

# Parishes of St Philips and All Saints Kew with St Luke's Kew

Where all God's children are Welcome

## Bible Study for the second week of the Covid 19 church building closure

### Section 2: Isaiah 50: 4-9

**Prayer:** Loving God, as we read your word, may your Holy Spirit teach us your ways, and enable us to walk in them all the days of our life. Amen

Read the passage through twice.

#### Isaiah 50: 4-9

The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue,  
to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning,  
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

<sup>5</sup>The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears;  
I have not been rebellious,  
I have not turned away.

<sup>6</sup>I offered my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from mocking and spitting.

<sup>7</sup>Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,  
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint,  
and I know I will not be put to shame.

<sup>8</sup>He who vindicates me is near.  
Who then will bring charges against me?  
Let us face each other!

Who is my accuser?  
Let him confront me!

<sup>9</sup>It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.  
Who will condemn me?

#### Background

The book of the prophet Isaiah is not a unified piece of writing. There are at least three different voices, possibly four, in the 66 chapters of which it consists. The first 39 chapters speak of the imminent destruction of Israel by an invading force from the North. Chapters 40-55 were probably written between 597 & 538 BCE in Babylon by an exiled Jew who was called to become a prophet while living there as a slave. Chapters 56-66 were written after the return from Babylon, 70 years after the awful events described so graphically in chapters 36-39.

In the ancient world, it was a mark of utmost respect to appropriate someone else's name and style to yourself. Copyright did not exist, the prophet Isaiah of chapters 1-36 was highly respected, a priest of the Temple, one who had seen God in glory (Chapter 6), so it was fitting that someone who was called to continue that prophetic work should assume Isaiah's name.

Today's passage is from chapter 50, so falls right in the middle of a meditation on the current suffering of God's people and the future freedom that they would enjoy.

It is one of several "servant songs" that pepper these chapters, but the identity of the servant is not fixed, and the function of that servant varies according to the song.

As it is a song, this text is a piece of poetry, and should be treated as such when read. Hebrew poetry is very sophisticated, and works through parallelisms, which is why the writer appears to

repeat himself (it was probably a man who wrote this, but we cannot be totally sure). Instead of rhyming or writing in a particular metre, as we would, the Hebrew poet seeks to expand the initial thought in the second half of the line with either synonyms or an extension of the subject of the first half, eg. "I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards." The emphasis, the phrase which pulls the biggest punch, is therefore the second phrase in the line, not the first.

In poetry, the use of the first person singular pronoun does not necessarily mean that the writer is referring to himself. As a poem is a construct, it has been fine-tuned for a particular purpose with multiple layers of meaning and craft. That craft points to the poet, but the pronouns used do not, necessarily, indicate that the poet is talking about himself.

Many consider the writer of Isaiah chapters 40-55 as one of the finest poets of the ancient world.

### Some questions:

- The prophet starts his song with an explanation: every morning, God wakes me up with a new message for his people. Does God talk to you every morning?
- Each new message is of hope, a sustaining message for the weary – the exiled Jewish people. Is this something that we need, in our current circumstances?
- The prophet seems to indulge in self-justification, but it rapidly gets increasingly extreme – from "I was not rebellious" - ie "I did not refuse God's command" to "I gave my back to those who struck me" – is the prophet describing actual violence meted out to him? If so, by whom, and why?
- When the prophet speaks, not everyone believes the message. In fact, many prophets of Israel were told by God that no one would accept the words that God had put in their mouths, but they were to speak their message regardless. Which is harder to pass on: a message of judgement, in a time of crisis, or a message of hope, in a time of despair? Remember, this prophet may well have been speaking to people who had been born in Babylon, who had never seen Israel, nor visited the Temple. All they knew of their God was the stories their parents told them, and the practices they had grown up with. Synagogue worship was in its infancy, Biblical texts were rare, the Psalms were their main source of understanding God. Does the prophet's description of his suffering make sense, given the exiles' situation?
- The prophet has utter trust in God. Whatever people say or do to him, he knows that he is obeying God to the letter, so will be vindicated. He has God on his side, who can realistically accuse him of anything! Can we share his confidence? Can we be as positive about God supporting us and backing us up?
- The Servant in this passage appears to be aligned very closely with the prophet himself. However, could it be someone else? Prophets have a tendency to speak on behalf of the nation as well as to that nation, so could the suffering servant here be Israel itself, given a message of hope for the world – to them and to all exiled people – and suffering by their transmission of it in a foreign land? Or, as the Early Church interpreted the story of Jesus's Passion in the light of passage such as this one, is this text a foretelling of Christ's sufferings? Or, has the Church been guilty of reading backwards – ie this suffering servant resembles the suffering that Jesus went through during his trial and crucifixion, therefore it must be about him, when in fact God is speaking to his exiled people and giving them the hope of eventual return? Messianic readings of Isaiah and other Old Testament texts are not innocent: they come laden with expectation, and other narratives can be influenced by them.
- Are we allowed to apply this to ourselves? Does not God continue to speak to us today, in the same way that he did to this prophet, 2,500 years ago? Can we not voice our suffering in the same way? Are we not exiled from our families and our communities just as much in our current crisis as the Jews were in Babylon? Psalm 137 "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" feels totally apt sometimes for today. Can we claim to be the suffering

servant of this passage as well? If so, does it allow us to let off steam, voice our complaint out loud? And if so, does it give us hope for today and tomorrow?

**Reread the passage, out loud if possible**

**To review:**

- God speaks to the prophet every day, and the prophet can only obey the promptings of God
- We can self-identify with the prophet, or associate him with the exiled people of Israel, or see in his words a foreshadowing of Christ's sufferings on our behalf.
- God promises to sustain our right, to uphold us in times of difficulty
- God is faithful, and if we remain obedient, will vindicate us
- This passage, written over 2,500 years ago, is still very relevant today

**Prayer:** Loving God, transform our isolation into the splendour of your company. Fill our loneliness with the knowledge of your presence. Take our frustrations and lift them to your loving heart. Give us hope and vindicate our confidence in you, today and always. Amen

Fr Peter 3.4.2020