

### ***The Right Man for the Job***

In the name of him who takes away the sins of the world, dear friends in Christ: It's said that you have to use the right tool for the job. And that's true. It makes the work a lot easier and more efficient. But it's equally true that in many cases, you also have to have the right man (or woman) for the job. Even with all the right tools, no one else could have painted the dazzling frescoes that adorn the Sistine Chapel in Rome. It had to be Michelangelo. The work simply wouldn't be what it is if someone else had done it. Likewise, it took Einstein to develop the theory of general relativity, Mozart to create his exquisite music, and the architect Eiffel to design the Eiffel Tower. (Seriously, would anyone want to go to Paris to see the Charlie Tower or the Fred Tower?) No other politician could have as skillfully and tactfully led this nation through its most difficult crisis, the Civil War. It had to be Lincoln. Would that we had statesmen of his caliber and integrity running the country today, but ... well, I'll just leave it at that.

We see in Scripture too that the Lord raises up certain individuals at designated times and appoints them to perform specific jobs for him. Mind you, they weren't necessarily geniuses or especially spiritual or virtuous people; no, they had their own set of strengths, weaknesses, quirks, and foibles. But he chose Abraham to be the father of the faithful. He chose Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and to give them his Holy Law. He chose David to be the king whose house and throne would endure forever. And he chose Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and the other prophets to speak to his people and write down his Word in Holy Scripture. In each case the Lord matched the right man with the job. He prepared and equipped each one of them for the task he had in mind in such a way that only that one person would do. No one else could have pulled it off the same way.

All of which brings me to today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah. It's a portion of what is known as the Second Servant Song. There are four of these servant songs in the writings of Isaiah. Each one describes various characteristics and attributes of the One Right Man through whom the Lord would perform the biggest job of all, namely to bring salvation to his people. The songs also give details about the task that is set before this Right Man – exactly *how* he is going to bring salvation to God's people. Now, three of these four servant songs are cast in the third person; that is, they tell of the Savior and what he will do. This second song before us today is different because in it we hear from the Savior himself; that is, through the prophet Isaiah the spirit of Jesus speaks first person. More than 700 years before he walked the earth, the Lord Jesus spoke these words directly to the people of God.

He begins, "Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar." It's a call to listen up and hear what he has to say. And this is the proper attitude: Jesus speaks, we listen. It tells us that his is primarily a teaching ministry. He's the wise master; we are his disciples - a word which means student. And that he addresses his message to the coastlands and to people a great distance away tells us that the entire world is his intended audience. He wants everyone to pay close attention to what he has to say.

He continues, "The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name." Here he speaks of his incarnation: the eternal Son of God taking human flesh, conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary – whom we have to agree was the right woman for the job: to bear him, give him birth, and him raise as her son. He also says that the Lord

named him from before his birth. This reminds us how both Mary and Joseph were instructed separately by the angel to give him the name Jesus, which means the Lord saves, “for he will save his people from their sin.”

Returning to the song, “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.” This tells us that his only weapons are his words. Recall at the temptation of Jesus when he does battle with the devil, he does it all by speaking – and specifically by reciting Scripture. Likewise, there was that time when he was teaching on the Temple courts, much to the anger and frustration of his enemies. So they send a detachment of armed guards to arrest him. But they are stopped dead in their tracks when they come close enough to hear his teaching. Instead of arresting him, they are caught up in his message. When later they are taken to task by those who sent them for failing in their mission, they reply, “But no one ever spoke like him.” They were disarmed by the sword of his word.

And this is how he deals with us as well. It’s through his word that he changes us. First, he strikes us with the Law of God. Like arrows in the heart, we feel the pain of conscience as he convicts us of our sins. Thus, he brings us to repentance. And then like a skillful surgeon who uses the blade to heal, he speaks his words of grace and mercy that bind up our broken hearts. He conveys all his richest blessing to us through his powerful Word: forgiveness, guidance, wisdom, and ultimately salvation and eternal life.

