

Isaiah 49.1-7

Because of the LORD

Amington (St Editha)

Sunday 15 January 2017

Seeing Double

Seeing is believing, yes?

I'd like to show you some optical illusions. Hopefully you can all see the screen.

¶ The first is one of my favourites – how many of you think the middle shape is lighter on the left than it is on the right? ¶ How about now? ¶ Now? ¶ Now? In fact, the whole shape is one colour, but the gradient behind it makes it look like it isn't ¶.

¶ How about this one – are the horizontal lines straight or wonky? If I add a straight box ¶ – now can you see? ¶ As it moves down, you can see, ¶ all the lines are straight!

¶ How many legs does this elephant have?

Perhaps you've seen double illustrations – the very first one was ¶ this one – is it a rabbit, or a duck?

§ Here's another one – Eskimo, or Native American?

Of course, it's both. And actually, believe it or not, this is a good lesson to learn for reading read the Bible, particularly for reading prophecy. Passages can be referring to several different things or situations at once – even spread over many centuries.

If you don't like optical illusions but prefer vegetables, the Bible is like an onion because it has layers. And if you don't like vegetables but prefer donkeys, they have layers too.

So let's dive into Isaiah, and see if we can understand a bit more what he was trying to say.

The Chosen

Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
before I was born the LORD called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.

Isaiah 49.1 (NIV)

Here speaks God's Chosen, whoever or whatever he is, called and named from the womb. Notice that the chosen one speaks to **islands, distant nations** – that's us! So I hope you're listening.

§ What does The Chosen say?

Polished and Sharp

Look in v2: he says, **He** (that's God) **made my mouth like a sharpened sword... he made me into a polished arrow.** § Sharp swords and polished arrows gleam with reflected light, they are beautiful, deadly, powerful, dangerous. When I saw these words I remembered Revelation 19 – **coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations** (Rev. 19.15, NIV).

Hidden

Keep looking in v2: he says, **in the shadow of his hand he hid me... and concealed me in his quiver.** § God's Chosen is hidden away, guarded, protected, kept safe and secret until the time is right.

Made by God

If you are a bit of a grammar nerd like me, who is the subject, and who is the object in v2?

The subject – the one doing the calling and the making – is God.

The object – the one being called, the one being made § – is The Chosen, whoever or whatever he, she, it or they are.

§ Can anyone tell me who this gentleman is? His name is § José Mourinho. He is one of the top football managers in the world, currently at Manchester United. When he first came to England to manage Chelsea, he gave himself a nickname – can anyone tell me what it is? § ‘The Special One’. That’s right, he called *himself* ‘The Special One’. Now, he did win a *lot* of trophies at Chelsea, living up to his nickname... but still!

There’s none of that with God’s Chosen §:

He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand **he** hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and **he** concealed me in his quiver.

Isaiah 49.2 (NIV)

Servant

God is the subject – *he* does it, by *his* power. The Chosen is who he is **because of the LORD** (7). But The Chosen, whoever he is, is still pretty special, called and made by God. I expect he’s going to be a king then, a mighty lord, a warrior –

No. Look in v3: **He said to me, ‘You are my servant.’** And in v5: **He formed me in the womb to be his servant.** *Pause*

So: ¶ who is The Chosen, this servant?

I thought I'd take a little straw poll. ¶ I've put three possible answers up on the screen.

Answer 1: Isaiah. After all, in v1 the prophet says, **Listen to me... before I was born the LORD called me.**

Answer 2: the people of Israel. After all, in v3 God says, **'You are my servant, Israel'.**

Answer 3: Jesus. After all, in v5 The Chosen says, **[God] formed me in the womb to... bring [Israel] back to him.** And in Matthew 15.24 Jesus said he had come for the lost sheep of Israel.

So: what do you think? Hands up for 1... 2... 3...

Does anyone remember the optical illusions we saw at the start of my talk?

In a sense, Isaiah is The Chosen, because, like all the prophets, he was calling the people of Israel back to God. He was reminding them of God's faithfulness, his love for his people, and promising that soon God would restore them to their land.

Israel was called and chosen, from Abram's call in Genesis 12, to bless the nations, even the Gentiles (see v6).

But of course that purpose was only finally fulfilled in Jesus, **who embodies all that the nation of Israel was called to be.**¹ So the answer is hidden answer 4, **∫** ‘all the above (but mostly Jesus)’!

What images come to mind when you hear the word ‘servant’? Perhaps something from *Downton Abbey*: someone who waits on tables, dresses in drab clothes, eats scraps of food, sleeps in a house that is not theirs – someone whose life is to put others first.

