

GOD'S SERVANT, SERVED

Five Lenten Meditations
on Isaiah's 'Suffering Servant'
for small group study

Craig Thompson

ILLUMINATING FAITH

About *Illuminating Faith*

Illuminating Faith is a Christian educational ministry auspiced by the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne, Australia. Reflecting the congregation's own interest in thinking deeply about Christian faith, these studies offer a range of different reflections on Christian confession intended both to illuminate that faith, and to show how Christian faith can itself be illuminating. The study materials derive from a range of different sources and will appear in an increasing range of styles. The congregation as a whole contributes through study groups in which the material is tested, in proof-reading, by composing questions small groups might consider when using the studies, and in giving its minister time to oversee the project. For more information, further studies, to provide feedback or to discover ways of supporting this ministry see:

www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/illuminating-faith.

Craig Thompson is a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, presently placed with the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne.

© 2020 Craig Thompson and the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist. Permission is granted to print and distribute this material in its present form for non-commercial purposes.

© Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

GOD'S SERVANT, SERVED

LENTEN MEDITATIONS

These studies are intended for use as Lenten studies, although they can be used at any time. They focus on the 'Servant cycle' readings from Isaiah. These texts have been very important in the church as lenses through which to view Jesus but appear in the Revised Common Lectionary used by many churches in the Holy Week readings, meaning they do not get a lot of direct attention in Sunday preaching. These studies may help to address that deficit a little.

The interpretation of the Servant cycle has been much contested through history and still is today. The studies do not do in-depth analysis of the set texts or to present a sure conclusion as to their meaning but are rather in the form of Christian 'meditations' or reflections on one aspect of the particular passage. These meditations were originally sermons, and were preached at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, Lent and Easter 2019. As such, this crisis is reflected in some of the studies.

If you would like more exegetical information on the focus texts for each study and don't have commentaries to hand, the free online materials of Howard Wallace or Anna Grant-Henderson will do the job (links are in the e-text of this study document):

Study 1 - Isaiah 42.1-9; See Howard Wallace's commentary on this text [here](#) or Anna Grant-Henderson's [here](#).

Study 2 - Isaiah 49.1-7; See Howard Wallace's commentary on this text [here](#) or Anna Grant-Henderson's [here](#).

Study 3 - Isaiah 50.4-9a; See Howard Wallace's commentary on this text [here](#) or Anna Grant-Henderson's [here](#).

Study 4 - Isaiah 52.13-53.12; See Howard Wallace's commentary on this text [here](#) or Anna Grant-Henderson's [here](#).

(**Study 5** returns to the text for Study 4)

The studies are intended for use as a read-and-discuss study series but can, of course, be used by individuals. The questions for reflection at the end of each study are guides only; the discussion can follow the interests of the group; and a psalm and confessional prayer response is suggested at the end of each study.

CONTENTS

1.	On seeing what is there.....	1
2.	The flickering Servant of God	6
3.	Love’s new creation.....	12
4.	Sin-sick	17
5.	The God of COVID-19	24

■

1.ON SEEING WHAT IS THERE

Isaiah 42.1.9

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.

If you were to give a child a pencil and ask her to draw a picture of a person's face, the chances are high that she'll draw a circle for the head, with eyes at the top of the head and the nose and mouth filling the rest of the space. Or, if you asked her to draw and colour a tree, it will almost certainly have a brown trunk and green leaves – in a single hue of brown and green.

She'll do this because she 'knows' that this is what a face looks like, or how a tree is coloured. Of course, it is not only children who do this. Most of us realise pretty soon that our untrained drawing skills are fairly limited so we risk no more the taking up of pencils to draw but, if we dared, we would draw and colour much the same as innocents who don't yet know that they 'can't draw'.

We draw and colour like this because we ‘know’ what things look like: eyes are at the top of the head and leaves are green. Except that they aren’t. There are good reasons for imagining that things are like this but we are wrong nonetheless. We have simply not paid enough attention to the world in which we live.

We need to be mindful of the distortions of unattentive ‘knowledge’ when we come to read the Scriptures. It is impossible not to bring some knowledge – or at least some expectation – to the Bible, but it always distorts what we see when we get to it. Anyone well-formed in Christian tradition brings to the Bible thousands of years of accumulated expectation: we know what we will find there.

In this way, the church has long ‘known’ the meaning of the readings from Isaiah we will consider in these studies. We have learned the connections between these prophetic texts and the story of Jesus. Again, there is good reason these links have been drawn. The work of the ‘Servant’ figure who appears in these texts resonates with other accounts of who Jesus was and what he achieved:

‘Here is my servant...in whom my soul delights...I have put my spirit upon him’ (42.1);

‘But 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’ (53.5).

If we wonder, How could those lines *not* be about Jesus?, the point is made. The connection to Jesus is obvious to a church which saw both what happened to him – ‘wounded’, ‘crushed’ – and experiences forgiveness and reconciliation from what happened to him – ‘for our transgressions’, ‘we are healed’. And we need not doubt that obvious connection.

Yet there is much more to be seen here, and much more to know. and it will change something of what we already know. The relationship between Jesus and the Servant is greater than the ‘conservative’ knows, who sees here a miraculous foreknowledge of Jesus. Such a reading would not allow that Jesus is *dependent* on Isaiah’s vision, but this then reduces the link between Jesus and the Servant to a happy coincidence across 500 years. And the relationship between Jesus and the Servant is much deeper than implied by the dismissive claim of the progressive that the church has misunderstood and hijacked a convenient text. For, even if Jesus doesn’t ‘require’ that Isaiah spoke as he did, we can’t *recognise* God in Jesus without some prior context, the Servant of Isaiah provides some of this context.

