

Light for the nations

2nd Epiphany

All Saints Cathedral, Zamalek,

11,13 January 2008

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-38

Matthew 3:13-17

SLIDE 1

Our society loves to focus on new things. Anything new is speedily embraced by many. Have you ever seen something advertised as OLD? Well, yes, maybe tourism to Egypt... come and see what is old. But generally speaking, we are focused on what is new. Even tourism to Egypt needs to offer NEW attractions the whole time, in order for people to keep coming.

Most of the time, this is because we think that NEW means different and better, and that is what attracts us.

So when the prophet Isaiah spoke on behalf of God about NEW things, Israel also listened carefully. I like us to also listen rather carefully to the words of Isaiah that were read this morning.

SLIDE 2

Read Isaiah 42:8-9a

I am the Lord; that is my name!

I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.

See the former things have taken place, and new things I declare

Israel was in desperate need of something new, because it lived in misery. They were a nation in distress. At the time when these words of Isaiah were spoken, the people of God were dispersed among the nations, where they were treated as second-class citizens. Many Jews lived in Babylon – modern Iraq. Here in Egypt there were also hundreds of thousands of Jews, especially in Alexandria, but also here in Cairo and even as far south of Aswan there was a Jewish temple.

Israel suffered from living in the midst of the idolatrous nations, who did grave injustices in accordance with the character of their wicked gods. There was injustice everywhere, not just in general, but there were also many wrongs done against the people of God by the nations in whose midst they lived.

For Israel, dispersed over the Middle East, the great question was: Where is our God, JHWH, in the midst of all of this? Why did he allow the nations to abuse them. What about all his promises of new life? Why did they not see more blessings? Why was their life full of troubles? Why did God seem to be so far?

Let me ask those questions in a more personal way. We believe in the God of heaven and earth, but where is He in your life? Why do I face so many problems? Where is God?

In the midst of these existential questions, Isaiah spoke to the nation of Israel, and his words echo back to us as well. They have meaning for us.

Read Isaiah 42:9a

**See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;**

So what is the new thing that God promises through Isaiah? What does God have to tell Israel in the midst of its feelings of misery, its feelings of God being so far away.

The first new thing is, that God introduces his servant to us. ‘You have many problems and many issues to deal with, but here He is, my servant.’ What a very promising event for a nation, and for us, in need. God sends His representative. When his people are in need, God is not silent – *He takes action.*

From the beginning of history, mankind has realized that things are not as they should be. We can all dream of an ideal world, and we all know that the world IS not ideal. What is wrong with us and with our world!

The whole Old Testament is looking forward in anticipation, for the person whom God had promised from the very beginning of history, the person who would undo all evil in the world.

God first chose the nation of Israel to be that servant, a light for the nations. God gave his laws to Israel, in order for Israel to be a model nation - but Israel did not obey its laws, it was not the light to the nations God wanted it to be, so Israel was sent into exile among the nations.

And then Isaiah spoke:

SLIDE 3

Read Isaiah 42:1

**Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight; I will put my spirit on him
And he will bring justice to the nations.**

Those words sound so tender. God introduces his servant to us. 'Here he is, my servant, I am with him, I have chosen Him, my soul, says God, delights in him... The Spirit of Almighty God, is on him...'

In the New Testament, these words of Isaiah are directly applied to Jesus Christ. We read in Matthew 12 that these very words of Isaiah were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

We have read about Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3 this morning, where the very same words from Isaiah 42 are repeated.

SLIDE 4

Read Matthew 3:16-17

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from

heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'

No other person that had lived had such an intimate relationship with God. No-one has been able to serve God so wonderfully well. Never did God delight in any person as He did in Jesus Christ.

This prediction of Isaiah was new, and actually, a shock to Israel, that saw *itself* as the very fine special servant of God.

The fact that God was fully pleased with this servant, with Jesus Christ, is a fantastic reason in 2008 to be closely linked to Jesus Christ through our faith-relationship with Him.

The very first thing that Isaiah says about the *task* of this servant, **is that he was to bring justice to the nations**. O, how the Jews in the time of Isaiah loved to hear those words.

'Yes Lord, yes, justice is what the nations need. Lord, please let them suffer for what they have done to us. Let the nations be punished for their sins, for their false religions, for the fact that they serve idols, and also for the fact that they do not treat us with the respect we as the people of God deserve.... Let the Babylonians suffer... let the Greeks suffer... let the Romans suffer. Let the nations in the year 2008 suffer. Lord, we need your justice.'

I can just imagine how Israel rejoiced. God will send someone who will bring justice. But the justice Jesus brought, was unexpected, and not what Israel.

