

Changing the world through gentleness and generosity

Sunday 14 October, 2018 – 10.30am

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Matthew Williams, Vicar of St James' Old Cathedral, on the First Sunday of Advent and commemoration of Nelson Mandela's 100th birthday:

Reading: Isaiah 42 : 1-9

Today we honour Nelson Mandela
in the year he would have been 100.
Today is also Advent Sunday.
Today we begin a series on the Servant Songs in Isaiah.
Today we begin a series on Stewardship.

That's my brief.
A bit to cover, so let's go!

Most of it is easy.

I could give you a whole lecture
on the servant in Isaiah.
I don't lack things to say about Advent or Stewardship.

But the first one is the hardest.

Nelson Mandela.

What to say
about Nelson Mandela?

If I speak of Nelson Mandela
Am I speaking of the man or the icon?
The person or the struggle he represents?

What do you want from a preacher
who speaks of a man who became an icon?

It seems to me a difficult position for a preacher.

Should I be an idolater
or should I be an iconoclast?

Should I join in the adoring worship of a man,
do I join in the way we perfect men in our imaginations
to sustain our need for icons
which is really not very different to our love of idols?

Or do I re-humanise the icon
present the more complex picture,
so we discover the real man,
flawed like all other men,
and so risk dishonouring an undeniably great leader
by seeming to spend my time picking holes,
reducing him or tearing him down?

And who am I to speak at all?

If I speak of Nelson Mandela,
I cannot do so neutrally,
for I speak as a conspicuously white man,
I have a sort of increase-the-glare-at-the-beach whiteness.

I am a sort of icon myself,
easily identified with the violent oppressors
and architects of apartheid
from whom he spent his life seeking justice and liberation.

Who am I to speak at all?

And if I speak of Nelson Mandela,
I speak as a foreigner.
Do I dare to speak with cool historical and geographical distance
about the fraught and complex pain
of real South African lives of all colours?

Who am I to speak at all?

I ask your forgiveness in advance
where I stumble into presumption and ignorance.

But I hope today to steer through this Scylla and Charybdis,
to be neither an idolater nor an iconoclast,
but only a faithful preacher of God's holy word.

I hope to honour Nelson Mandela's example,
wherever it conforms to the pattern of our great example,
God's chosen servant.

Today we heard from the prophet Isaiah
about the paths of the true servant of God.

It does appear to me that for much of his life,
Nelson Mandela chose a different path to that.
Unlike Ghandi and Martin Luther King,
to whom he is often compared,
Mandela was a more pragmatic revolutionary.
He explicitly embraced violent methods,
and refused to denounce them.

To be fair, he rightly called out an awful hypocrisy
from the white government
who used violence to try to co-erce him
into denouncing violence.

But still, unlike God's servant in Isaiah,
perhaps more like Peter
when he drew his sword in Gethsemane,
Mandela did believe in violent shortcuts to just ends.

In his later life, however,
he seemed to find paths first worn by God's servant,
seeking justice with gentleness
seeking justice with generosity
carving paths for reconciliation.
From this, I hope, we will find inspiration.

And I hope that for our part,
as we look for God's coming this Advent,
that the narrow tracks carved by God's servant
are the ones we will always look to walk upon
even when it might be more pragmatic to do otherwise.

But firstly, we must ask - who is this servant?
This servant we meet in Isaiah. Who is he?

There is a simple answer to this question,
and then a more complicated one.

The simple answer is,
The servant is Israel.

We know that because Isaiah introduced him to us
in the previous chapter.

*“But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,
⁹I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its farthest corners I called you.
I said, ‘You are my servant’;
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.*

So the servant is Israel,
chosen and not rejected.

The first half of Isaiah has been largely about
the rejection of Israel,
the sending away of Israel into exile,
Isaiah’s own ministry calling in chapter 6
was one of blinding Israel,
so they would see and not perceive,
until the completion of their exile and devastation.

But now Isaiah affirms
that Israel is chosen and not rejected.
They are God's servant.

But this is not a simple ethnic or national identification.

Isaiah goes on to reinvent and renew
what he means by Israel.

Out of national Israel

a remnant will remain

a remnant Isaiah often describes in the singular, servant,

a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse,

the family of King David,

and this true servant of God

will call and show others how to be true servants, plural, of God.

We met that servant in today's reading,
clothed in the language from chapter 11
about that shoot from the stump of Jesse,
a King from David's family,
with the Spirit of God upon him.

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

It must be said, though,
that for a powerful agent of justice,
this servant has the most peculiar methods.

His methods are gentleness and generosity.

First, gentleness.

²*He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;*

³*a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;*

He is quiet, inaudible,
he treads so softly
that he doesn't break even things nearly broken already
and even flickering candles are not put out by the breeze of his passing.

And yet...

He will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴*He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

That is one potent gentleness,
a gentleness made globally potent
by the powerful Spirit of God upon him.

Secondly, generosity.

⁵*Thus says God, the LORD...*

*I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,*

⁷*to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

The servant is the gift of God,
and he gives the gifts of God.

He is Israel himself,
and he forges a new Israel
out of both Israel and other nations,
opening their blinded eyes
and bringing them out of prisons.

He is God's servant himself,
and he redeems a new collective
of servants, plural,
people who serve God like he serves God,
which we hear about in chapters 56 on.

And he does it all with the spiritual potency
of gentleness and generosity.

If you know the gospel stories,
you will know that all this language
about the servant
was spectacularly filled out
by the person, life and ministry of Jesus Christ,

He was the King of gentleness and generosity.

And all this language about the servants he makes *see*
and the servants he makes *free*
is supposed to be filled out by us.

We are supposed to be,
servants who change the world
through the power of gentleness and generosity.

When Nelson Mandela was still in prison,
President Botha offered him release
on condition that he renounced violence.

He refused the terms.

So when he was released,
and was coming into power,
there was considerable fear about what might result.

Would he endorse the violence of revenge,
one might say, the justice of revenge?

Famously he did not.

Instead he set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission,
installing Archbishop Desmond Tutu as chair,
allowing it to declare amnesties upon past injustice
provided it was openly admitted.

He insisted on seeing everyone as a human being
with the potential to become ethical.
He chose the paths of gentleness and generosity.

He went to visit ex-President Botha in peace.
He took tea with the widow of Hendrik Verwoerd,
the intellectual architect of Apartheid.
He had lunch with Percy Yutar, the vicious prosecutor
who pressed the argument for his execution in the 1960s.

Yutar was mellow and humbled,
and declared himself to be struck by
“the great humility of this saintly man.”

Were it not for this development, I think,
Mandela would be so much less than he was.

The most beautiful moments in Mandela’s story
are the times he found the footsteps of Jesus to walk upon.

For this gentleness and generosity,
Mandela had his critics.

Too conciliatory, they said.
Too conciliatory. Too gentle. Too generous.
Just letting people away with stuff.

I can only say,
I hope that is a criticism that sticks on me one day.
I hope someone can plausibly condemn you for that too.

Too conciliatory. Too gentle. Too generous.

For somewhere in that moment of being too conciliatory,
too gentle, and too generous,
perhaps we will also have walked right on the footsteps
of the true servant of God.

And there, on that narrow, straight path,
we will know we are prepared for his coming.