

Sermon on Isaiah 42: 1-6 & Matthew 3: 13-17

Sisters and brothers,
what more do we need at the beginning of a new year than a vision and a call, a sense of belonging and a confirmation that we are loved, loved, and loved again. All of these come to us in the Bible readings which are the lectionary suggestions for this Sunday.

And they do not come in form of a demand or as a piece of advice, they come to us as a song in the Old Testament text, and as a mere declaration of love in the Gospel reading.

There is poetry and beauty in both texts that make the moment in which you read them somehow special and sacred.

**6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to lead the prisoners from prison,
and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.
8 I am the LORD, that is my name;**

These promising words are from the first of 4 songs which the prophet Isaiah holds in store for us. They are called Servant Songs because in all of them God speaks to his people and calls them servants.

**1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;**

In the first 4 verses of our beautiful song from the book of the prophets the person of the servant is described to us. The servant's mission is introduced to us. Back in Isaiah's time people tended to think that maybe the prophet Isaiah is the servant, or any of the other prophets, or a certain political leader who brought peace and justice back to a people that had been hurt, bruised and oppressed over decades and centuries.

Just remember briefly what prophets we meet throughout the OT: Abraham is one, even Jacob, Miriam and Moses, Deborah, Samuel and many others, and of course all those who we find in the section of the book of prophets in our Bible: Micah, Amos, Jeremiah – just to name some. A whole range of very different people and very different jobs to do over time and centuries...

The word "servant" could have been applied to individuals who were faithful believers and working hard to be good co-workers of their God, people who made

a big effort to make the world in which they lived a place in which everyone could live a life of happiness and freedom.

It could be applied, and was used over the centuries, to describe the special people, ordinary people were often waiting for: role models, saviours, bringers of liberation, justice and peace, carers for welfare and lovers of humanity...

It was sometimes applied to the people of Israel to back them up and make them strong, when they were in danger of falling in despair and giving up.

And when in Jesus' time the Roman Empire held the biggest part of the world known then in its terrible and oppressing grip, the Jews hoped desperately that a saviour and liberator, a servant of God would come and free them from their bondages, lead them out into the light and give them back a life worth living. In Jesus they saw such a servant. In their eyes Jesus perfectly fulfilled the qualities of the servant:

**1 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 to the nations.
2 He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
3 a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.**

The voice of God, in the book of Isaiah, speaks in a very similar way to the voice of God in the story of Jesus' baptism:

**16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water,
suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God
descending like a dove and alighting on him.
17 And a voice from heaven said, «This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I
am well pleased.»**

Here is a beloved person of God who is filled with God's spirit and is loved by him out of all proportion!

This human being brings justice to the nations and to the most distant places. He is a light for the world. And what is most important: he does not seek to force his message on people by raising his voice or using his eloquence, as so many people would do, but he will come gently and win over people lovingly...

No wonder people thought of Jesus as the servant of God!

In God's speech in Isaiah, God identifies himself in ways that enhance the servant's authority as his representative:

**5 Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people...**

And the tasks God's servant is going to fulfil are spoken out clearly:

**to open the eyes that are blind,
to lead the prisoners from prison,
and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.**

Israel's prophets always spoke on behalf of those oppressed by the powerful. They challenged unjust systems and worked for those who were oppressed and exploited, without rights and without a say...

Prophets are the people God uses in times of crisis...
in the old Israel, in Jesus' time, and today.

They speak powerfully about healing of the nations and changes of the status quo. They offer the ordinary people a vision for life and stuff for their hopes and dreams.

Jesus clearly was such a prophet or servant.

And following him we are asked to be prophets and servants too.

Jesus came to be many things:

the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the Saviour, the Lord...

and yet Isaiah describes the coming of the Messiah as the coming of a servant...

one who would suffer for and serve his people,

one who would come to bring righteousness and justice, mercy and grace.

He will come with a quiet voice and a gentle spirit,

with loving persistence and constant care for his people.

**6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people...
to open the eyes that are blind,
to lead the prisoners from prison,
and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.**

These words of Isaiah would be recalled by Jesus as he spoke about his calling, and about his father, God. And although they would have been familiar to any of the

Jews with whom he came in contact, people were still confused about who he was, this son of a carpenter from Galilee...

Who Jesus is, was best experienced by the people whose paths he crossed. When Jesus showed up and spoke, people saw and heard their God.

Blind Bartimaeus regained his sight and his place in society.
Mary Magdalene found a sense of healing, acceptance, and belonging in Jesus' welcome.

In the story of the Prodigal Son as he returned home, this man discovered the unending love and forgiveness of the unconditionally loving father.

The crowds learned about the endless love and grace of God...

in stories about the love of God and ordinary things:

mustard seeds and mountains,

houses built on sand and rock,

lost sheep and lost coins...

People learned from the graciousness of Jesus,

listened to the word of God which he so clearly offered to them.

People learned to love God,

to trust God more,

and to talk to God...

They understood that God would hear,

and would answer their prayers and speak to them in many ways...

And when God speaks (through stories, prophets, Jesus, people around us), anything is possible:

Water becomes wine and a simple meal of bread and wine becomes the life-giving gift of Christ.

Mud becomes medicine & heals blind eyes.

The picnic lunch of a boy becomes a festive meal for a multitude listening to Jesus preach and teach.

A gathering of 2 or more ordinary people suddenly becomes a sacred moment.

And the tumult of our lives becomes calm, when Jesus speaks peace into the storms of our beings.

With the words of Isaiah and the love we are all offered by God in Jesus, we are asked to watch out and pay attention to when God speaks today...

...maybe through us:

in our words,

in our actions,

in our kindness to others,

and in the way we live out the great love we have received,

the talents we have, the riches, the graces...

God speaks when we bake pizzas on Mondays and offer them to the customers of the Münchner Tafel.

God speaks when we invite children and their families to our church activities – no matter where they come from... when we give homework support to all kids who want it.

God speaks when we make room for people and welcome them; when we open our church doors to the full diversity of humankind in God's glorious creation, warmly embracing all differences in age, race, nationality, and cultural backgrounds.

God speaks in the words of Isaiah, the prophet.

God speaks in and through Jesus and his life.

He still speaks to us today, here and now.

God says:

**1 You all are my servants, whom I uphold,
my chosen ones, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon you;
you will bring forth justice to the nations.
You will not cry or lift up your voice,
or make it heard in the street;
3 a bruised reed you will not break,
and a dimly burning wick you will not quench;
you will faithfully bring forth justice.**

I love you, God says to us today.

I take you by the hand and keep you.

I need you in this place to turn the world upside down,
to humble the powerful and to lift up the lowly,
to turn the tables, to topple vain idols
and to stand with the poor.

I need you to proclaim God's kingdom,
to feed the hungry,
to give sight to the blind,
to strengthen the weary,
and to set the prisoners free.

I need you to turn the world upside down,
and to overthrow the present order
with a revolution of love.

Amen.