Slide 5

Jesus did not come as the rulers of the nations, he brought a wholly different justice. A new justice. An unexpected sort of justice

Jesus himself linked the justice he came to bring, to his baptism: He wanted to be baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness, all justice. In his baptiBaptisan act of submission to God and his first clear identification with humankind. Jesus identified with sinners.

When Jesus spoke of justice, of righteousness, He was not focused on punishing people for their wrongs.

Slide 6

Isaiah described the justice that the Servant of the Lord was to bring:

Read Isaiah 42:2-3

**He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will
not snuff out**

This is justice of a much higher ethical sort than what the rulers of the nations offer. The dreams of Israel did not go further than a reversal of the injustice of those gentile rulers; they hoped for a similar person who would rule with power, but supporting Judaism and Israel.

The rulers of this earth, the politicians, the wealthy, the famous, shout loud in the streets: I can do it, I am your man, I am your woman, I can bring the change you want... I will be your agent of change.... Support me, pay me tax, vote for me! Support me!

Israel was hoping for a messiah who would end the Roman rule over their land, a messiah who would be glorious and victorious and who would restore the land.

Isaiah promises something new, something much better. He promises not a political turnaround, but a turnaround in the life of all people who have been trampled; he promises the presence of God.

This was the second new thing – and again a shock to Israel. As a nation it hoped for revenge; God however revealed that He is interested in a wholly different justice: The justice of the Son of God coming to the world – to be with us.

Jesus did NOT shout to be heard. He did not speak the language of the robust rulers, of powerful politicians, or of fabulously famous. He did not ask for people to support Him. Rather, he knelt down to help the one who

is bruised, and to help the dimly burning candle. He did not demand, He gave.

Our text mentions a smoldering wick. That is a candle that has just gone out. It won't take much to relight the flame and it won't take much to snuff it out entirely. Jesus came to support the people who feel that inwardly they are about to die.

On the internet, I came across an American Christian organization, called, believe it or not: Smoldering Wick Ministries. It exists to help pastors with a burnout. Well, that is why Jesus came. If your flame is almost gone, the candle only gives smoke, he is there with you, and to get you on your feet again.

If you are bruised, hurt by the sorrows of life, pained by other people,
If you feel like a candle that is about to be quenched
Then Jesus, the servant of God and the Son of God is there for you.

He does justice by lifting you up - after you have been pushed down by those in power, or by the evil economies that only reward the successful, or by the civil wars or general poverty in your country. He bends down to whisper words of encouragement in your ear, if the madness of 20 million people in this city drives YOU mad...

A lesson for us is that if we are in need of help, He is there beside you – to help you cope with life and its challenges. And just as He came to bend down and be with us who need His support, He asks of us, his church, to do just that for each other, and for other people. To stand beside those who are in need.

Related to this idea that the servant of God would come as the helper to stand beside the hurting people in this world, is that Isaiah indicated that this servant of God would himself also suffer. This was another new thing he proclaimed:

Slide 7

Read Isaiah 42:3b-4

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice

He will not falter [*be crushed*] or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.

In his law the islands will put their hope.

The suggestion in these verses is, that WHEN he has established justice in the earth, he then will grow faint and be crushed. This is a very important concept in fact, something Isaiah would speak much more of in later chapters of his book, and especially Isaiah 53. There we read:

Slide 8

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer and [...] the LORD makes his life a guilt offering.

Ultimately, this was the justice Jesus came to bring to Israel and the nations. His own death, for the redemption of all. The same death that was so potently symbolized in his baptism.

He came to fulfill all justice, all righteousness. He was the personification of justice. When you meet with Him, you meet with justice itself. Himself. He did not come to just bring a new standard of justice, of righteousness, he did not come to bring a better law – he came to bring himself.

And the price for being so fully righteous, for being the personification of justice, was the hatred of the people of his days. The darkness did not like this light. Injustice cannot cope with a person who is fully just. Israel and the pagan Roman nation colluded to do away with Him....

Jesus was fully prepared to be the ultimate perfect sacrifice, a guilt offering. His death underlined the wickedness of man, but from God's perspective, it also meant that the guilt of sinful mankind was once and for all done away with.

All these ideas were so wholly alien to Israel. They wanted a ruler who could defeat the nations, make Israel the glorious nation again, and the idea that the servant of God would suffer, was completely unacceptable to them, just as presently many people think that if you faithfully obey God, He will bless you with health and wealth, with victory and material blessing. That, friends, is heresy.

Well, the example of this servant of God who was being persecuted *exactly because* He was such a light and such an example of righteousness, teaches me that those who are attached to this servant, to Jesus, must expect troubles, not a rosy life. But He then is bending down, and whispering words of encouragement in our ears. Lo, I am with you till the end of the earth...