Oddly, then, we both don’t *need* Isaiah to understand Jesus, and yet *must* understand Jesus in terms of Isaiah. This is because what Isaiah says is not *necessary* for Jesus’ work; other things are present to help us recognise God in him. But the God Isaiah sees working in the Servant is the same God who is at work in Jesus, and so we should expect a connection between the work of the two. Our sense for God’s way in the world, then, will be much stronger if we look to see Isaiah’s Servant *on his own terms*, before *and as* we connect the Servant to Jesus.

This is not straightforward. We will see that the Servant is a very slippery figure. Sometimes the Servant is clearly *Israel itself* but other times the Servant is clearly *over-against* Israel, or *for* Israel (cf. Isaiah 49.3,5). The slippage from the Servant which is *all of* Israel to the individual(?) Servant *for* Israel is probably deliberate but is also vexing. At the very least, we might come to see that God's way with the world cannot be reduced to simple formulas or drawn with straight lines, or coloured with a single shade of green.

This matters for Christians because if it is not clear *who* or *how* the Servant is in Isaiah, it must be less clear *in what way* Jesus himself is the Servant. If Jesus is doing the kind of things Isaiah saw that such a God would do, we need to see what Isaiah saw if we are to know what Jesus did.

To grasp something of Isaiah's vision will be our work in these studies but, for now, there is another dimension of Isaiah's preaching which is crucial to our reading of the Servant's work. This is the nature of the God whose Servant features in these texts.

Very strong in Isaiah – particularly these later chapters – is the declaration of the absolute sovereignty of God. The work of the Servant is the work of the God who, as we hear in our focus text for this study:

...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 (42.5).

Isaiah sets God's capacity to reconcile through the Servant's *suffering* alongside God's *creative power, as being of the same order*. If there is a link between the suffering of the Servant and that of Jesus, then the cross becomes – unexpectedly – a sign of creative *power*: a sign of the absolute sovereignty and creative power of God. It is *the cross* which parallels the creation of the world, and not the merely Easter Day resurrection, isolated as a miraculous wonder.

The cross is how God creates, or 'now' creates, now brings righteousness to the world:

See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare... (42.9).

These are not 'additional' things; they are *new* things. New sight, new knowledge, which changes *how* we see, and so *what* we see. The former things, as what we 'know', must give way to the latter things – the cross, and God's freedom in the cross.

This begins when we pay attention to what is before us, trusting not what we think we know but trusting eyes being trained to see. A child can be trained to see that, in fact, our eyes are not at the top but in the middle of our faces, that a tree trunk is pink and purple and grey, and occasionally a *little* brown; that a leaf is greeny-yellowish-white when it is not red or purple.

We do not see the world aright because we do not see God aright. Because we have not looked deeply into the God who is there, we do not believe that there is more to see in us and around us than we have noticed in fleeting glimpses.

Seeing God rightly begins with doing as God commands: '*Behold, my servant*' (42.1, KJV), [given] as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Behold, servant, *who you are*. See *who is given* for you. And discern *the God* in the midst of it all.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What kinds of things do we 'know' we will find in Scripture? When have you been surprised by a new reading of a familiar passage?
- How do you understand Old Testament texts to be related to the good news of the New Testament?
- In what way is the cross 'creative'? What newness does it bring?

PSALM 36.5-11

- ⁵ Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
- ⁶ Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgements are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.
- ⁷ How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
- ⁸ They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
- ⁹ For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.
- ¹⁰ O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!
- ¹¹ Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me,
or the hand of the wicked drive me away.

PRAYER

We bless you, O God,
You have created and sustained us and all things
for your own name's sake, that we might glorify and enjoy you forever.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed,
we fail to bring you glory.

Forgive us when it does not occur to us that there is more to see of you and of
those around us than we have seen till now.

Forgive us when, seeing more deeply we choose rather to be blind; when
hearing more completely, we choose to be deaf.

Forgive us, then, selfishness, witting and unwitting;
unkindness, intended and unintended;
impatience we think we can justify, and which we cannot,
despair because we have knowingly or unknowingly grasped the wrong hope.

Gracious God above all gods,
Open eyes which are blind, bring captives out from the dungeon,
and light to those who sit in darkness.
Make of us people for whom the past is past,
and who are grounded in the new things you have promised.

Just so, gracious God, have mercy on us...

Amen.

If you are doing this study in a group, finish with prayer for each other.

2. THE FLICKERING SERVANT OF GOD

Isaiah 49.1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
² He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
³ And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
⁴ But I said, "I have laboured in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the Lord,
and my reward with my God."

⁵ And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honoured in the sight of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength—
⁶ he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

⁷ Thus says the Lord,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
"Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Those who take delight in horror movies will know that 'the flicker' is an important cinematic device for creating unease in that kind of story telling. This is the flickering awareness of a presence revealed in a flash of lightning then disappearing, or the spirit caught in the corner of an eye but not visible to closer attention, or the fleeting hint of something hidden under a normal surface.

In the first of these studies on the Servant Songs of Isaiah we noted that it is important to look closely at the details of the Songs, for the details have the potential to disrupt too easy a reading of Isaiah through received Christian tradition.

One of the things such close attention reveals is a flicker in the identity of the Servant who features in them. This is clearer in the text for this study, in which we hear first an account of the calling of the ‘Servant’, who is identified as the *people* Israel (v.3), as elsewhere in Isaiah. Yet the text then shifts to describe a Servant who is not Israel but apparently an *individual* who is commissioned ‘to bring [Israel] back’ to God (v.5). This flickering or slippage of identity of the Servant – now what we might call the Servant Israel, now the Saviour-Servant – takes place several times in Isaiah, apparently quite deliberately. (In what follows we will use ‘Servant Israel’ and ‘Saviour-Servant’ to distinguish between Isaiah’s two apparent references, while trying to keep them as close together as we can).

The traditional reading of the Servant Songs pays little attention to this difficult double-reference. The figure of the Saviour-Servant has typically been used to interpret Jesus along the lines that Jesus experiences and brings about the kinds of things that the Saviour-Servant does. That is, as the Saviour-Servant seems to do, Jesus comes from God to save Israel (and the world), appearing not unlike a currency in an economy of salvation: a transaction takes place in which Jesus is ‘spent’, and we are saved as part of the bargain.

