

ISAIAH 49:1-7  
GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYONE

Who is Church for? Is Church for us and for people like us? There are some Churches that are run like family dynasties and you need to become part of the family almost, in order to be part of Church. From time to time, Churches look at themselves and to the future and say 'these are the kind of people we need.' So we have a target audience in mind, the kind of people you think you would like to have in the Church, the kind of people who would be good for the Church. We think of ways to target these people and attract them into Church. Some years later, the same discussion takes place: the target audience hasn't responded, but others have. God has been at work in other people, not the people the Church first thought it wanted or targeted.

The same question faced leaders of the Church a long time ago. They had their target audience in mind and the message was for this particular group of people, but it became clear that the target audience didn't want to know. What do we do next? Then someone must have asked the question "What does God want? What does the Bible say?" They came up with an answer that sent ripples around the world of its time: "*I have...*" (*Is 49:6*) The leaders of the Church, the apostles, Peter, Paul and the others, who had thought of their target audience as the Jews, came to see that in fact God was looking beyond that and so the Church and the gospel was to be for everyone, for all nations, to the ends of the earth. They then had to ask "what kind of Church must we become if the gospel is for everyone?"

We have been thinking about mission these last few weeks and we began by saying that "mission is something God does". God is engaged on a mission; He is doing something. God's mission is to bless the world with all kinds of good things, with the fruits of creation, with grace and peace, with forgiveness and love; from the very beginning it has been His mission to bless the whole world, all nations, so that people from all nations would know Him, love Him, and worship Him. That has always been the scope of God's mission, for everyone, for whole world. To carry that mission out, He chose a particular people, Israel, to be His servant, to be a light in the world so that other nations would be drawn to the light and would come to know God and be blessed.

Israel began to think differently. They began to think that God was only for them, that He was Israel's God and only Israel's God. He was their exclusive property and the blessing of God was only for them. They began to think that the nations, the non-Jews, the Gentiles, call them what you like, it is all the same! – that these people were even less than human, dogs to be excluded and kept out. So they built walls round the temple that said "Tresspassers will be executed" "Gentiles keep out!" They thought that God was only for them and people like them and that when the Messiah came He would reinforce that view and would restore Israel to first place in the order of nations.

Then God spoke to Isaiah. In 4 songs, God spoke about 'the Servant of the Lord' who would come to Israel and serve God; this would be the Messiah; the last of these songs is perhaps the most famous and tells us of the suffering servant. Today we read song number two in which the servant is sent, but things will not always go well; He will have to persevere in His God-given task. The overall theme of the second song is the scope of the reach of God's servant and especially these words: "*It is...*" (*Is 49:6*) The Servant's job is to save Israel, to be the salvation of and for Israel, but not just Israel. As if saving Israel is not a big enough job, the servant is sent to be the salvation for the whole world, the light for all nations beyond Israel, the

salvation to ends of the earth. The scope of the servant's task takes in the whole world, everyone; no-one is left out.

Jesus came to be this Messiah, to be the servant of the Lord. He came to Israel, was born in Bethlehem, that iconic place in Israel because of its connections with great King David; He grew up a Jew, went through all the growing-up rituals of being a Jewish boy, then a man. He began His ministry and preached in synagogues and all that kind of thing. He preached in the synagogue in Nazareth, in Luke chapter 4, and set out His manifesto for ministry: *"The Spirit..." (Lk 4:18f)* and everyone in the synagogue was amazed at this young man's preaching, but then He began to give examples of way in which God had blessed in the past and would bless again, of the people who on whom God's favour and blessing had rested and all the examples were of Gentiles, people beyond Israel; the Jews of Nazareth were not happy and threw Him out, and would have thrown Him off the cliff.

Who is the gospel for? A woman at a well in Samaria – there were three reasons why Jesus should not speak to her: she was a woman, she was foreign (from Samaria) and she had messed up her life with five divorces; people suffering with leprosy who were outsiders, outcasts socially; children – they didn't count for anything; tax collectors, men like Zaccheus – they were collaborators, thieves, greedy men. These were people whom Jesus helped. Then we read the wonderful little story in Matthew 15 of the Canaanite woman; I'd love to have seen Jesus' face as He speaks to this woman because there's more going on here than the words. *"Lord, Son..." (15:22)* Jesus says nothing, but His disciples are true to their upbringing: *"Send..."* Jesus says to her *"I was..." (v24)* This is a most uncharacteristic, unhelpful reply; not like Jesus at all; which is why I think there is more than just words going on here. She comes back: *"Lord, help..." (v25)* *"Is it..." (v26)* *"Yes, Lord..." (v27)* At the end of the story Jesus says: *"woman..." (v28)* Half-way through the story Jesus is conforming to all the old Jewish stereotypes that say 'grace is not for you'; by the end He is confirming His role as the Saviour for everyone, for all people from all nations. So either He is very rude, or there is a twinkle in His eye that says to the woman, 'these are the words you expect to hear from me, perhaps, but there is more; there is grace for you and here it is!'

