

ISAIAH 42:1-9
GOD DOING A NEW THING!

It's a great question. It's up there with questions like: "what would you do if you won lottery?" Or "what will we get dad for Christmas?" Or "Is there one place in the world that you would love to visit?" We asked that last question round the lunch table one day; by end of the discussion we'd come to the conclusion that we needed a round-the-world ticket because there are so many places in the world that we want to visit! We don't ask big questions very often; the lottery question I never ask because I never buy a ticket! But there are times – sometimes these are simply a bit of fun – "what would you do if..." and we dream a lot about the answers and laugh about the answers at times. Sometimes these questions simply annoy us because there is no answer or the answer is such a problem!

There is another question that is a great question, up there with all these others, except it was a real question, a life-changing question. The answer to this question would change someone's life totally and for ever. It was asked one day by the roadside in Israel, on the road leaving Jericho to rise up to Jerusalem. At the side of the road, there was a man begging; not an uncommon sight then; he was asking anyone who passed by to put some money in his paper cup, or his hat lying on the roadside. Most people just passed him by without a second glance; they'd seen him there before, he was a regular sight at that point on the road and regular travellers just walked past, occasionally someone giving him some money. He was there because he was blind; because he was blind he couldn't work; because he couldn't work he had no money to buy food to eat; he was poor and so he depended on what he was given on the side of the road out of Jericho.

Today, he hears a greater than usual commotion; there is the sound of a crowd coming towards him. There are lots of feet walking along the dusty road; he can hear them. People are talking animatedly. He asks someone what's going on; "why the crowd?" An anonymous figure in the crowd tells him that Jesus of Nazareth is coming and the crowd is following Him; perhaps they are talking together about what just happened in the town to the chief tax-collector, he's just been converted, he's a changed man, he's giving money back! Bart has heard about this Jesus of Nazareth and that He can heal people; other blind people have been given their sight. So he shouts to Jesus "*Jesus,...*" (*Mk 10:47*) Typical crowd - they tell him to "Shhh! we can't hear the teacher if you shout out like that! Be quiet!" But Bart won't be quiet: "*Son of...*" (*10:48*) Jesus stops and someone in crowd tells Bart: "*Cheer up!...*" (*10:49*)

Then comes the question: "*What do...*" (*10:51*) Wow! Jesus is asking him what he wants; he has a free choice! But for Bart there is no other choice: "*Rabbi, I...*" (*10:51*) We don't know whether this man had ever been able to see, or whether he was born blind, but that is all he wants; to be able to see. Being able to see is the key to his whole life; if he can see, he can work; if he can work, he can earn money to buy food; if he can support himself, he will no longer be poor and depend on the goodness of others to a beggar. Being able to see will transform his life totally, completely; he will be a new man and all because he can see. Jesus said "*Go...*" (*10:52*) Jesus gave him what he needed; answered his prayers in the most dramatic fashion; he is a new man transformed by grace and power of Jesus.

800 years before, the prophet Isaiah had been given a picture of someone who would come to the world, God's answer to the plight of the world. He would not be a great King in this picture, nor a mighty warrior, nor a great celebrity, but a servant. Chapter 42 is the first of four passages in Isaiah called "the servant songs" in which God shows the prophet that One will come to the world who will be the Servant of the

Lord and who will change the world forever when He comes. None of these songs is predictable; there is a surprise in all of them and indeed the last one shows that the servant will suffer and die in order to complete God's rescue plan for the world. Chapter 42 is the first of these four servant songs; here the servant steps onto the stage to do the work for which God has sent him and his great quality here is his willingness to be faithful to his God-given calling. These are pictures that we see completed and fulfilled in Jesus; Jesus came to be the Servant of the Lord. The season of Advent is all about His coming.

The overwhelming impression of the servant in Isaiah 42 is his compassion for and gentleness towards other people. "*A bruised...*" (v3) Here are two pictures that say the same thing: the plant that is bashed, but not completely broken – what to do with it? Should we cut it down completely because it is bashed? The servant will bind it up; it is bashed but not broken, so there is chance to mend it and heal it and get it back to being strong again. The candle or the lamp is smouldering, not yet gone out completely though not far from it – what to do with it? Do we snuff it out and extinguish the light totally, once and for all; or can we fan it back to flame again and give it the chance to come back to life? There are people who are bashed and bruised; people in whom life is smouldering, but not yet extinguished – the servant will treat them with compassion and gentleness and will heal and revive and breathe new life and mend! That is his God-given mission in the world.

