

Lent 3
15/3/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 95
John 4:5-26

The flickering Servant of God

In a sentence

God identifies so closely with us in Jesus that happens to us happens to Jesus, and what happens to Jesus happens to us

Those of you 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 – 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 our reflections on the Servant Songs of Isaiah we noted that it is important to look closely at the *details* of the Songs, for they have the potential to disrupt too easy a reading 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 today’s text, 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’ll use ‘Servant Israel’ and ‘Saviour-Servant’ to distinguish between Isaiah’s two apparent uses, 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 gets in the way of what Isaiah might help us to see with his flickering of the identity of the Servant between the individual and the whole people. Isaiah 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 today 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 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 point I want to 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... – 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* to whom he is connected – even us.

Some of the old iconography of the church portrays it 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 today's 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.
