

Sermon on Isaiah 49: 1-6
The Servant of God

Sisters and brothers, I am a “book woman”. I love stories, texts, poems. I read them, I write them, I learn them by heart. Poems and song texts carry me through when life is rough. And they come to my mind when the beauty and happiness are overwhelming. So, let me begin with a poem today...

Poem

Here, near me,
nearer than I know Lord,
you knew me, you loved me
long before my birth.

Long before I sought you,
long before I prayed,
you have always loved me
and led me in your way.
You know all my thoughts Lord
so I don't have to fear,
you are always with me...

You are here, near me,
nearer than I know Lord.
You knew me, you loved me
long before my birth.

I have no idea who wrote this poem. What I know is who gave it to me.
In one of the darkest times of my life, Jenny, my Scottish friend, gave it to me.
I must have read it millions of times.
And after I had read it often enough, I took a lipstick and wrote on the mirror in our
bathroom the words: God wants me to live.
God wants me to live...
This carried me through...

Sisters and brothers,
have you ever had the feeling that all you've done has been in vain?
Done for nothing?
That you'd have been better off not investing so much time, energy and commitment?
That what you do just doesn't make any difference?

Can you think of times when depression darkened your days,
when you felt under extreme pressure, and totally overburdened?
There would have been loads of exciting jobs to do, but you felt it is all just getting too
much? And you are just so tired? Washed out? Exhausted?

Do you know what it feels like when you come to the absolute limit of your energy?
When fear grabs you in its claws?
When pain and doubt threaten to overwhelm you?
And then, just when you think you are at the end of your tether and you can't possibly go any further, you're given an even greater and more demanding job to do?

That is, dear sisters and brothers, how Isaiah - the prophet, the poet, the preacher, the servant of God - must have felt.
Yes, we have another of the servant songs as sermon text today...

And here the servant says:

"I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing..."
Even though Isaiah knew that God had called him before he was born, and that God had given him all the skills he needed to fulfil his mission, he felt worn out.

"He made my mouth like a sharp sword..." Isaiah could say.

Yes. Isaiah was a talented speaker.

People paid attention to this man, who was so close to God, but who was still haunted by doubts and feelings of inadequacy.

And just at the very moment when he expressed all that and tried to reassure himself of God's presence, love and glory...

just when he could say again the words "My God has become my strength..."

he is confronted by a voice saying: "It is too light a thing..."

that you do what you are already doing...

There are much bigger tasks waiting for you.

"I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth..."

But, let us start at the beginning...

Have you noticed whom the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 49 is addressed to?

Whom the servant of God is talking to?

"Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away."

Isaiah wrote to the Israelites.

Spoke to them.

Preached for them.

But here at this moment his audience is much greater.

It includes people who live far away from Israel, and it includes people who are separated from biblical times by thousands of years...

Today, the servant of God is talking to you – and to me...

"Listen..."

The text (v3) speaks of a servant that God was going to use.

And many people throughout the history of theology have had many different ideas of who this servant might have been.

Some thought Jeremiah, who lived after Isaiah, was this servant.

Some thought, of course, Isaiah himself was the one.

Some thought that the king of the Persians, who let the Israelites out of captivity, was this servant.

Some suggest that the whole nation of Israel is the servant.

And one answer is of course that Jesus is the servant that this and many other Old Testament readings speak of.

The text doesn't clearly tell us who the servant is supposed to be, but it shows very well what a relationship between a servant of God and God can be like. The message is for individuals, peoples, nations.

It is for us.

We are called by God.

God called us before we were born; while we were in our mother's womb he named us...

And he gave us all the skills and resources we'd need to fulfil our mission.

He'd hold us in his hand, support, nourish and sustain us... because he wants to be glorified in us (v3).

Isaiah had received all the equipment he'd need and divine and powerful words of commission:

"You are my servant, in whom I will be glorified".

But yet, we first see (v4) the pain of the one who is called.

He is overcome by doubts and fears.

Isaiah felt he hadn't succeeded; he felt he'd spent his strength for nothing, and he needed time to rediscover that God was still at his side.

Isaiah's message up to this point had been "to bring back Jacob", to restore and strengthen the scattered and oppressed people of Israel, to keep them together, and give them visions of future salvation.

However, his new message was to include the whole world.

God will save his people from destruction.

No human victors,

no human oppressors

and no oppressed people shall be in God's future of salvation.

There shall be light for all people.

And well-being, joy and life will reach to the ends of the earth!

Isaiah's message is equally important - in the old days in Israel and at the beginning of the 21st century.

Then and now the message has a spiritual, a physical, and a political dimension.

People shall live in peace.

Broken bodies can be healed.

And unjust political systems must be overcome.

God's servant is the light to the nations...

to heal and save and make new the whole earth.

How could Isaiah not be overwhelmed by this mission?

How could he not be threatened by it?

For some time he just didn't know where from he would get the strength for it.

But just when he would have liked to draw back and slip away,
he realized not only the wonderful gifts God had provided for him,
but also the fact that God is always there for him:
before his beginning and long after he departs this earth.
Only then could he see and say:
God has become my strength.

And he would urgently need all that strength, because God told him:
It is too light a thing ... to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations..."

This is the dazzling climax of Isaiah's song:
God's comfort and faithfulness and a new mission.

God held much more in store for Isaiah than Isaiah could ever have thought of.
God equipped him with extraordinary gifts -
just remember the "sharp words and the polished arrow" -
because he was sent to do extraordinary tasks.

Beyond all the feelings of frustration there was a vision:
God's servant sent to the ends of the earth, where hard work was waiting and times could
be dangerous.
The person called to that needs God's love, presence and protection...
Isaiah drew strength from the deep knowledge of belonging to God,
living in him and with him, and being embraced by his shelter and care.

It was with just such an assurance that Jesus could live and speak centuries later.
And his most powerful words, besides many, many others, were his words of comfort.
Think of so many stories of healing,
where people's bodies were restored,
and then Jesus said to them:
Cheer up! Your sins are forgiven...
or: from now on live your life differently...
or: your faith has made you well...go in peace.

The servant's words: razor-sharp, like an arrow... aiming right at people's hearts, calling
us all to yet another mission.

"You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world", so let your **light** shine
before others, so that they may see your **good** works...
Here again are the servant's words:
words to comfort, to encourage, to bring peace –
and to remind us that heaven is waiting for us, here and now.
God needs you and me for his kingdom.

God is happy to have us all as his people, his family... his servants.

And in that we are not alone.

We have so much to give and share.

I just recall last Sunday's activity when we all – inspired by the story of 5000 being fed with a single boy's picnic lunch - wrote on pieces of paper what we can give, what our contribution to the community can be.

Let me just name a few: A listening ear, time and money, love, hope and kisses, happiness, peace, knowledge, wisdom, food & joy, arts, friendship, hugs & smiles, and of course many many more. As many things to share and support each other with as we were people in this church.

Let us not see the servant of God as a lonely individual but understand that many servants of God in community will make it much easier to follow God's call and fulfil the mission God is giving us.

Servants of God are people who belong to God and to each other.

People with a close bond to him.

People who serve the salvation of others to the ends of the earth.

It is too light a thing that you should only do the obvious, ordinary task...

I will give you as a light...

to do the extraordinary;

and all you need for that

I have already given you.

I called you before you were born.

While you were in your mother's womb, I named you.

You can do it...

We can do it...

Together.

Amen.