It is easy to read this economy of salvation back into Isaiah, so that the suffering and rejection of the Saviour-Servant also becomes a price paid on behalf of the people, perhaps after the fashion of a sacrifice made to win reconciliation with God. The Saviour-Servant and Jesus, understood in this way, mutually support each other.

But such a transactional economy of salvation blinds us to what Isaiah might help us to see with his flickering of the identity of the Servant between the individual and the whole people. Closer attention reveals two things, one the flip-side of the other.

First, the Saviour-Servant suffers what Servant Israel suffers. The Saviour *becomes* the thing to be saved – becomes Israel – rather than being a price ‘paid’ for it. This means that the Saviour not only suffers ‘for’ Israel, but the suffering is what Israel *itself* suffers. The Saviour bears what Israel is already bearing.

Important here is that Israel is a community humiliated in exile. The words applied here to the Saviour-Servant – ‘deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers’ (v.7) – describe exactly Servant Israel’s own situation. Its humiliation has been the sign to Israel of its own failure and punishment from God. The Saviour-Servant, then, does not undergo any *further* humiliation God might require for reconciliation; the Saviour ‘re-enacts’ or embodies the suffering and humiliation of Servant Israel. As it watches the Saviour-Servant, Israel *sees itself*: ‘he’ *is*, in his suffering, what *we* are. He suffers not as a payment to free us from our suffering. It is *our* suffering he suffers – he suffers as we do.

But, second, the converse also applies: if Isaiah helps us to see the Saviour in the form of suffering Israel (who is to be saved), he also causes us to see Israel in the Saviour. That is, what happens to the Saviour-Servant happens to Servant Israel as well because the Saviour-Servant 'is' Servant Israel. By seemingly confusing the two, Isaiah declares that what the Saviour-Servant experiences will be the experience of Servant Israel.

The crucial thing is that the Saviour experiences an *exaltation* after the time of rejection and alienation (vv.8f). *This is the gospel in Isaiah*: unfaithful and failed Servant Israel will be lifted up with the co-suffering but faithful Saviour-Servant. Because of the identification of the one with the many, the many can pull the one down but the one can pull the many up.

Why does this matter? There is one particular point we will draw from this for our appreciation of the ministry of Jesus, and the crucifixion of Jesus in particular.

Isaiah's Saviour-Servant does not suffer *for* the people, as if his suffering does something to win God back over; his suffering is not a transaction. This is also to say that he doesn't suffer *because* of the people – because they have done something to him. Isaiah's Saviour-Servant suffers *with* the people. The Saviour suffers because the people suffer.

This matters for reading the crucifixion of Jesus, if Isaiah's Servant helps to understand the work of Jesus. Under Isaiah, the crucifixion becomes not a suffering *for* the people (a suffering in our place) or even a suffering *because of* the people (which we have caused). The crucifixion is a suffering *with* the people.

This is an unexpected reading of the cross – or an unexpected addition to our other readings. It is to say that if to be crucified is to be Godforsaken (as Jesus cries from the cross, Mark 15.34), then we who find ourselves Godforsaken are, in this sense, *already* also crucified. Put differently, the crucifixion of Jesus is a sign of our existence: alienation from God. Jesus does not do something 'for' us on the cross so much as simply 'does us'. Alienation – the heart of the meaning of the crucifixion – is our normal way of being.

As with the 'flickering' identities of the Servants in Isaiah – now Israel, now the Saviour, now Israel again – when we look at the cross we are to see the same kind of flickering: now Jesus, now us, now Jesus, now us again.

The gospel in this is that our suffering, our Godforsakenness, is not the measurement of what we are. The measurement of what we are is our identity with Jesus *on* the cross and Jesus *beyond* the cross, the identity of the many with *this* one. The crucifixion is Jesus' own share in what we are and suffer. And so the *resurrection* is not *his* elevation only but the elevation of *all* who are connected with him – even us.

Some of the old iconography of the church portrays this beautifully, in which the death of Jesus as not merely his stopping breathing but his full entry in the realm of the dead, so that his resurrection is not merely *his* being raised but his hauling back into life all whose suffering and death he shared. We share in the Saviour's death because the Saviour

has shared in our death. If this is true, then what happens next to *him* is what will happen also to *us*.

Our experience of this miracle is always as a flickering, although not for the unease of the horror movie but for *hope*. This flickering is at the centre of our life as Church. As we gather each week around the Communion Table it is as the Body of *Christ*, and yet it is *our* bodies, and yet it is the Body of *Christ*, and yet...

To glimpse such a flicker, such a momentary transfiguration of the world, is perhaps as important now as it ever has been, in a time when our mortality and the possibility of widespread suffering looms so large, and we might succumb to the fear that what is happening to us is our only measure.

Yet because God identifies in Jesus with *all* that we are, and makes of us *all* that Jesus is, there is finally nothing to fear other than that we might not hear the call of Jesus – God’s Servant – in our text, saying to us alienated prisoners, ‘Come out’, saying to us who are isolated in darkness, ‘Show yourselves’ (49.9).

Now we catch only a flicker in the corner of our eye but then we will see face to face, and God’s image will settle. And that image will be us, hidden in Christ, in God.

This is how God serves us.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- The meditation proposes that, should we feel ourselves ‘forsaken’ by God, this is an experienced of ‘crucifixion’. Does this help? Why (or not!)?
- What difference might it make in your life experiences to see that Jesus has been there before you, and now moves ahead?

PSALM 71.1-14

- ¹ In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
- ² In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.
- ³ Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress,* to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.