Then this is put into words: "*I will...*" (v6bf) God commits Himself to our world to change things for us; the servant has a world-wide job to reveal to the world what God is like, "*I am the Light of world*" said Jesus, One who has come to help the world see what God is like and what God can do for the world. This is all about transformation: "*to open...*" (v7) Go back to Bart, sitting by the road outside Jericho and asking Jesus to help him see! That man's life is transformed by being given his sight; he can see the world in new way, sees himself, his family perhaps, he sees Jesus and because he sees, his life is transformed! The Servant came to transform the world and these three groups are simply examples: the blind given their sight, captives freed from prison, those in dungeons who sit in darkness will be released; people who are in need are helped, rescued, given new life by the servant.

There is more than one kind of blindness, more than one kind of prison, more than one kind of darkness. We've already seen an example of Jesus healing a man physically blind, but Jesus crossed swords with other people whose eyes were closed to the truth, blind to the reality that was standing in front of them. They saw Jesus but weren't willing to consider the truth behind claims He made. They refused to accept Him as the servant of the Lord; they refused to see Him as the God-given Messiah for the world; instead they branded Him as a trouble-maker and plotted to kill Him instead. Yet others that He met recognised Him for who He was, believed, trusted and found in Jesus their peace, hope, freedom, life. People are set free from all kinds of prisons and all kinds of darkness to find their lives transformed by the new thing that God was doing in the world through His servant Jesus.

Jesus opens our eyes – I believe that the power of Jesus is still able to heal people who are blind; this comes more usually through medical science and sometimes in other ways and there are stories on television of people being given sight even in the last two weeks. But there are other ways in which He opens our eyes: He shows us what God is like, you want to understand God, look at Jesus! He shows us something incomprehensible, how to have an understanding of the eternal God – look at Jesus. He also shows us ourselves and that can be a bit more uncomfortable, because He shows up our faults and mistakes and calls us to repent, but He also shows us how special we are in eyes of God, that we are a people beloved by God, accepted,

blessed by the gifts that God has given to us. When our eyes are opened like this our world can be completely transformed, understanding things we never understood before; creating faith in our hearts when there was no faith before.

Jesus sets us free – this last week has been Prisoners' week and we have been thinking about prison and what that means and the problems and issues people face; we have prayed for prisoners and their families and those who guard them etc. But there is more than one kind of prison. There are millions of people across the world who captive to poverty, in chains that they cannot break for themselves; or people in chains of addictions to drugs, alcohol, and other things; people in prison at home because they can't get out on their own and it is worse in winter; people in prison to their fears and anxieties in life. There is no easy answer to these things, but I believe that Jesus can set us free from these chains, that He sets us free from our fears, that He helps us break addictions; how many people across the world who are poor can still declare their faith in the God who loves and provides for them – they are free indeed!

Jesus breaks the darkness – Darkness is symbolic of so many things: of fear and despair, of oppression, of the bad things that happen to us, of evil in the world. Sometimes the places where we sit in life seem to be surrounded by darkness. On the surface, life seems fine and good and we present that good and pleasant face to the world, but inside our hearts are like stone; inside there is no joy, no peace, no hope, only fear, anxiety, despair, hurt. There are people who feel bruised and bashed by life, people who feel like the candle that is smouldering and about to go out. I can't snap my fingers and make that change in an instant, but I can show you what Jesus is like and can say that He promises to break that darkness, that He is able to set us free and that is what He came to do.

Bart, sitting by the side of the road, was asked the big question by Jesus: "*What do you want me to do for you?*" How would you answer that question today? What would you want Jesus to do for you? To help you understand the world? To help you understand yourself? To set you free from something that holds you? To break into the darkness of your soul and take away your fears and anxieties? Jesus came to serve the world, to be God's answer to the plight of the world; He came to reveal things that were hidden before; He came to meet the needs of people bruised and bashed by the world and by life; He came to meet the needs of weak and vulnerable people, who may look 'sorted' on the outside but who inside are lost and bewildered. He came to open our eyes; He came to break our chains; He came to break our darkness. Jesus said to Bart: "*Go, your...*" (10:52) Consider this big question today: "What do you want Jesus to do for you?" Answer it and believe!