Ever since then, the Church has had to wrestle with who the gospel is for. The conversation we spoke of earlier took place in a town called Antioch in Turkey and recorded in Acts 13, when Paul and Barnabas went there to preach; they preached in the synagogue and the people loved what they heard when Paul told them about Jesus and what He had done and *"I want you..." (Acts 13:38f)* Revival spread through the city in response to this preaching. Antioch was a Roman colony and so there were lots of non-Jews there and though the sermon was preached in the synagogue the whole city had got to hear and there was a revival crowd next Saturday wanting to hear more. The Jews were not happy. Who is the gospel for? Paul came to the conclusion that gospel is for everyone and so they should preach to everyone, anyone in the city who wanted to listen and so they did and the gospel spread and the people believed and were saved and the Jews rejected it! The Church then to face up to the question: "If the gospel is for everyone, what kind of Church must we be?" That was a huge question and if read Acts 15, you will see how it was resolved for their time and culture; it is not the answer so much that I want to applaud today, but the willingness to face up to the fact that the gospel is for everyone.

Good news is for everyone. That is God's mission in the world, to bless everyone, every nation, so that all people and nations know Him, love Him, and worship Him. So the good news of Jesus is for everyone; no-one is to be kept away! Last week, we

heard some stories from Andrew Anderson about the Church in other parts of the world and it is great to see that the Church is now to be found in almost every nation of the world; that is as it should be, as God intended it. The gospel is not just for the West, or the rich world, but for every nation and in fact is now stronger in many other nations than here. The gospel is for everyone in our society and culture too and perhaps we're not quite so good at that. We're comfortable with Church when we want to attract people like us, who are the same as us, who think like us and even subconsciously we aim at targeting people like us. In our communities there are lots of children, parents and families, some broken families, people whose lives are messy, who have had no contact with Church in past. The gospel is for them too. The question we need to ask is this: "if the gospel is for everyone, what kind of Church do we need to be?"

There are 4 things to think about in answer to that question, going deeper each time:

1. Tell people: we can no longer expect people to come to us to hear; we have to tell others and tell everyone and anyone who will listen. As Church we have a responsibility to tell our whole community: Juniper Green, Baberton Mains, Hailes and everyone in our community.
2. Welcome people: if you are part of the welcome team at the door, then greet everyone with a smile and warm welcome, whether it is a friend you see every week, or someone you don't know. The same is true of those you sit beside in the pew.
3. Accept people as they are: it is so easy, when we have been brought up in the Church, to think 'this is how we behave in Church' that when someone doesn't behave in that way, we criticise them and put up barriers and sometimes we make that all too obvious; watch what you say, watch what your body-language says; watch the attitudes that are too easily judgemental.
4. Be prepared to create a Church which is for everyone, even if that is not what you want. Let me give you an example: the reason why we began to project hymn words on the screens in the weeks before Christmas was that I could see some young mothers wrestling with their children, a hymn book, an order of service, and trying to sing; I thought 'it would be so much easier for them if words on screen, then they only had to wrestle with their child! It may not be what you want, but... That's only one example.

The gospel is for everyone. God has a mission to bless the whole world and all nations so that everyone might know Him, love Him, and worship Him. That is the mission God is doing! So the gospel is good news for everyone, across all nations, through every part of our society. So, how can we be Church which makes that happen for everyone in our community? How can we make sure that the good news reaches everyone? Not everyone will respond, but everyone needs to hear! How can we be Christians who are like Jesus? Do we think that Church is for us and people like us and only us and people like us, our exclusive property? Are we unhappy when there are people come who are different, from a different age group, family background, lifestyle, colour? Will we be a Church that is shaped by the mission of God? Will we be Christians whose attitudes are shaped by the mission of God? The scope of that mission is for everyone – how can we be a Church like that? How can we be Christians like that?