- ⁴ Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.
- ⁵ For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O Lord, from my youth.
- ⁶ Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.
- ⁷ I have been like a portent to many,
but you are my strong refuge.
- ⁸ My mouth is filled with your praise,
and with your glory all day long.
- ⁹ Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
do not forsake me when my strength is spent.
- ¹⁰ For my enemies speak concerning me,
and those who watch for my life consult together.
- ¹¹ They say, 'Pursue and seize that person
whom God has forsaken,
for there is no one to deliver.'
- ¹² O God, do not be far from me;
O my God, make haste to help me!
- ¹³ Let my accusers be put to shame and consumed;
let those who seek to hurt me
be covered with scorn and disgrace.
- ¹⁴ But I will hope continually,
and will praise you yet more and more.

PRAYER

We bless you, O God,
You have created and sustained us and all things
for your own name's sake, that we might glorify and enjoy you forever.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed,
we fail to bring you glory.

Forgive us when the best we can see becomes, for us,
all there is to see, all we expect to see;

forgive us when the call to be the healing of others
is more than we are willing to hear;

forgive us, then, lack of hope,
lack of charity,
failure in courage;
indifference and greed.

Gracious God above all gods,
Open eyes which are blind,

bring captives out from the dungeon,
and light to those who sit in darkness.
Make of us people for whom the past is past,
and who are grounded in the new things
you have promised.

Just so, gracious God, have mercy on us...

Amen.

If you are doing this study in a group, finish with prayer for each other.

3. LOVE'S NEW CREATION

Isaiah 50.4-11

- ⁴ The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
awakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
- ⁵ The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
- ⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
- ⁷ The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
- ⁸ he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
- ⁹ It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.
- ¹⁰ Who among you fears the Lord
and obeys the voice of his servant,
who walks in darkness
and has no light,
yet trusts in the name of the Lord
and relies upon his God?
- ¹¹ But all of you are kindlers of fire,
lighters of firebrands.
Walk in the flame of your fire,
and among the brands that you have kindled!
This is what you shall have from my hand:
you shall lie down in torment.

The fear unfolding around the COVID-19 pandemic is, in part, fear of the widespread suffering and death it threatens to bring. This is the fear of the loss of things we love – *people* we love.

In fact, in this instance, significant loss is already being realised even before any such death touches us personally. Fundamental to being human is our embodied relationality – the physicality of our being-in-relation with others. Without this we are not ourselves.

Yet a virus *weaponises* human social being against us. And so, in the absence of a vaccine or antidote, we are forced to battle this threat by denying it what makes it strong: the centrality of our bodies to our relationships with each other. In order to defend ourselves and those we love we isolate ourselves from each other. And yet we lose something of ourselves and them in this process. Even before anyone dies, then, the virus brings about a kind of death-in-diminishment. What we fear here is the loss of what we love – the deaths of people who matter to us, the isolation from those who are a part of us.

There is, however, another fear which has manifest itself in response to the threat of the virus. We see the signs of this fear in the empty shelves in our supermarkets, empty for fear of supply breaking down on account of COVID-19. Those empty shelves are not merely about greed or irrational thinking. They are a sign of the fear that, in all this, we might actually be alone.

If the fear of death and social isolation is the fear that we might *lose* what we love, the run on supplies reveals a fear that we might not *be* loved, that there is finally only ‘me-and-mine’ on whom ‘I’ can depend in the struggle to survive. Thomas Hobbes characterised human social existence as ‘a war of all against all’. This might seem a *little* dramatic as a characterisation of recent toilet paper shortages, but that is only because of the robustness of our supply chain and the strength of our institutions. Hobbes argued we need such institutions to protect ourselves from *ourselves*, and we have learned from him. We have been able to set the ship upright again because the ballast in our political economy is so substantial. But this can blind us to what was indicated in the temporary imbalance: I feel safer if *my* pantry is full rather than having to rely on you to give to me from *yours* when the need arises. I’m not sure you love me that much, that God loves me that much or that ‘the system’ which is our economy and society loves me that much.

Our lives, then, are caught up in the threat that we might *lose* what we love – by the virus or any other means – and in the fear that we might not *be* loved, that we might be *alone* in our suffering.

Our focus text Isaiah for this study describes one whose experience of threat and suffering differs from ours in form but not in substance. He too is faced with the loss of things loved: the loss of freedom, the loss of dignity, the charge of unrighteousness. In this way, he knows the pain of death, and possibly also has an understandable fear of it. In this he is not different from us.

But this pain does not lead to *doubt* that he is loved. Whatever happens to the Servant – and it is bad enough – he declares, ‘I have not been disgraced.’ This is because it is not *what happens* to him which is the measure of who he is but rather *the God who claims him*: ‘It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?’ (v.9). This in no sense justifies or even alleviates what the Servant suffers. But there is something here starkly different from what we typically see going on around us.

The prophet makes this point explicitly:

Who among you fears the Lord
and obeys the voice of his servant,
[the servant] who walks in darkness
and has no light,
yet trusts in the name of the Lord
and relies upon his God? (v.10)

The implied answer to the question, ‘Who among you,’ is, ‘no-one’: no-one walks in darkness and – despite this – holds that they are still loved. But Isaiah is not being pessimistic here.

Only love itself – the refusal to compete for survival – overcomes the fear that we are alone. When the prophet doubts, then, that there are any who honour the way of the Servant, any who dwell in darkness without despair, it is not quite to accuse. It is to see something new in the relationship between God and the Servant.

The Servant’s suffering does not lead to despair, does not cause him to doubt that he is loved. And so the Servant does not compete with others in order to survive. There is no Hobbesian ‘war against all’ which is necessary for him to engage in, because *survival* is not the point. The point is relationship with God: *love* is the point. Survival – *mere* survival – is always ultimately *lonely* because it finally pits us against each other. Yet the defining mark of the Servant is that he is *not* alone, and it is out of this that he has life.

