is setting out the stage for Israel’s global, historic role which must now be taken up again. Their return home is not an end to their suffering, but the start of the next chapter. Their mission is to call upon the “islands and distant nations” (v1) and be a “light for the gentiles”, and bring God’s “salvation to the ends of the earth” (v6).

This is Isaiah of Babylon’s great legacy. Whilst the people were in Exile, feeling that they had laboured for the Lord “for no purpose” and had “spent their strength in vain” (v4), Isaiah has seen that the gods of Babylon are mere lifeless lumps of carved wood strapped to the backs of donkeys so they don’t fall off (Isaiah 44), or immobile statues of gold (46:7). This leads Isaiah to believe: “I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 46:9).

Isaiah has discovered monotheism. Whilst before Isaiah it is questionable to what degree monotheism had taken root, paradoxically it is in exile when the God of Israel should have been discarded as a vanquished deity, overpowered by the gods of Babylon, that they actually find their God is the only living God.

It is because they have discovered that the God of Abraham is the only God that the people may return filled with a renewed sense of their universal mission to the world first promised to Abraham that he would become a father of many nations (Genesis 12:3).

Deeply ironic is it that from these heights of rapture the returning exiles should embark upon one of the most narrowly nationalistic periods of their history once they arrive back in Jerusalem. Under Ezra they embark upon a weeding out of foreign influences and the breaking of inter-racial marriages. The *Book of Jonah* is a parody of this narrow-minded policy, featuring a reluctant prophet who resents God’s generosity and mercy to the Ninevites.

In Isaiah we see the two military symbols used are the sword and the arrow. The sword is a close quarter weapon. It represents the confrontation that servants of the Lord must be willing to face when opposition confronts them. The NT uses the same sort of language:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-6).

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross:* it is a hymn some Christians find difficult to sing nowadays, but being the light of the world means that sometimes we cannot run away and hide our light under a bushel. Christians may not preach Jihad, but we must have the courage to face those that would denounce Christ.

The other symbol we find in Isaiah is the arrow. The arrow is a weapon of attack that kills its victim at a distance. This symbol stands for Isaiah’s missionary zeal to evangelise the world which the prophet now places upon the people. Since there is no other God, they do indeed have a worldwide mission to fulfil; they must fly like the arrow and take their message to the “islands and distant nations”.

Their calling to this worldwide vocation first promised to Abraham may have been hidden for a while but it has still been held in God’s quiver for future use, and Isaiah has rediscovered it. Now it is too small a thing to merely look to the restoration of the tribes of Jacob (v6), now it is a mission that stretches to the “ends of the earth”.

iii

The Servant of the Lord has a lot on his plate. This begs the question who Isaiah thinks constitutes that Servant of the Lord. It will come as no surprise that there are a number of theories on this matter.

Some have suggested Isaiah is speaking of himself. In verses 4-6 we seem to be talking of an individual person, but verse 3 calls Israel God’s servant, so does the prophet have the whole people of God in mind?

The simple answer seems to be yes to both. Isaiah is speaking of the role of both the people and any individual who has been called to be a Servant of the Lord. In taking the light to the “distant nations” there is suffering and pain to be faced, but the pain borne by the servant will be like the *asham*, the guilt offering, for the suffering of the servant will be the means through which sinners will be reconciled to God. Like the old scapegoat tradition of the Exodus, the suffering of the servant people will not be without effect.

Isaiah is warning the exiles that their return home after years of longing will not be a return to a land flowing with milk and honey, there will be no nationalistic triumphalism for having seen off their Babylonian oppressors with the help of their new masters, the Persians. They must not return with the intention of reasserting their narrow self-interest, but with a renewed vision of their call to serve all nations of the world. Such a role will not bring them world dominance such as the Babylonians and Persians seek and others will later crave such as the Greeks and the Romans. Their worldwide mission will bring pain and suffering, but it will be worth the while because God will use it to establish the light of his presence among the nations.

Sadly, the exiles forgot all of this as soon as they set foot on home soil. They rebuilt spiritual walls in Ezra’s holiness code which we find in Leviticus and elsewhere; they also rebuilt their fortress city under Nehemiah’s direction. For a while they turned in on themselves in a rebirth of national pride and self-determination, particularly when the Maccabbaeus family led the revolt against the Greek empire. But most of their post-exilic self-determination deteriorated into bitter fratricidal murder and social and political division.

Isaiah’s Suffering Servant desperately needed a new embodiment – and found it in Jesus Christ. Looking at Isaiah’s poetic visions of the Servant of the Lord, whose unmerited suffering leads to the redemption of others, it is obvious why the Christians found such resonance in Isaiah of their own experience with Christ.

The question remains: is this a vision of what one Suffering Servant will accomplish? Is it a prophecy of Jesus Christ?

Or is this a prophecy of what all God’s servants are called to do down the ages? Our readings from Paul’s *Letter to the Corinthians* and from St John’s *Call of the Disciples*, suggest that it is both.

Suffering in order to bring the light of God to the farthest reaches of the world is the call of all God’s servants down the ages and it is still ours today, but we have now seen the triumph of that strategy in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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