

ISAIAH 42:1-9
BRUISED REED PEOPLE

Who are the strong people? How would you define strength? There is a school of thought that says “the strong people are the extroverts!”, the outgoing people, the people who will tell everyone else what to do and the 26 other ways in which you might succeed at doing something because they’ve done it already! These are the strong personalities and these are the people who we think will change the world. How many of you have done a Myers-Briggs test as part of work-place training? This is a personality type test in which you are given a number of statements and you score how you react to these and count up scores and that will tell you whether you are extrovert or introvert, whether you make decisions by thinking or feeling etc. I did this test once and the only score that I can remember is that, on the introvert/extrovert scale I came down right in the middle, neither one thing nor the other and I suspect there is something right about that, because it depends on the mood I’m in how I react to situations.

I read a book in the summer; title was one word *Quiet*. The subtitle: “the power of introverts in a world that can’t stop talking.” The book began with the notion that extrovert people are the most successful and these are the people who will change the world, but then Susan Cain began to challenge that idea. She went on to describe all kinds of experiences that were designed to make her into an extrovert because that’s the only way in which she would succeed in the world of business or the law or the church. But then she challenged all of that thinking by describing a significant number of people who are introverts by nature and who have changed the world in significant ways. In a world where the loudest have taken over, even if they have nothing to say, what place is there for quiet people? It is a fascinating read!

I say all of that by way of introducing Isaiah 42! This is the first of four passages in this part of Isaiah which are called “servant songs” because they introduce the character described as “the servant of the Lord”. These are pictures that we see completed in Jesus and even parts of this song are quoted in Matthew chapter 12 to apply them directly to the ministry of Jesus. There is something here about the nature of the servant in the first place, the way in which he will conduct his ministry and there is something too about the way in which he will treat the people he meets. This is all about the way in which God relates to us and to people in our world and especially in and through Jesus and what He came to do and the way in which He went about His work. There is something here to reassure us about that relationship with God. But there is also something here to challenge us about our relationships with one another and other people and how we go about our business as Christians and as the Church in our community.

“*Here is...*” (*Isaiah 42:1f*) Isaiah introduces the servant to us. This is the first of four pieces in which the servant features; God has sent His servant into the world with a mission to complete and sometimes that servant seems very much an individual person and sometimes feels as if the whole nation of Israel is meant to be the servant. Something of both is true. The servant will come with a mission from God to complete and that mission is variously described, with the climax in Isaiah 53 of the picture of the servant as the suffering servant, one who will die for the sake of His people and take away our sin. You very clearly see the picture of Jesus and Him crucified in that passage and there is something of Jesus in all of them. Isaiah 42 begins by showing us what the servant is like, something of His style, His personality, how He treats other people. This is how Jesus is to us and the way in which we receive grace from Him, but there is also something here about the way we are, if we want to be like Jesus.

“He will...” (Isaiah 42:2f) “Unostentatious, unself-advertising, quiet, unaggressive, unthreatening” (Alec Motyer) The servant doesn’t make a big fuss about himself; he doesn’t draw attention to himself, but he goes about his business quietly and without a great show! The servant is not called to be loud, nor to be the life and soul of the party. Jesus was in Nazareth for 30 years and no-one noticed Him! Only when He began His ministry, the preaching and the miracles, did people sit up and take notice of Him and even then sometimes He walked away from places where He’d done lots of miracles so that He could preach elsewhere. Jesus did nothing to make a fuss or a show; everything He did was for the sake of others and the glory of God. He didn’t proclaim His glory from the rooftops; indeed His glory remained hidden to almost everyone till after the resurrection. That is the kind of person He was!

What kind of ministry is the servant to exercise? *“A bruised...” (Isaiah 42:3)* I love these 2 pictures, because they are so evocative of people who are weak and vulnerable, but not yet written off. The first is a picture of a plant: the reed stands tall beside the river bank perhaps, but this reed is bruised, damaged, is not standing so tall because it is bent over in the wind or knocked by a wild animal walking past. It is not broken off completely, but it needs some tender loving care. The other is a picture of the oil lamp or the candle and the wick is smouldering; it is not burning brightly, but it has not yet stopped burning; either the wind has almost blown it out or it is nearly out of oil and smouldering, with smoke coming off it instead of light; but it has not yet gone out completely; it needs some tender loving care. How is this a picture of the ministry of the servant? He is to bring people back to life; to tend their bruises and restore their strength, to fan the smouldering wick back into life again. It would be easy just to break the reed off, since it is nearly gone anyway; or to snuff out the lamp and buy a new one, but no!