This is something new, and it brings us back to what we noted in passing in our first study on these Servant Songs. There we saw a strange juxtaposition in Isaiah of the way the Servant suffers and the creative power of the sovereign God. What this means becomes clearer now. The Servant is a true creature of God because, despite what happens, he *remains* the Servant of this God. This unbroken relation, in which the Servant is servant of this God and God is God of this servant, is precisely what creation *is*: the binding of God and creature together so that the one cannot be itself without the other.

Creation happens in the faithfulness of the Servant, in his trust that in all things God is his and he is God’s. This is a creation from the chaos and void of competition and the struggle of all against all for mere survival. In its *absence* we are left, as the prophet so graphically puts it: to ‘walk in the flame of our own fire’ (v.11).

But in the creative spark which is God’s faithful Servant, a different kind of fire is kindled. This is the fire of love in the freedom of one who knows that he, she, is loved.

We can tighten our laws to protect ourselves from each other, but fear will out, as will the chaos it brings. The law does not create, does not bring life. The law does not set us free from our fears but only suppresses them.

Yet where there is love, we are fully alive even should we suffer or die (cf. John 11.25f).

Some of the phrases in the Isaiah reading this morning are more familiar in St Paul's borrowing of them in Romans:

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is [Servant!] at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Naming the space of his community as one in which 'we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered' (v.36), Paul continues:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, [or COVID-19,] or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...

The answer to this is the same as the answer to Isaiah's question, but now it is clear gospel: '*No-one*' can separate us from the Servant.

And so, Paul declares, 'in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us'.

For though we may have good grounds to fear the pain that death and separation can bring, it remains the case that

...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, the resurrection and the life.

When *this* is our confession, every moment is alive with God, as love: every moment is the beginning of a new creation.

Let us then, even in the depths, lift up our hearts.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What aspects of your life feel like competition for survival, from which you would like to be released?
- What freedom can be found in the knowledge that, wherever we find ourselves, we are loved?

PSALM 70

¹ Be pleased, O God, to deliver me.

O Lord, make haste to help me!

² Let those be put to shame and confusion

who seek my life.
Let those be turned back and brought to dishonour
who desire to hurt me.
³ Let those who say, 'Aha, Aha!'
turn back because of their shame.

⁴ Let all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you.
Let those who love your salvation
say evermore, 'God is great!'
⁵ But I am poor and needy;
hasten to me, O God!
You are my help and my deliverer;
O Lord, do not delay!

PRAYER

We bless you, O God,
You have created and sustained us and all things
for your own name's sake, that we might glorify and enjoy you forever.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed,
we fail to bring you glory.

Forgive us when, for fear of what we might lose,
we are paralysed and grasp after things
which ultimately deny life rather than affirm it.

Forgive us when, for fear that we might not be loved,
we are selfish, greedy, unkind, violent.

Gracious God above all gods,
Open eyes which are blind,
bring captives out from the dungeon,
and light to those who sit in darkness.
Make of us people for whom the past is past,
and who are grounded in the new things
you have promised.

Just so, gracious God, have mercy on us...

Amen.

If you are doing this study in a group, finish with prayer for each other.

4. SIN-SICK

Isaiah 52.13-53.12

- ¹³ See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
- ¹⁴ Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
- ¹⁵ so 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.
- ^{53.1} Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
- ² For 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.
- ³ He 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.
- ⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
- ⁵ But 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.
- ⁶ All 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.
- ⁷ He 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.
- ⁸ By 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.
- ⁹ They 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.

- ¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
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.
- ¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
- ¹² Therefore 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.

There is a lot going on in the focus text for this study, only a small part of which we will consider directly.

We begin by picking up something we noted in the previous study. This is the ‘flicker’ the prophet allows around the identity of the ‘Servant’ who features in the readings for these studies. We saw how the Servant is sometimes the people – ‘Servant Israel’ – and sometimes an individual distinct from the people but nevertheless deeply connected to them – the ‘Saviour-Servant’.

There are hints of this again in the text for this study. If we replace the pronouns which appear to refer to the individual Saviour-Servant so that they now refer to Israel, we get the following from one section of the passage:

- ^{53.2} For [Israel] grew up before [the LORD] like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
[It] had no form or majesty that we should look at [it],
nothing in [its] appearance that we should desire [it].
- ³ [Israel] was despised and rejected by others;
a [people] of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces.
[Israel] was despised, and we held [it] of no account.

This ‘works’ as an account of Israel’s own experience: a people chosen for no value it had in itself other than God’s own call to it, a people raised up out of nothing, a people overrun, afflicted and dismissed by the nations.

We noted in the last study how this flickering from the Saviour-Servant to Servant Israel is important for Isaiah and also, ultimately, for our understanding of how God works with us in Jesus. There is another important ‘flickering’ in our present text: between illness and disease on the one hand, and sin and unrighteousness on the other.

Verse 4 in a standard translation like the NRSV runs,

Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

But, in a modern Jewish translation, the text reads:

Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing,
Our suffering that he endured.
We accounted him plagued,
Smitten and afflicted by God (JPS Tanakh translation)

Those who know this passage well ‘know’ that it is about how the sin of the people is overcome by the afflictions of the Saviour-Servant: ‘he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors’ (53.12). Yet there is a flickering here between the suffering from *disease* and the suffering brought about by *guilt and transgression* which is also present in the fuller passage.

We are greatly tempted to read the reference to sickness and plague as ‘metaphorical’. This is the way many modern translations prefer to slant ‘disease’ in this text. But why exactly do we do this? One reason is that we reject – rightly, and with the righteous sufferer Job – any notion that illness and suffering are reliable indications of personal sin. Against this, we hold that a person must not be reduced to what happens to her; that the sick person does not ‘deserve’ to be sick *because of* her sin. And yet here in Isaiah sickness is at least a ‘sign’ of sin – something which appears where we might expect sin to appear.

Perhaps another reason we treat sickness as ‘only’ a metaphor for sin is that we hold physical illness to be more ‘real’ or tangible than sin – almost *too* bodily to stand for sin. Yet the text does not hesitate here. Isaiah flicks happily between sickness and sin as if they were the same *kind* of problem, as if the one had something to do with the other.

