

The Servant

Henry Augustus Rowland, professor of physics at Johns Hopkins University, was once called as an expert witness at a trial. During cross-examination a lawyer demanded, "What are your qualifications as an expert witness in this case?" The normally modest and humble professor replied quietly, "I am the greatest living expert on the subject under discussion." Later a close friend, well acquainted with Rowland's usual humble personality expressed surprise at the professor's uncharacteristic answer. Rowland answered, "Well, what did you expect me to do? Lie? I was under oath."

I wonder who is in our world today "the greatest living servant of God?" And I wonder if we might be surprised to find out who that Servant is.

Israel's story in Isaiah come in the form of an unfolding drama in which God is leading his chosen people, out of the "former age", that is to say a disastrous time before the exile, and into a "new age" when they would be restored to their land. But as this new age comes, God's people continue to live through the rise and fall of various secular empires. Isaiah covers Assyrian empire, then the Babylonian empire, then the Persian empire. Empires that rise and fall. And the people of God must continue to be a *light* in the spiritual darkness of the system of the world around them in which they live, because God has a plan for his people.

In Isaiah 42, we find the first of four "Servant Songs." – not so much songs really as *poems*. And all four of these poems speak of a mysterious "*servant*," and for centuries scholars and ordinary bible readers alike have puzzled over just *who is this servant?* At times the songs seem to be about a singular individual, but on the other hand, as they stand in the Book of Isaiah, "the Servant" seems also to be referring to the nation – Israel, the servant people of God. **41:8-10**

Empires rise, empires fall and crumble into dust, the system continues. But God will always have a chosen people. A *servant* people.

So that's why these Old Testament texts are still important. I'm taking the Servant Songs of Isaiah as a message to us today. Where do we fit into this world system of rising and falling empires and economies? This world where "the god's of the nations are idols"? How are we supposed to be "a light to the nations"? What role do we play in this drama? These were relevant questions to Isaiah's *first* audience, and they are still our questions today. ***We are the Servant.***

And that means, first of all, that we are . . .

Announcers of a verdict 1

In a long and complicated court-case, after all the witnesses have been called and all arguments have been made, and all the lawyers have finally rested their case, we may still have to wait hours and even days until the judge gives the verdict. In story that Isaiah is telling, God is the supreme court judge who calls his court to order, **41:21.**

Today, in the courtroom, he is hearing is about his people the Hebrews who have "landed in jail," that is to say, have been sent away into Babylon.

In the ancient world, prison – captivity – was not used in the same way it is in our culture: as a punishment – a sentence of so many years in jail for a specific crime. No. Jail in the ancient world was simply where you were held captive until your verdict was handed down. Then you

were either free to go home or . . .

So in Isaiah 42, the issue to be decided by the court of God is should the Jews have to remain any longer as captives in a land of idols?

This proceeding is not about whether they are guilty of worshipping other gods. That is not the matter to be ruled on today. This is more of a parole hearing. Why should they live under the rule of idol gods? Why should the chosen people of Israel's God be dominated any longer in a foreign land by a pagan culture? God has heard the case, withdrawn into his private chambers, considered the matter carefully, and now has come back with the verdict.

He summons the *servant* of the court, – the clerk, we might say. “Come here,” he says, “and take this verdict of mine and read it to the public. Make it so.

So who *is* this “servant”? It is someone in the world of that day who is to be the agent of the Sovereign God. And God speaks his approval of this person.” Here is *my* servant. He has been given my verdict in this case. I've put my *spirit* on him – I've chosen this person to put my will into affect. So who is the servant?

The context of Isaiah's vision, and this unfolding drama, this relates to the time of Cyrus the Persian. **41:25**

This is a powerful theological metaphor: When God wants a clerk, a “go-fer,” someone to do his bidding, he can summon the most powerful man on earth who was . . .

Cyrus the Great.

Cyrus the Persian was master of both politics and battlefield tactics. He is going about his business of successfully overthrowing Babylon and building his worldly empire. That's why they called him Cyrus *the Great*. But unbeknownst to Cyrus, he is being used by Israel's God to liberate his enslaved people the Jews. He is God's *servant*. It would be Cyrus who would issue the decree that allowed the Jews to return to their land. Cyrus thought it was *his* choice, he was settling his government policy as a supreme potentate. It was not. Cyrus was simply passing on God's verdict. And it was a verdict in favour of God's people. God still loved them. This was the first good news they had from God in generations! (27).

The exiles had lost all hope in God's promises. But now they could hope again.

But there was something new about these servant songs – something unfamiliar to the Jewish mind. The servant songs were the beginning of a new way of being the people of God in the world, one which the Jews would continue to find uncomfortable for centuries. God was exercising his rule over them *through secular rulers*. There would no longer be a monarchy in Israel, but a spiritual community guided by a divine law. God was their King, and the secular rulers simply his court clerks. This was something Paul would later state in Romans 13:1 “The authorities that exist have been established by God.” Whenever worldly rulers act justly, they are in fact the servants of God. Instruments of God's love and care – God's servants.

But not just any ruler can be the servant. If we are to be a servant people, leading people towards the light of God, then we must be . . .

Leaders in compassion 2

Usually we think of conquerors as loud, dominating characters who march into town, terrorize their subjects into submission. They shout in the streets and show their power. They hunt down every possible pocket of resistance, and root out with lethal force even the weakest forms of resistance. It's all or nothing, they must have total submission. It's how the System works. It's

Darwinian – survival of the fittest.