This is about the people that the servant meets. How easy it is with people who are weak and vulnerable to write them off as useless, as past their best, with nothing more to offer and so let’s concentrate on the strong, vibrant people who’ve got so much more to offer to us. When we are these weak and vulnerable people, it is so easy to feel that no-one really is interested in us, no-one takes care of us, we’re forgotten about and neglected or even snapped off altogether; we are snubbed by those who are supposed to care for us. Look at the gospels; see Jesus in action! How many bruised people did He take time to care for? Some were physically bruised and He healed many of them; others were spiritually bruised, full of questions and doubts and He took time to listen to them, to answer their questions and lead them to God.

Being weak and vulnerable comes in all sorts of ways. It comes physically: our bodies are weak, ill-health, pain and suffering strike us and when we’ve not had that experience before physical pain leads to other feelings of weakness, fear, anxiety; we’re not sure how to deal with this. Being weak and vulnerable comes from being perplexed by situations in which we find ourselves – how many of us are perplexed by the situation of the Church in Scotland today and by attacks on our Christian faith? We’re not sure where to turn or how to handle this situation. “If you are a Christian...” and someone criticises us for something we’ve said or the way we’ve behaved, calling our Christian faith into question because of our behaviour? This makes us feel weak and just a bit vulnerable; these attacks hit home at times and we take them to heart; “maybe they’re right; maybe I’m not a very good Christian.” We are bruised reed people, not quite given up, but our strength is nearly gone and we’re not sure where to turn next!

Jesus is taken into the desert after His baptism; the Spirit leads Him into the desert and God is there with Him. After 40 days He experiences these temptation by the

devil. They come in three ways that are almost all the same: “*If you...*” (*Matthew 4:3*) “*If you...*” (*Matthew 4:6*) “*All this...*” (*Matthew 4:9*) Jesus is hungry, physically weak and vulnerable, having fasted for 40 days and nights and at that moment of weakness, the devil comes to attack Him spiritually. He does it by raising doubts in Jesus’ mind. “If you are...” The last thing that Jesus heard before He went into the desert was God’s voice saying “This is my son” but now the devil challenges that, casts doubt on it; “are you really? Then why not show it by turning these stones into bread, jumping off the temple roof and landing on your feet unharmed! What displays of power these would be. World power can be yours if you bow down and worship me” – that last temptation to power is not in the devil’s power to give, but nonetheless, the temptation is to go that way; “forget the cross and caring and helping others; come with me and I’ll set you up for life as the king of the world!” So when someone says to us “If you really are a Christian...” Jesus knows how it feels.

All of this is reassuring: weak and vulnerable people are noticed by Jesus and cared for. He achieved the work God gave Him to do: “*In faithfulness...*” (*Isaiah 42:3f*) He did it! He completed the work; He saved the world, not by being loud and proud, but by caring for people quietly and tenderly; going about His business with grace and faithfulness, going the way of weakness and vulnerability that was the cross. Quiet but effective! This is how Jesus is with us still; so that when we are bruised reed people, He notices; He takes time to care; He gently lifts up those who are weak. This is deeply reassuring for us.

There is also a challenge for us to be the same. There are all sorts of ways this challenges us about our Christian attitudes, and about church life. Let me throw some things out that are not the final answers but are things to take away and think about, questions raised in my mind by this passage. Do we notice bruised reed people? Who are the people in whom we take an interest? In people who are strong, vital, extrovert, people who are easily noticed? Or do we take an interest in people who are trying to hide in the corner, hurting and not wanting anyone to notice, weak and vulnerable people? Or do we forget about people when they are weak and vulnerable? Equally, some people say we should advertise ourselves more and tell all sorts of good stories about ourselves in, for example, the C&B News; we should make more of a fuss about who we are and what we’ve achieved. How do we do that without appearing to boast about our achievements? Do we really need to shout about ourselves from the rooftops? How do we make sure that we are faithful to God? Can we be quietly effective or by being loud and proud? Which is us? I don’t know all the answers to these questions and some are not simple “yes” or “no” answers, but this picture of the servant raises these questions in my mind about the kind of people we are and the way we go about our Christian mission in our community.

“Bruised reed people” – this is all of us at some time. Thank God for Jesus who comes to understand, to walk with us, then to restore and to heal people like us. Thank God for Jesus who brings grace! How do we treat bruised reed people? Do we notice them, get to understand them, care for them? Or do we write them off; they’ve had their day; they’re no use to us! “*He will...*” (*Isaiah 42:2f*)