

Justice in service

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Isaiah 42:1-9

If you ask a child, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” it’s unlikely you’ll receive the answer, “I want to be a servant.” “Servant” is not found on any of the lists of hot new careers for the 21st century.

Being a servant has never been very attractive. When the early first Christians were first called Christians—which happened in Antioch by the way—it didn’t just mean they were followers of Jesus. It was also a play on words, a conflation of Christ and Chrestos, the Greek word for a helpful slave or servant. It was used as a common name for slaves. So calling someone a Christian was meant to be derogatory, an insult, a way of dismissing this new way of life. It is comforting to think they actually got this name, not because they were standing on temple steps handing out bibles but because they were going around caring for others. They feed the poor. They visited those in prison. They healed the sick. One of the primary reasons why Christianity spread so fast in the first few centuries was because they looked after people - any people.

Being a servant is part of the essence of our faith. The lifestyle of those Christians was modeled on their founder who said, “Love your neighbour as yourself and Love others as I have loved you”.

In the Jewish scriptures, particularly in the prophet Isaiah, God chose the image of the servant to describe the One God would send to give his life on our behalf. So what does Isaiah tell us about the role played by his servant—and about our own role as servants of Christ?

Three things characterize the servant in this portion of Isaiah 42.

First, the servant is firmly grounded in God’s support. The servant’s introduction is framed with words that link the servant closely with God: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights” and further, “I have put my spirit upon him.” The servant is clearly God’s servant, someone whose very identity and purpose are derived from God who has chosen that person for service.

Secondly, the servant’s role is clearly defined: to bring justice to the nations and on earth. This focus is mentioned three separate times in three verses (vv. 1, 3-4).

The Hebrew word for “justice,” *mishpat*, occurs in its various forms more than 200 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably. It means treating every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status and giving everyone their due or right.

This is why, if you look at every place the word is used in the Old Testament, several classes of persons continually come up. Over and over again, *mishpat* describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor—those who have been called “the quartet of the vulnerable.”

In ancient times these four groups had no social power. They lived at subsistence level and were only days from starvation if there was any famine, invasion or even minor social unrest. Today, this quartet would be expanded to include the refugee, the migrant worker, the homeless and many single parents and elderly people.

The *mishpat*, or justness, of a society, according to the Bible, is evaluated by how it treats

these groups. Any neglect shown to the needs of the members of this quartet is not called merely a lack of mercy or charity but a violation of justice, of mishpat. God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we. That is what it means to “do justice.”

To truly “seek God” is to seek justice and righteousness for the poor and oppressed. Love of God and real practical love of the other that makes a substantive difference in their life is true religion. Anything else is empty, fruitless and plain wrong.

Finally, the servant will do the work of justice with care, gentleness, and perseverance. Justice will be brought about without the servant’s voice having been raised, without a wick being snuffed out, and without the servant having been overcome by the size or difficulty of the mission.

The image of gentleness and restraint particularly give new meaning to the word grace. If justice is the mission, it is not to be marched in by violence and war. It is given as a gift, cupped in hand, cradled in arms and shielded by the body.

Our service is to be humble and gentle, thoughtful and loving. When I was at the Benedictine Abbey last year on retreat I was meditating on the opening verses of Psalm 63. ‘Oh God I long for you. My whole being desires you. Like a dry, worn out and water less land, my soul thirst for you. Let me see you in the sanctuary. Let me see how glorious and powerful you are’ As I was sitting quietly in the empty chapel and praying these words, a little, old Benedictine nun came in and slowly, gently and very carefully began to clean the chapel. At that moment that old nun revealed to me the nature of God’s glory and power. It is humble, self-giving, gently service. This is the God we serve and follow.

When Jesus is baptized in the river Jordan by John it is a confirmation of his identity as the Son of God, the servant of God, who calls each one of us to service. As Paul famously wrote we are slaves of Christ. We are upheld and supported by God as we serve, as we are committed to justice and we are to do our task with gentleness and grace.