

“SERVANT SONGS” – Isaiah 42:1-7

The four “Servant Songs” of Deutero-Isaiah interrupt the flow of the verses surrounding them, apparently because they were later inserts into the text. The first song falls in the midst of a trial scene in which the Babylonian idols and their worshippers are ridiculed for their emptiness. The verses about the Servant place him in contrast to the military actions of the Persian leader Cyrus, who conquered Babylon by the sword.

The first four verses speak about the servant:

- ¹ Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased,
Upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations,*
- ² Not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street.*
- ³ A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,*
- ⁴ Until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will wait for his teaching.*

The servant is described as chosen by God, pleasing to Him, and the recipient of God’s spirit. In being chosen, he is like Moses, or David, or the people of Israel. Endowment with God’s spirit was promised to the messianic king (Is 11:1) and was later extended to the entire messianic community (Joel 3). Unlike Cyrus, the servant is to bring forth justice, not conquest. In the Old Testament, to enact justice was to ratify and carry out the divine will – a power reserved to kings, priests and magistrates. The servant’s mission of justice extends beyond Israel to include other nations also, a new concept.

The servant accomplishes his mission quietly, with strength, not by calling attention to himself, or stirring up a crowd. His gentleness and mercy are indicated by his care for the bruised reed and the smoldering wick. Even the “coastlands” – apostate Israelites throughout the Babylonian Empire – are called to conversion, to find life in his teaching.

Verses 5-7 focus on the powerful actions of the Lord God:

- ⁵ Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spreads out the earth with its crops,
Who gives breath to its people and spirit to those who walk on it:*
- ⁶ I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice,
I have grasped you by the hand;
I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations,*
- ⁷ To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement,
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.*

The Lord, the creator, is the redeemer empowering his servant. People must acknowledge their blindness and imprisonment so that they can be cured and freed.