But Isaiah was not ready yet... he had another NEW thing to say to the nation of Israel...

SLIDE 9

On behalf of God, he said:

**I will [...] make you to be a covenant for the people and 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**

This is radical language, and there is much we can learn from these words. Isaiah had made clear to Israel that it should adapt its views of justice – God’s answer to Israel suffering is not political and military victories over the nations, over Israel’s enemies. But now Isaiah goes even further...

The justice that the servant of God will bring is not what Israel hoped for, punishment for the nations – but the servant of God is *even going to be a light to the nations*. He is God’s servant for ALL nations, Israel and all the others.

Slide 10

Israel knew that as a nation it was called to be a light to the world, as God’s blessings were always destined for all nations. But Israel had become more and more exclusivist. In response, God now says that where Israel was not the light that it should have been, He would now send his own servant, to be the *true* light for the nations. Israel had failed, so now the Servant of God would do the job by himself.

**I will make you to be a covenant for the people,
and a light to the nations,**

God relates just as directly all other nations as He had previously done to Israel only.

This was new to Israel, and very upsetting: ‘But do we not have a unique covenant with God?’ Israel asked. Well, look carefully at what Isaiah says.

Look at the parallelism between the sentences.

He is a covenant for Israel and a light for the nations. This does not mean that he is a covenant only for Israel and a light only for the nations. The parallelism, a literary style often used in the Bible, suggests that he is also a covenant for the nations and a light for Israel.

Let me prove this point.

Look carefully at Isaiah 42:6,7

**The servant of God is to be a light to the nations (gentiles)
To open eyes that are blind [...] and to release from the dungeon
those who are in darkness.**

It seems clear that the light for the nations is the light that opens blind eyes and releases those who are in darkness. It seems that Isaiah is speaking of the non-Jews who are blind and who are in darkness.

But when Jesus was once questioned about whether He was truly the expected servant of God, He said: ‘sure I am, and look for yourself’:

**the eyes of the blind are opened,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.**

BE CLEAR ABOUT THIS: Jesus quoted from Isaiah, where Isaiah REFERRED TO THE NATIONS.

Jesus was speaking of the JEWISH blind that he gave sight, and JEWS in darkness. Jesus used a verse about the nations and applied it to Israel. He thereby underlined the parallelism in Isaiah.

There is no difference. Israel is no longer the unique light of God to the nations, but God has sent his own Son to be that light.

When one of Jesus followers, St Peter, was one day invited to come to the house of a non-Jew, Cornelius, for preaching the Gospel of Jesus, he realized this lesson of Isaiah and Jesus. What happened? When Cornelius put his trust in Jesus, the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius.

Slide 11

Peter then understood and said:

I now understand how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

Related to this is one other issue, another thing that is absolutely NEW. Let us once more look at Isaiah 42:6b

SLIDE 12

I will [...] make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the gentiles.

Isaiah says that the servant of God, hence Jesus, IS the covenant, and He IS the light.

He is the covenant. He personifies Gods covenant with Israel, and he personifies the revelation of God to the nations. Jesus does not just *speak* of the covenant, and he does not just send light, he embodies the covenant and the light. The servant of God, Jesus Christ, is therefore all-important for us.

Slide 13

From now on, Gods relationship with Israel and with the whole world is characterized by one thing only: by how Israel and the nations relate to His servant, Jesus Christ. If they are linked to Him, they enjoy God's covenant and the light, and this is true for both Jews and gentiles. Outside Jesus Christ, there is no covenant-relationship with God. Outside Jesus Christ, there is no true knowledge of God. No light, no life.

Practically, this means that for us to have this covenant-relationship with God, depends on how we relate to Jesus Christ. If we are attached to Him, we participate in the covenant and in the light of God.

So, Isaiah revealed, if I counted well, 5 new things to Israel and to us.

1. When no-one served God fully, he sent his own son to be his perfect servant. Jesus was the one who did all God wanted of humankind.
2. He was the personification of righteousness and justice, which led him to be close to each person in need of help.
3. He was so righteous, so good, that people could not cope with that and killed him... this made Jesus into the perfect guilt offering.
4. God's unique covenant relationship with Israel is now open for the whole world. God has no favorite nations. All people who want to serve Him, are accepted by Him.
5. And finally, there is no way around God's servant and son, Jesus Christ. He personifies the covenant of God with man.

God introduces him today anew to us. He does not offer a theology, not a church, not some reverent idea, not some pious thoughts. He introduces Jesus to us. 'Here He is, my servant'.

Amen