Of course if this *is* what Isaiah is doing then it matters for us here and now, quite directly and existentially with the context of COVID-19. Reading this text in *this* context, we have to ask, ‘Has the Servant’s being ‘wounded for our *transgressions*, crushed for our *iniquities*’ (v5) got anything to do with the suffering that afflictions like COVID-19 (or any other plague) bring?’

The answer to this question would have to be ‘No’ if disease and sin are ‘only metaphorically’ related in this passage. If illness is merely ‘borrowed’ as an analogy to illuminate what it means to be a *sinner* and is not really about the meaning of *sickness* before God, then what the Saviour-Servant experiences has very little to do with what COVID-19 might do to us. For if the biblical text will not allow it, our modern minds *certainly* won’t allow that the unhappy accident of a new virus springing from genetic mutation has anything to do with sin.

But hesitation to bring sin and sickness at least into ‘dialogue’ with one another requires that we do a violence to ourselves. It requires that we separate what ails us ‘physically’

from what ails us ‘spiritually’. It tempts us to imagine that we can be ‘fixed up’ spiritually even as we still suffer physically, because sin and sickness are cast as problems in different unconnected parts *of ourselves*. A common manifestation of this way of thinking is talk about the ‘now-and-not-yet’ nature of our salvation: the ‘now’ is that God already forgives us completely (‘spiritually’) and the ‘not-yet’ is that our health or mortality or even our politics lag behind in the process, still to be ‘fixed’.

Yet the Scriptures will not divide us into ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical’ like that. If the ‘physical’ is incomplete or still ailing, so also is the ‘spiritual’. Instead of ‘now-and-not-yet’ the Scriptures tend more towards ‘not-yet, *and yet...*’ (to which we will return in a moment).

What holding sin and sickness together might speak to us is that, if we continue to be afflicted by plagues, so we continue to be afflicted by sin. If we continue to sin, so we continue to be afflicted by plagues. This is not to say that the one ‘causes’ the other. Abstractions of cause and effect are not the point here. The point *is* that the human being is a spiritual and physical *whole*. If we dare to separate out the spirit or the soul for a moment, whatever happens to it happens to the body, and vice-versa. Letting illness ‘stand’ for sin, and sin ‘stand’ for illness, keeps us *whole*, even in our alienation from the fullness of life.

It is this wholeness – or rather its absence – which most deeply ails us. We are divided within. We can treat the interior while the exterior suffers or decays; we can treat the exterior while the interior languishes. We can favour the now at the expense of the future; we can languish in the now for a future which may never come. We would have to say that it seems impossible not to divide ourselves against ourselves in this way.

And this division *within* our selves flickers back and forth with the division *between* us and God. This brings us to the heart of the work of God’s Servant in Isaiah.

The Saviour-Servant in Isaiah reveals the ‘not-yet, and yet’ of living faithfully in a world of divisions. His afflictions are the ‘not-yet’, whether in sickness and disease or in being abused by others. In sickness he is divided from himself; in oppression he is divided from common humanity. The world is not *right*, and the Servant’s experience is evidence of this.

But his *posture* in this suffering is the ‘*and yet*’: ‘This *is* ghastly, *and yet* I still know who is God’. This *is* pain, *and yet* it is not the end of all things. This *is* rejection, *and yet* God embraces me. This now *is* the not-yet, *and yet* God’s tomorrow is coming.

The triumph of Isaiah’s Servant is not what God does with the Servant’s faithfulness but his very faithfulness itself. Infected by the sin-sick world, he is brought to death. But he dies denying that death is the last word, affirming that division from self and other will be overcome, affirming that he will yet – in God – be whole.

The miracle is that God takes the Servant’s faithfulness and makes it our own.

In the same way Jesus dies on a cross, the lines of which divide the world horizontally and vertically. Signalling our division from each other and from God in this way, the cross becomes the final word about our condition: separation left and right, up and down, within and without. This is as ‘not-yet’ as any talk about wholeness and reconciliation could be; such things are not even in sight.

And yet. And yet the miracle is that God takes the dividing lines of the cross and makes of them a sign of God’s power to create from nothing. God makes of Jesus’ outstretched arms a span which holds together what the ‘horizontal’ divisions between us separate. God makes of the stretch between the crown of thorns and the nail in Jesus’ feet a span holding together the ‘vertical’ division between us and God.

In this way, as with the Servant, God makes a *reconciliation* of Jesus’ own faithful ‘and yet’ in the face of all of which afflicted him. Lent through to Good Friday is the ‘not yet, and yet’ of Jesus.

This righteous one – the Servant of God, makes many righteous (v.11) – by carrying our disease and bearing our iniquity, by identifying with us in an intercession which prays, ‘Yes God, they are sin and disease, *and yet...*’

Our sure hope is that God hears this prayer.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What are the risks in tying sin and sickness together? What are the benefits?
- What is the proper relationship between our ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual’ selves?
- Does the not-yet and-yet dynamic described above help to make sense of the call to live and love in a broken world?

PSALM 22.1-11,23-31

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
- ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
- ³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- ⁴ In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

- ⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
- ⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
- ⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
- ⁸ ‘Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’
- ⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
- ¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
- ¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
- ...²³ You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
- ²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
- ²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
- ²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live for ever!
- ²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
- ²⁸ For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.
- ²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
- ³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
- ³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

PRAYER

We bless you, O God,
You have created and sustained us and all things
for your own name’s sake, that we might glorify and enjoy you forever.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed,
we fail to bring you glory.

Forgive us when we divide ourselves
into little parts, some of which we imagine
have to do with you, and some not.

Forgive us when these divisions permit us
to separate ourselves from each other,
when we think we can justify
greed, unkindness, violence towards others.

Forgive us those particular errors which
lay heavily on our hearts.

