

“SERVANT SONGS” – Isaiah 49:1-7

Chapter 49 of Isaiah begins a notable change from the preceding chapters. Having repeatedly praised Cyrus of Persia for his conquest of Babylon, expounded on the emptiness of the Babylonian idols, and proclaimed the power of the Lord God over all of history, the prophet shifts to comforting those who have returned to the land of Zion. The previous section may have been written after Cyrus decreed that the Israelites could return to Jerusalem, but before they actually did so. Back from exile, they found the challenges of rebuilding the city and the temple to be much greater than expected.

With few Israelites outside Jerusalem accepting his vision, and those controlling the return isolating him, Deutero-Isaiah experiences a new commissioning from the Lord. His second “Servant Song” reflects his calling, his discouragement, and the expansion of his apostolate. The synopsis is reminiscent of Jeremiah: called from birth, at times discouraged, with a mission to outsiders.

The opening verses proclaim that God acts through his chosen ones, starting before they are even born, making them effective in speaking the Lord’s prophetic word:

- ¹ *Hear me, coastlands, listen, distant peoples.
Before birth the LORD called me, from my mother’s womb he gave me my name.*
² *He made my mouth like a sharp-edged sword, concealed me, shielded by his hand.
He made me a sharpened arrow, in his quiver he hid me.*

The servant is not only the prophet himself, but all faithful Israelites:

- ³ *He said to me, You are my servant, in you, Israel, I show my glory.*

Dejected over what seems to have been a fruitless ministry, the servant realizes that he must let himself be judged by the Lord, not by human standards, for it was the Lord who sent him on a mission to Israel’s sinners:

- ⁴ *Though I thought I had toiled in vain, for nothing and for naught spent my strength,
Yet my right is with the LORD, my recompense is with my God.*
⁵ *For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb,
That Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him;
I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength!*

The Lord gives a new dimension to the servant’s mission, extending the message of salvation beyond Israel to the whole world, not for Israel’s glory, but for the Lord’s:

- ⁶ *It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob,
and restore the survivors of Israel;
I will make you a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*
⁷ *Thus says the LORD, the redeemer, the Holy One of Israel,
To the one despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers:
When kings see you, they shall stand up, and princes shall bow down
Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you.*