

DIVINE ENABLING

Isaiah 42:1-9

The Greek myth of Sisyphus is an appropriate metaphor for our times. Condemned by the gods for pride and deceit, his fate is to roll a massive boulder up a hill, only to see it roll down again, and so repeat the futile process for all eternity. Be it civil war in Syria, the refugee crisis in Europe or near to home the rampant politics of patronage and self-enrichment, a sense of repetitive folly prevails today.

Isaiah of Jerusalem, eight hundred years before the birth of Christ, faced a situation not unlike ours. Traditional spiritual and moral values were being questioned and re-assessed. The country's rulers were consumed with greed and self-seeking. The people of the land were increasingly exploited by the rich elite. The super-powers of Assyria and Babylon were on the prowl. It was a time of political upheaval right across the Ancient Near East with the tiny country of Judah caught in the middle.

What was Judah to do? What will Judah, the people of the covenant, ultimately put their trust in? Where will they look for help? On what will they base their confidence? The choice is stark. Will Judah follow the ways of the world, trusting in duplicitous diplomacy and strategic alliances? Will she rely on her own shrewd wisdom and political policies to preserve her status and security? Or will she rely on the promises of her sovereign God.

This is the context which Isaiah faced. For some 50 years from the death of Uzziah in 740BC to the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in 701BC, supernaturally lifted by divine intervention, Isaiah served as the mouthpiece of God. However, the focus of his prophecy does not end there. He foresaw, 115 years hence, the Babylon siege and sack of Jerusalem, and destruction of the temple in 586BC, and the people carried off to exile for some seventy years.

This then is the immediate context of Isaiah 42, the Servant Song prophetically foretold to people in exile. Their redemption did not lie in the machinations of realpolitik, or the fortuitous plans of diplomacy. Isaiah points to the Servant of the Lord, God's chosen one in whom he delights (Isa 42:1), none other than Christ, the promised Messiah. As the people of Isaiah's day looked forward to their day of deliverance, we in turn look back. Their salvation, like ours is through grace and divine intervention.

The personal promises of vv1-4 which speak of the Servant's compassion, care and commitment to justice are the fabric of our spiritual DNA.

United to Christ, in union with him, the gracious attributes of his character are available to us. The question is, given such privileges and prerogatives, will we live by the promises of God, fulfilled in Christ, or will he choose to follow policies of our own making, be they ecclesiastical, social, political or personal.

As if the immensity of God's character needs further buttressing, Isaiah reminds his hearers and us in vv5-7 of the cosmic character of God, his creative transcendence, as well as his personal care and covenant commitment ensuring the deliverance and salvation of his people.

The culmination of Isaiah's prophetic promise comes in vv8 and 9. Idolatry yields to the magnificent majesty of God. One is granted a foretaste of the Great Day on which the New Jerusalem, perceived by faith, is fully realized. Just as the people of Isaiah's day, living in the context of physical exile in Babylon, had to learn to live by the promises of God, we too living as it were in spiritual exile between the first and second coming of Christ, need to live by the promises of God and not plans cobbled together of our own making.

Alan Cameron
Trinity Presbyterian Church
Lynnwood
1st Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday 08 January 2017