

The Servant of the LORD

The first three verses of our First Reading for today, Isaiah 49:1-3 are remarkable: ¹ *“Listen to Me, you coastlands! Pay attention, you distant nations! The LORD has called Me from the womb. Before My mother gave birth to Me, He made mention of My Name.* ² *He has made My mouth like a sharp sword and has hidden Me in the shadow of His hand. He has made Me into a polished arrow and has hidden Me in His quiver.* ³ *He has told Me, ‘You are My Servant, Israel, through whom I shall glorify Myself.’* Just who is this servant?

Some have suggested that the name Israel identifies this servant as the nation of Israel, and many agree. Certainly the nation was described as the Lord’s servant (42:19). But several problems prevent such an interpretation here. Israel was anything but a good example as a servant. The nation had turned away from the Lord and despised His servants, the prophets. God called Israel a deaf and blind servant (42:18–20). Israel itself needed rescue and help. If we identify the servant here as the nation of Israel, then how does Israel restore itself and “bring back those of Israel I have kept” (49:6)? What this servant does helps Israel. The servant cannot be helpless Israel. In addition, the servant mentioned here is a single person. He has a mouth, and *the LORD has called Me from the womb*. We might suggest that a nation can be born. We speak of the birth of our own nation. We might even say that a nation was in a womb, but we would not say that it was in “the womb of its mother” as an individual child. We must look for someone else to be this servant.

Who else but the Messiah fits the description here? God chose Him before birth. From the beginning God’s plan for the deliverance of the world involved the coming of one person. As God told Adam and Eve, this Person would be the seed, or offspring, of a woman. Throughout the long history of the Old Testament, God promised the coming of such a deliverer. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all anticipated the coming of that one deliverer. God promised David that such a deliverer would come from his family and that this one great Descendant would rule forever on David’s throne. Isaiah foretold that this descendant would be the Branch from the stump of Jesse, David’s father (11:1). Isaiah also identified Him as a child, born of a virgin - an individual (7:14; 9:6). All the Old Testament prophecies pointed to the coming of that one Great Servant, who would deliver His people. In this text the Great Servant calls out to people at the far corners of the earth.

Consider the description of the Messiah here. God set Him apart long before His birth. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, was born in time of a woman. The Lord of free and faithful grace made the mouth of the Messiah like a sharp sword. Remember the words of Jesus. They were often like a sharp sword cutting away pretence and unbelief, exposing sin, then applying the healing balm of God’s grace for sinners. In addition, Isaiah wrote that the Messiah was hidden: “in the shadow of His hand.” The God of grace did not reveal the Messiah until it was time for Him to do His work on earth. Then the stars themselves joined the angels in announcing His arrival (Matthew 2; Luke 2). The Messiah is the Servant in whom the Lord would display His splendour. That is, the Messiah would come to accomplish the most glorious and wonderful blessings that God planned for all humanity. He would redeem the world from sin, death, and hell. That is the glory of God’s grace,

and it is tied to the Great Servant - the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Yet we might wonder how the Messiah could be identified in verse 3 as "Israel." This Servant becomes the reason God had chosen His people Israel. The Messiah would come from the descendants of Abraham; that's why God chose Abraham. God continued to identify the origins of this Messiah through the prophecies of the Old Testament. When God calls the servant Israel, He brings all those prophecies to mind. Israel, God's chosen people of the Old Testament, existed for only one reason - to be the nation from which the Messiah for all humanity would come. The Messiah, this Servant of the Lord, would fulfil the mission God intended through Israel. He is the focal point of all Israel's history. The Great Servant therefore receives the name Israel as a title implying all God promised to bring to pass through this nation. He is the true Israel, who would bring glory to God and who stands in dramatic contrast to the historical Israel.