Gracious God above all gods,
Open eyes which are blind,
bring captives out from the dungeon,
and light to those who sit in darkness.
Make of us people for whom the past is past,
and who are grounded in the new things
you have promised.

Just so, gracious God, have mercy on us...

If you are doing this study in a group, finish with prayer for each other.

5. THE GOD OF COVID-19

Isaiah 52.13-53.12

- ¹³ See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
- ¹⁴ Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
- ¹⁵ so 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.
- ^{53.1} Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
- ² For 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.
- ³ He 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.
- ⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
- ⁵ But 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.
- ⁶ All 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.
- ⁷ He 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.
- ⁸ By 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.
- ⁹ They 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.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

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.

¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light;

he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

¹² Therefore 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.

If someone were to assert that God caused COVID-19 and the crushing effect it is having around the world, the obvious response of God's good people would likely be a very strong, *No*.

Let us then consider another similar proposal, the response to which is a little less obvious because it is made by the prophet Isaiah in our focus text for this study: '...it was the will of the LORD to crush [the Servant] with pain...' (v10; cf. 4f).

There is no getting around the assault of this verse on our modern sensibilities, and probably not just modern ones. What has such divine sadism to do with 'the God of love' we believe we know from elsewhere? Must we not reject Isaiah here for *God's* sake? For this is surely more than any theology of divine compassion can accommodate.

And yet this confronting assertion, and the tone of the whole the passage (and of several of the other Servant Songs), is there on the scriptural page and features historically as a significant key to the interpretation of the passion of the Christ (This text is, for example, set for Good Friday each year in the Revised Common lectionary).

It is too easy, then, simply to dismiss Isaiah here because we do not understand him. We must ask, Does this text understand anything which we don't, yet? Likely it does. To reject the text for the reasons just acknowledged would be to miss the relationships which are in play here – in the first instance, the general relationship between a god and its people.

We have noted before (particularly in the first study) that a central theme in this second half of Isaiah is the absolute sovereignty of the God of Israel over all things. This leads to a central conundrum in Scripture: how can the people Israel be so thoroughly crushed if their God is proclaimed as all powerful? Gods and their people are usually related in such a way that a god's power is shown in the *prosperity* of its people. If a people is decimated – as was the people Israel – their god is proven to be weak, or nothing (see, for example, the tensions in Ezekiel 20.8f, 14, 22 and 36.22f, 32, as well as Isaiah 48.9-11)!. The gods are, after all, generally a making-divine of ourselves. The humiliation of the

people is the humiliation of their god. How can Israel's God be sovereign when Israel is dragged away into exile?

The only resolution of this is the one the Scriptures take up: if God *is* sovereign, and has a Servant, and then the Servant of God is crushed, this must be because God 'caused' the crushing – even *willed* that it be so. It may seem to us a perverted logic – and we use the word 'cause' very carefully here – but nothing else will make sense of the situation if God has no rivals and yet God's people suffer. (We might think here of God's permitting that the righteous Job suffer – Satan has to ask permission of God to afflict Job: Job 1,2). Is God powerless to prevent the suffering of the people under, say, the Assyrians or the Babylonians? All the prophets cry, *No*: the Assyrians and the Babylonians are tools in God's hand.

On the face of it, this is harsh, at the very least.

And yet a miracle unfolds out of it. In fact it is *the* miracle of the Scriptures. It is the miracle of the creation itself, the miracle of the Exodus and the Restoration from exile, the miracle of the Resurrection. There is a miracle here because gods should *die* with their people. The story of Israel's God should have ended in the sixth century BC. The crushing end of the Servant should be the crushing end of the Servant's God. Yet this God 'survives' the death of the Servant in rejection, exile, and crucifixion.

It is, however, a survival *through* death. For even this God is not immune to death. God, too, 'dies' – ceases to be God – when the Servant is lost, in the peculiar way that a father ceases to be a father when his son dies, and a wife ceases to be a wife when her husband dies. In this sense, the *relationship* between God and the Servant *is* God, so that the end of the Servant is the end of God.

And yet. This. Is. No. Ordinary. God. (Is perhaps not 'a god' at all). The 'and yet' – as we saw in the previous study – is the heart of the matter: *and yet*, God comes *through* this death.

What does 'coming through' or 'surviving' death mean for God? It means that whatever God was *before* the death of the Servant, God still is *now*, after that death. It means that if God *had* a Servant – and this 'having' of a Servant was *integral* to who God is – then God must *still* have a Servant. This is the meaning of any talk of 'resurrection' of God's Servant. Something like a resurrection of the Servant is hinted at in Isaiah – although the text is quite opaque here and resurrection is not really an Old Testament concept (for the possible 'resurrection' of Isaiah's Servant, contrast 'tomb' in v.9 with v.11 'he shall see light and v.12 'he shall divide the spoil').

But resurrection-talk refers us now not merely to God's 'power' to undo death – a 'trick' God might manage against nature – but to God's very being. The Servant is as much raised for *God's* sake as for the sake of the one raised. In fact, we can be stronger here – the Servant is raised for *God's* sake, *period*. The dead have no 'sake', no desires, no lack; this is what 'dead' means. Resurrection is no *reward* for righteous suffering, no compensation for a hard life. Resurrection is a gathering to God, a 'completion' of God

according to God's own plan. Gods die when their servant peoples are lost. This God is no different, except that *this* God rises again and, therefore, *we* must rise.

We can put this in classical trinitarian terms by saying that the Father cannot continue to be the Father after the crucifixion if the Son is not restored to life. In fact we can see now that the doctrine of the Trinity is a way of answering the question of the Old Testament: How is it possible that God can lose God's Servant – that God can, in that way, *die* – and yet continue to be God?

It is, then, not that God 'can' raise the dead but that God 'must' raise the dead – or at least *one* of them – *if God is to remain Godself*. The absolute sovereignty of God is not abstract free power (whatever that would actually be) but the power to be what God has promised to be and so 'is' – the God of *this* Servant.