Next, we get to eavesdrop on a conversation that took place between the eternal Father and the Son. “And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified’.” This is the Father’s commission to the Son. “I’m going to glorify myself through you – and specifically in your servant-hood.” What he’s speaking of is the glory of the cross, how the Father’s immense love for the world is shown in offering up his Son as the sacrifice for sin. It’s interesting that he calls him “Israel”. That was the name of the nation chosen by God and charged with revealing God’s glory to the world. But they failed time and again. Jesus would be Israel reduced to one man – the Right Man – through whom God would do the job.

What follows is a bit difficult. The reply of the Son to the Father is this: “But I said, ‘I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity’”. It sounds like he’s saying that he failed in his assigned task. But it must be remembered that’s exactly what it looked like for most of Christ’s ministry. Here he was, Israel’s long promised Messiah, and most of the nation rejected him. Those who were most studied in Holy Scripture who should have been most eager to receive him were usually his most vocal critics. Even his own disciples surprised him: he was often amazed at their lack of faith. And he’d tell them things over and over again, and they still wouldn’t get it. In the end, of course, one of them betrayed him and all of them abandoned him. When the sun set on Good Friday, no one believed in him. It did indeed look as if his mission had failed.

But he continues, “yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God.” And this is pure trust in the heart of the Son. No matter what it looks like, no matter what I experience or how I’m disappointed, no matter how much I’m made to suffer, I’m going to trust that in the end my Father will make it right. This will all be worth it. And this is important for us to note. When Jesus faced the horrors of the cross, he did so in faith. As a rule, during his earthly ministry, he did not use to his own advantage his divine attributes. He lived like a man – like any of us. So, he wasn’t using his divine foreknowledge to see past his death to the resurrection and what would follow. He died simply believing the Father’s promise to raise him. And because he did, we can have that same confidence.

The Servant Song continues, "And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him—for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength—he says: 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth'."

Here we recognize the great theme of Epiphany. It's the big secret that was hiding in plain sight throughout Israel's long history. Though the Lord chose that nation to be his own special people, and though he promised to bring the Savior into the world through them and through no one else, the salvation he accomplished by his faithful Servant's death and resurrection was always intended to be for all people. It's a truth that Israel of old and the Jews at the time of Christ never understood. They tended to think that the Lord was their God alone and that somehow, they deserved his special attention. This attitude led to pride and a sense of superiority that was completely unfounded. It also severely hampered – more like hamstrung – any thought or effort toward evangelism. But this passage makes it absolutely clear: The Lord's Servant is to be a light to all nations. His salvation is for all people on earth.

And this is emphasized yet again as the Song of the Servant closes: "Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: 'Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you'."

Two thoughts here: first, the Servant's rejection by his own people. Though he is the Redeemer of Israel, he is deeply despised and abhorred. John, in his Gospel says it this way, "He came to his own, and his own received him not." And that's what happened historically. The majority of Jews at the time of Christ – and even today – reject Jesus as their Savior. And part of the reason for this is that his salvation is the great leveler. If his salvation is for all, then they lose their special status as God's chosen people. In other words, it robs them of their pride. And they're not willing to let go of it. Instead of despising the sin in themselves, they despise Jesus. But this was for our advantage. It was the Jews' broad rejection of Jesus that caused his Gospel to go out to the nations. Their persecution of the early believers spread the Church far and wide – precisely so that the words of Christ were heard and continue to be heard today "in the coastlands" and by peoples afar.

And finally, there is the exaltation. He who was sent to be the servant of all, now becomes the One before whom all kings, princes, powers, and authorities fall down in homage. The once despised and suffering Servant is recognized as the King of kings and Lord of lords for he is the Lord's Chosen. Why? Because he was and always will remain the Right Man for the job. May we too recognize him, rendering all honor, thanks, and praise to Him, now and forever. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***