



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tonight we hear the first of four servant songs that are scattered throughout the latter parts of Isaiah. If we come to all the Holy Week services, we hear all four of these songs. Some scholars describe them as poems even. And there are many puzzles about these songs. Did they originally circulate separately from the Book of Isaiah? To whom did they originally refer? A lot of ink has been spilled about these and other topics, but what is fascinating is how the testimony of one generation is often taken up by the next and adapted in order to speak to new situations. In scripture, it happens all the time, especially with the prophets, but if we have ears to hear, we can find it in the gospels too.

And that reminds me of something Father Bill said yesterday in his Palm Sunday sermon about the remarkable work of art that Sam Gilliam made on the first anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is titled simply "April 4, 1969." Remember that piece? The artist took purple, black, and red paint, and folded his canvas over and over again. The finished work is kind of an abstract meditation on King's blackness, on his nobility of soul, and on his blood poured out for others.

If I heard Father Bill correctly, he was suggesting that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a paradigm for what great art can do. That's because it invites us to work through our own experience deliberately and prayerfully, including our grief and trauma. Art often comes out of a particular experience, but then it becomes something universal. Art allows us to enter into the experience of another, including our most traumatic experiences, all for the sake of deeper engagement and empathy, all for the sake of deeper conversion and transformation.

When we encounter a work of art or simply sit with the mystery of another human being, we find our world changed with new questions and new answers emerging and new possibilities for our lives. As we retell the story of Israel, for example, we hear over and over again about their liberation from bondage. According to ancient Jewish tradition, each child of Israel must come to believe that they personally were delivered from slavery in Egypt. It's like that old African American spiritual. Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they

nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? We were there. In a very real sense, we were there and sometimes it causes us to tremble. Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights."

Like much of the Hebrew Bible, the four servant songs in Isaiah, the first of which we heard tonight, speak to a second, great exodus of the Jewish people. Long after they came out of Egypt, they were conquered and carried off to Babylon. Down by the river of Babylon, we sat and we wept, they sing. The mysterious servant of the Lord is taken to be the prophet himself sometimes. Some say that he is some other prophetic figure or perhaps the whole people of Israel. There are even a few who think that it is Cyrus, the emperor of Persia, who returned the people back to their land. Perhaps he is all of these things and more.

What we do know though, is that the servant is a humble person whom God lifts up. He is God's authorized representative who executes justice for the whole world. He suffers greatly and brings light and salvation to all of us. No wonder the first Christians thought these songs were about Jesus. Both Paul and the evangelists use them this way, as does the subsequent tradition. It's just one more example of God's people applying a promise to a new situation.

The song we just heard, for example, lies in the background for the scene from the gospels in which Jesus is baptized. Scripture identifies Jesus as the servant when God's voice calls Him my son, my chosen, my beloved. In Jesus, we too are chosen. We too are beloved children and we are called to serve others in His name.

This reading, this rereading is legitimate so long as we don't write the Jews out of their own story. And that's especially important in light of the history of anti-Semitism. God loves the whole world and everyone in it. As the Apostle Paul once taught, the gifts and promises of God to Israel are irrevocable. They too are God's beloved children. They are the original audience for this prophecy, and they are the elder siblings in our relationship. And so Israel is a light to the nations. They're called to teach people about God's ways of justice, peace, and neighborly living.

Listen once more to the words of Isaiah. "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. He will bring forth justice to the nations." We are all waiting for someone like that, aren't we? Whatever Egypt means for us, whatever it is that breaks our hearts, holds us down, makes us so very afraid, we are waiting for someone strong enough and good enough to come and set us free.

History is littered with various strong men and strong women who lack the goodness and wisdom to lead. They may come to power in various ways, by birth, by election, or by revolutionary violence, but no matter how they do so nothing

seems to change. Even folks who really, really want to do what's right seem to end up compromised or corrupted, and that shouldn't surprise us. If we read the scriptures, we find only a handful of good kings with the rest judged for their idolatry and their mistreatment of the poor. Even David, the king by whom all other kings are measured in the Bible, is a deeply flawed human being. And so God raises up prophets to renew us in God's ways, to remind us in a world that's so violent and unfair, that we are God's beloved children. That is what we are: God's beloved children.

Throughout the ministry of Jesus, we see Him live this out. We see Him living out what it means to be God's servant, what it means to be God's beloved child, what it means to trust God with His whole heart, with His whole being. We see it in how He treats other people. We see it in how He is able to forgive His enemies, how He includes those whom others deem untouchable. With sovereign freedom, which belongs only to God, Jesus shows us how to love others. Jesus is such a person that all other priorities, even the really important ones, are subordinate to living out God's love minute by minute with every single person He meets.

And that affects how we must hear what would otherwise be troubling words in our gospel tonight. Jesus first says to them, when Judas grumbles about Mary's "waste," quote unquote "waste" of some costly ointment, "Leave her alone, Jesus says. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Troubles me sometimes to think about these words, but Jesus refuses to rebuke Mary because He knows what her actions mean. He knows her heart. She is preparing His body for death and Jesus, a real human being, is terrified by what He knows is about to happen. She is comforting him in His agony. She knows that soon He will be tortured, mocked, and crucified. And like the women on the very first Easter, perhaps she's one of those women. Mary has come to care for His body. She has come to meet His need.

In just a few days, on Maundy Thursday, we will see Jesus live out His role as God's servant. He will wash our feet and give us an example to follow. Now, I believe that He is consciously imitating what Mary did for Him. He is thinking about His disciples and what it will mean for them to see His body broken on the cross. He is strengthening them for the trauma they're about to face. He is encouraging us to persevere in the new and better way of love, even when that's really, really hard to do. In fact, by washing our feet and dying on the cross, Jesus provides the supreme example of love. And by breathing His spirit on us, He gives us power to follow His example.

And so Jesus never gives up on the privileged place of the poor in God's kingdom. When He defends Mary's choice and says, "You do not always have me," He is pointing us to the urgency of love. The world needs love. The world

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needs selfless, self-giving love that Jesus unleashes for us all. For it is by love that God wants to change the world. “Behold, says the Lord, I am about to do a new thing. Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights.”

Amen.