But in Cyrus the Great there was a unique moment of light in the dark history of the world: Cyrus allows the Hebrew exiles to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem. He is not your typical warlord. He is a statesman. By pursuing a policy of generosity and compassion instead of repression, he was able to make his newly conquered subjects into enthusiastic supporters. The Bible records that by his decree, a remnant of the Jewish population returned to the Promised Land from Babylon, to rebuild the temple. (You can read the full text of his edict in the Book of Ezra). As a result of his policies, the Jews view Cyrus as a dignified and righteous king. He is the only Gentile in the Bible to be designated as *a messiah* an anointed one – a divinely-appointed king, **Isaiah 45:1**

Compassionate leaders are rare in this world. But there are a few. Jesus used the servant song to refer to John the Baptist. A smoldering wick , , , , Here was a man who was anything but timid, the strongest of character, yet he didn't have a violent bone in his body.

This time the system was run by Rome. The same old system only under a new name. The same ruthless brutality that grips the world to this very day. But John announces that a new order is coming – the Kingdom of God – God's system.

Pilate never got

As I thought about the servant song I asked myself, “who are the compassionate leaders in our world today? Who are the heirs of Cyrus the Great, John the Baptist, Jesus the Christ?”

The Verdict is in: Jesus said. . .

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.”

I find it ironic that we live in a day of celebrity power. On issues of critical importance to our world: the environment, global poverty, human rights, who are the loudest voices? Who is speaking up for the powerless? The widows and orphans? It's often not the most powerful politicians, or even religious leaders, but movie actors and rockstars. But that's not what matters; what matters the verdict is in

God *loves* the world. He has chosen to embrace a wounded and bruised world. He will not condemn it.

So this means that God calls his servant people to be

Teachers of Truth 4

As a direct result of Cyrus's rule, the Hebrew Scriptures were compiled and, copied and then brought to Jerusalem from Babylon by Ezra the great teacher. And Jerusalem then became a brilliant centre of learning. Picture Ezra teaching the Scriptures in Jerusalem and the great impact of that ministry. It was overwhelming at first. People who had never really been familiar with God's word were suddenly aware of their need for God. They were shocked at how little they knew of God and how much they needed to learn.

But note the ultimate target audience for the teaching is on “the islands.” This refers to Jerusalem's nearest neighbors on the coast lands.

What this means is that the “servant of God” the people who have God's word and study

it and know it will have an effect on the “neighbours” – people of other faiths will recognize the Truth.

And with this the song ends. But not without invitation to respond and be . . .

A Hope for the Hopeless

a light for the Gentiles,
to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Brothers and sisters, many in our world today live on the edge of hopelessness and despair: economic hardship, marriage difficulties, wayward children – problems are as common and as old as humankind itself. And now, the daily news tells us our world is taking destructive turns that those only a few generations ago could hardly imagine.

But as I listened to this servant song, written so long ago, before Christ, to a people feeling as similar hopelessness, I thought about how we in the church often talk about “God servant” we usually think of a pastor or a missionary or an evangelist.

But Paul says an interesting thing in Ephesians 3:

“. . . grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ. . . His intent was that now, *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms . . .” Eph 3:8-10

Did you notice the emphasis: *through the church*. It is not through solitary remarkable individual servants, that a hopeless world gets a sign of hope. It through a servant body. A community. *We are the servant*. A light to the Gentiles. God has handed down his verdict: he loves this world. His love is manifest in Christ and his body the church. We are a movement, a body, sent on a mission that involved us all. There is hope that servant-leaders and a Servant-Messiah are still possibilities in God’s world.

So if we returned to my original question and asked, *who is the greatest living servant of God in the world today*, we might be inclined to say that no *one* individual can claim that, but it must be the *Church*, the servant people of God throughout the world. Don’t you think?

But, for me that’s still not the total picture. There’s still something mysterious about the Servant Songs and we might call it . . .

The Cyrus factor

The Nobel Peace prize is awarded, according to the will it’s founder Alfred Nobel, “to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between the nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace . . . ”

In 2003, who won the Noble Peace Prize? That year the odds on favorite was Pope John-Paul. He was a Great guy and was about to die, and it would be the last chance. He was a giant actor on the global stage. If you were a betting person, the Pope was going to win.

But in 2003 the Nobel Peace prize went to Shirin Ebadi, a little known Iranian lawyer, human rights activist and founder of Children's Rights Support Association in Iran. She won the

prize for her significant and pioneering efforts for democracy and human rights, especially women's and children's rights. She is the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman to receive the prize.

Through a long career she defended the rights of people. In 1975, she became the first woman to preside over a legislative court in Iran. But following the revolution in 1979, conservative clerics who came to power insisted that Islam prohibits women from becoming judges. She was not allowed to practice again as a lawyer until 1993.

As a lawyer, she took up the cases unfortunately people fell afoul of the hardline power in Iran. She was jailed for bringing embarrassing evidence against powerful people and spent 48 months jail, including 16 months in solitary confinement. But this brought increased focus on Iran from human rights groups abroad. She defended cases of child abuse cases, and freedom of the press. And for this she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in the words of the committee "for her courageous efforts for democracy and human rights, especially for the rights of women and children." The selection committee praised her as a "courageous person" who "has never heeded the threat to her own safety".

On December 10, 2003, in her acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, she said:

"I am an Iranian, a descendant of Cyrus the Great. This emperor proclaimed at the pinnacle of power 2,500 years ago that he 'would not reign over the people if they did not wish it.' He promised not to force any person to change his religion and faith and guaranteed freedom for all. The [Decree] of Cyrus the Great should be studied in the history of human rights."

We must never think that God is limited to the Church in bringing his love and care to this dark and wounded world. God has put within the heart of humanity the ability to be a servant people. We must choose to be a part of that people and unite with all who are the Servant.

The 18th century preacher John Wesley once said: "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can in all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can."

We are the Servant.