Let us pause for a moment to notice what has happened. With a bit more insight into the theological dynamic with which Isaiah is working, we have moved from what, on the face of it, is the *ghastly* proposal that God 'willed' the suffering of the Servant, to the resurrection gospel.

In view of all this, we might reconsider our opening assertion, now as a question: Did God cause the novel coronavirus and the crushing effect it is having around the world? The answer now *might* be not an unqualified 'No' but, 'Maybe, depending on how "big" we think God is, and on how "small" we think God is'. This is because Isaiah's God is so *big* that only God could 'cause' such pain to God's own Servant, and is so *small* that the suffering and death of the Servant is God's own suffering and death.

Selah

We can – and must – push further by asking how *we ourselves* are caught up in the good news of the God-Servant relationship. What has what happens between God and God's Servant got to do with what is happening between God and us, now? Put differently, how are we related to God's Servant, that *we* might be healed, as the Servant is? This hinges on the *identity* of the Servant, an identity which is built out of two relationships.

The first relationship is that between the Servant and God. This is what we've just been considering: the *ineluctable mutuality* of God and God's Servant, to the extent that the one is lost without the other.

The second relationship which forms the identity of the Servant is that between the Saviour-Servant and Servant Israel. This is the 'flickering' we have seen between the *one* who is the Saviour-Servant and the *many* who are Servant Israel. This flickering is not an imprecision around the Servant's identity but *constitutes* it. If we ask 'which' of the two Servants is crushed according to the will of God, the answer has to be 'both', or the one *in* the other. If we ask which of the children of God is hung on the cross, the (capital C) Child or all the children of Israel – even all humanity – the answer is 'both'. The Saviour-Servant 'points to' Servant Israel and vice versa; Jesus 'points to' us, and we to him. This

pointing-to is a mutual ‘containment’: we are within each other. What does God see when looking at Jesus? Us. And what does God see when looking at us? Jesus.

To ‘believe’ in *this* God is to hold that, in the end, God cannot tell which of the Servants – the Saviour or the People – God is addressing. As Christ was once hidden in our humanity, and God’s address to him was God’s address to us, so now are we hidden in Christ’s humanity.

The hope of the church is that when God looks at us and looks at God’s righteous Servant, he cannot tell us apart. Our hope is that when God raises the one God loves in order to raise Godself, God raises the many – *even us*: one for all, all in one.

Selah

What does this mean for our impious question, ‘Did God cause the coronavirus and the crushing effect it is having around the world?’? On Isaiah’s terms, as we have unpacked them, and *only* – ONLY – on those terms, we might have to answer not a strong ‘No’, not a cautious ‘Maybe...’ but – in fear and trembling – ‘*We hope so*’.

For *this* to be our hope is to say that our hope is in a God whose future is a future *with us*, and in a God who has *no* rivals – not even death itself. Faced with what is insurmountable, our only hope is a God who takes all obstacles and threats – even death – into Godself, and does this in such a way as to become the source and goal of all things, even these.

To declare, as we did in study three, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God, is not to say merely that God blasts away all threats but that all such things are *taken up* by God and worked towards God’s healing purposes.

This does not change the suffering of God’s servants, righteous or unrighteous; we might still be crushed with pain. The ‘not yet’ remains.

And yet, the God we have described is a God with us, even ‘by’ us, and in all things *for* us: a God so small as to suffer all things with us, a God so large as to make *all* things God’s own, so large as to make all things – even great suffering – means of bringing us home.

To talk of a resurrection wrought by this God, then, is not merely to look forward to a happy release from all which binds us. It is to expect to look *back* and see that, from the beginning to the end, as cause and purpose, God was in everything with us all the way along.

Let us, then, open our eyes, that – from the perspective of a Servant crucified and risen – we might begin to see God with us, even now in all this.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- The study proposes that our future is tied up with the future of another – the Servant. How is this good news?
- The study proposes that God raises the dead for God's own sake. What difference does this make to the promise of resurrection?
- If God's people are raised for God's sake, what do we 'look forward to' in resurrection life?

PSALM: 31.9-16

- ⁹ Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.
- ¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,*
and my bones waste away.
- ¹¹ I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror* to my neighbours,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
- ¹² I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
- ¹³ For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.
- ¹⁴ But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, 'You are my God.'
- ¹⁵ My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.
- ¹⁶ Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

PRAYER

We bless you, O God,
You have created and sustained us and all things
for your own name's sake, that we might glorify and enjoy you forever.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed,
we fail to bring you glory.

Forgive us when fear takes hold of us – fear of the known, or of the unknown.

Forgive us when we imagine ourselves out of your reach,
beyond your help, at the mercy of darkness and death.

Forgive us, then, when out of such despair
we speak and act
in selfishness which takes more than we need, depriving others;
in self-righteousness, which sets us 'inside' and others 'outside';
in anger which defends the indefensible and hurts the defenceless

Gracious God above all gods,
Open eyes which are blind,
bring captives out from the dungeon,
and light to those who sit in darkness.
Make of us people for whom the past is past,
and who are grounded in the new things
you have promised.

Just so, gracious God, have mercy on us...

If you are doing this study in a group, finish with prayer for each other.

Also available

The covenanting God draws near

Rob Gotch

Is God among us or not?

Howard Wallace

Reading the Creed Backwards

Craig Thompson

The Lord's Prayer – Prayer for those who can no longer pray

Bruce Barber

The Apostles' Creed

– A lively text in a world made strange

Bruce Barber

Advent Studies on Year B RCL (Isaiah)

Craig Thompson

Intro to the New Testament [YALE UNIVERSITY]

Intro to the Hebrew Scriptures [YALE UNIVERSITY]

The Spirit in the Desert

To be notified when new studies become available,
subscribe to our email list via the links on the web site address below.

www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au

God's Servant, served – Version Date: October 2020