

TUESDAY COMMUNION
"A servant to the world".

Hymn: 788 Behold the servant of the Lord

Reading: Isaiah 52.13 – 53.3

Prayers

Let me encourage you to go home and read not just the passage we've listened to today but the whole of this section: Isaiah 52.13 to 53.12.....

It needs to be read as one passage but it is also one of those passages about which one could talk time and time again.....

There is nothing like this passage anywhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here is one of those great leaps in understanding which move forwarding the understanding of those who seek to be caught up in the life of God.

Indeed, these opening verses are full of a sense of astonishment, something utterly unexpected is happening. Ways of thought that have last through the ages are being turned upside down.

Isaiah speaks even as the slaves in Babylon are preparing to return to their own land. At the heart of his message there has been this promise to these women and men in captivity:

God is going to set you free through his servant, Cyrus, the man from Persia God is using to grant you your release. What he doesn't say is that they are returning in order to re-establish a new order of kings of Israel, to create a great kingdom such as existed under David, to be a rich and prosperous people.

Indeed, Isaiah seems to have been all too well aware of the political realities of his time. Cyrus may set free the slaves but back in Jerusalem they will still be subject to him. He may well have foreseen that the future would almost certainly be one in which Israel was dominated by its more powerful neighbours.

What then was the role of Israel?

Isaiah has spoken about his belief in One God who is the universal God. He is not one God amongst many. He is not the God confined to the territory of Israel who forgets his people when they are forced into exile in Babylon.

He is the God of all.....

In this new situation the powerful nations are not going to have much concern for the small, dependant state of Israel. Jerusalem is a broken city. Her people dependant on the whim of foreigners.

She will not have little significance for those who hold power in this world.....

Yet, Israel is called to live as the servant of God towards the whole of God's world! There will be nothing of the grandeur of Babylon about this people, "no form or majesty".

They will be a people "despised and rejected" and they will know "suffering" and weakness. The rulers will hold the nation to be "of no account". Yet, God will be at work within this people and, at least in God's eyes, they will be "exalted and lifted up".

Even the rulers of other nations will be "startled" by this strange people and what they reveal about God's will for the nations.....

The servant here is Israel but we may also think of Christ and his church. We shall think of Christ's own life in the light of this passage next time but maybe should see here a word to the Church.

I suspect that in our own country the coming years will see the church in Britain treated increasingly as an alien people. Polly Toynbee, chair of the humanist society, called yesterday for the removal of the bishops from the House of Lords.

She did so, not in order to create a fairer representation of the faith communities in that place but in order to remove the Christian contribution to our national life.

We can huff and we can puff about this age we're entering but maybe Isaiah says to us that the old days when the church was powerful aren't coming back.

The role of the church is to be a servant people in a world where many people will ignore and despise her. Yet, God has not finished with her!

She may yet have the capacity to amaze those who have scorned her and the Gospel message that she seeks to live out.

As we shall see next week, the vocation of the servant was never to be easy but in Christ it has been gloriously fulfilled.

Amen.