Would you put God in that category? If you’re really, truly honest, do you think of God as a humble servant, or a mighty and strong warrior who fights for you? Of course, he is both – but in Jesus he shows us which is more important.

Jesus said, **‘the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’** (Mark 10.45). Friends, service is in God’s nature: self-giving, love for others – the eternal dance of the Trinity is marked by the giving and sharing of love. Service is in God’s nature – which is why Jesus came as a servant. God didn’t change who he was suddenly in Jesus, in the New Testament. This is who God always has been and always will be: faithful, holy, just, true – and full of self-giving love.

¹ Webb, *Isaiah (BST)*, 194.

The Purpose

We've already touched on what the servant is called to do by God, the servant's purpose: to bring God's people back (v5). They had lost their way, in Isaiah's day, and in Jesus' day: captive to a foreign nation, having lost their focus on God.

But remember v1: the servant speaks to **distant nations**. And in v6, God spells out that his servant's mission is bigger than the people of Israel:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'

Isaiah 49.6 (NIV)

This is one of the most important passages in the whole Bible – and we will come back to it later. You may recognise it, because the second half was quoted by Simeon when he held the baby Jesus in his arms in the Temple.

It's so important, because it tells us that God is for *everyone*. God's salvation is bigger than one people, bigger than one nation – bigger than the Church of England, actually. The good news of God is that you are not alone in the mess of your life – the good news of God is that, whoever you are and whatever you have done, if you turn back to God he will forgive you and give you a fresh start – he will shine his light in the darkness we all face. *Pause*

Third, the forgiveness, the life God gives freely to all who turn back to him, it was won at great cost. **§** Look in v4 with me:

But I said, 'I have laboured in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
Yet what is due to me is in the LORD's hand,
and my reward is with my God.'

Isaiah 49.4 (NIV)

Here Isaiah was prophesying Jesus dying on the cross: the ultimate futility and waste of human life. If that had been in the end, God's servant Jesus would indeed **have laboured in vain**, and **spent [his] strength for nothing at all**.

But it was not the end. As Isaiah prophesied, even in futility, Jesus trusted in his Father's faithfulness, and he was not let down.

Finally, the servant's purpose is **¶** to honoured. Look in v7 with me: **'Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down'**. One day, the one who was **despised and abhorred**, as Jesus was by his own people, and still is today by many – one day all people will realise who he is, and give him the honour he deserves.

The Holy One

And all this – how does it happen? Who makes it happen? **¶**

'Because of the LORD,
who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel,
who has chosen you.'

Isaiah 49.7 (NIV)

God, **the LORD, the Holy One of Israel**, chose his servant from the beginning, and is faithful to his servant to the end. If you remember nothing from my talk this morning, remember this verse. If that is too many words, remember this: **¶ because of the LORD, who is faithful**. And if *that* is too many words, remember this: **¶ because of the LORD**.

Because of the LORD: he is the first, the last, the greatest.

Earlier on I tried cruelly to trick you with this slide §. Who is The Chosen? Hidden answer 4: § all the above (but mostly Jesus).

But there is *also* a hidden answer 5: § YOU.

In Acts 13.47, after Paul and Barnabas are rejected by the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, they say this:

‘For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” ’

Acts 13.47 (NIV)

That’s right – they quote Isaiah 49.6, not talking about Isaiah, not talking about the people of Israel, not talking about Jesus, but *themselves*, and by extension, the Church. So all that’s true of the servant, is true of everyone who is adopted into God’s family – the Church (which is not a building, it’s God’s people everywhere).

Everyone in God’s family is § chosen.

And so we are § equipped, like a sharp sword or a polished arrow. We all have our part to play.

We are § kept safe – which means, even though we may stumble or be harmed, God will never let us fall.

We are **J** made by God, and loved by him, to be like Jesus: God's servant, called to take the light of God's salvation into all the world.

Everyone in God's family is all those things – but not because we are special and deserve it or have earned it – because... well, why? Anyone remember the phrase I said to remember from today?

Because of the LORD. You are chosen, equipped, kept safe, made to serve God like Jesus, **J because of the LORD.** **He** is the reason. **He** is the purpose. **He** is the one who is always with us.

That is your homework this week: remind yourself every day **J**:

Because of the LORD...

... I am loved

... I am chosen

... I am forgiven

... I am equipped

... I am kept safe

... I am made to serve

If you want that – if you want this life of a loved and chosen child of God, it starts with saying sorry to God every day, and receiving his forgiveness, a fresh start, every day – not because you deserve it, but because of what Jesus has done: **because of the LORD.**