

“Called” Isaiah 49:1-7, John 1:29-42, 1 Corinthians 1:1-7

If someone asks you to describe who you are, what do you say? Off the top of your head, you might say, “I am a man, I’m a pensioner, I’m elderly, I like to stay up late and sleep in of a morning”. Or you might say, “I’m Indian, the mother of 4 children, who is updating my nursing qualifications”. What comes immediately to mind is different for all of us. What you say gives people some idea of who you think you are. It gives them some idea of your identity.

Today we are going to look at an aspect of the Christian identity. We are going to look at the idea that we, as Christians, are people who “are called”. We will look at some scripture passages and see how the word “Called” is used.

Firstly, listen to Isaiah 49:1-7 on P 520 of the church Bibles.

God calls his Servant

Isaiah 49:1-7 is the second of what is known as the four Servant Songs. When I first read through the passage it was confusing as to just who the servant was. v3, *You are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my splendour*, gives the impression that the servant was the nation, Israel. But when we look at v5 we see that part of the servant’s purpose was to bring Jacob back to God and to gather Israel to God. So, the Israel referred to in v3 can’t be the nation, because the servant was to gather Israel back to God. It seems best to interpret the Israel of v3 as someone who was a citizen of Israel or perhaps, someone who fulfilled the purpose that God intended for the nation of Israel. With that in mind let’s quickly look at the whole passage.

In v1 we read, *Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations; Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name*. The servant addresses the countries of the world and proclaims that God called him before his physical birth. The servant has a strong sense that he was called and named long before he was born. This is a profound affirmation that his life was not an accident but part of God’s intention. He builds on this idea of being predestined when he tells us in v5 that he was formed in his mother’s womb to be God’s servant.

The servant has a two-fold purpose, to display God’s splendour, (v3) and to bring the people of Israel (Jacob) back to God (v5). (Remember the word Jacob can also be used for referring to Israel.)

In v2 of the passage we learn of the formation of his character: his equipping by God with powerful speech and in v3 we learn of his designation as God’s Servant, through whom God will display His splendour (glory). In v4 we learn that throughout his servanthood he experienced disappointment that made him feel his efforts were in vain. But he found contentment in the knowledge that his reward was to be found in the Lord. Interestingly the Lord expresses no regret or condemnation of the fact that servant considered his efforts were

in vain. In fact the servant finds honour in the Lord's eyes. So much honour that the Lord broadens the mission of his servant. In v 6 we read, *It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel that I have kept. I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.* And in v7 we learn of the servant's ultimate reward, *Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see you and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy one of Israel who has chosen you.*

Many people have laboured for the Lord and have seen minimal results. They have received scant encouragement in their service. In God's work it seems that who we are matters more than what we achieve. Activity has its proper and important place, but more admirable is faithfulness in glorifying God. The servant is rewarded for his faithfulness, not his success.

Exactly who the servant is, is not made clear. At the time of writing the people of Judah were in Exile in Babylon. The Babylonian empire was close to falling and Cyrus the Great, from Persia was on the ascent. Cyrus would eventually allow the return of the people of Judah and Israel to their homeland. Some have identified the Servant with Cyrus.

The servant has many of the characteristics of a Messianic figure. The servant's purpose is to return Israel to God and to bring salvation to the wider world. Very much what the Jewish Messiah was expected to do. But since the coming of Christ, it is generally agreed that Jesus fulfils the description of the servant best of all.

We will now listen to John 1:29-34 from Page 750 of the Church bibles.

Jesus as the Chosen Servant

The identity of Jesus was revealed to John the Baptist when he saw the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus. John the Baptist referred to Jesus twice as the "Lamb of God" in v 29 and in v36.

He also testified in v34 that this is the "Son of God." Due to variations in early Greek manuscripts, v34 can be translated as both "Son of God" or "Chosen One of God". Son of God is the more common reading and emphasizes his divine nature. The Chosen One of God highlights Jesus as the anointed servant chosen to bring salvation. The word "chosen" is not dissimilar to the way the word "called" was used in Isaiah 49.

The first of the Servant Songs is found in Isaiah 42 and at the very start of that passage, in v1, we have the words, *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.* The servant is referred to as "my chosen one."

Jesus was "chosen" by God to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. Jesus' life had purpose. Jesus was God's servant.

It is worthwhile remembering that because Jesus' life was fulfilling God's purpose it was a life that brought opposition and loneliness. He was in conflict with and opposed by the religious authorities, the loyalty of the crowd was fickle, the disciples were slow to grasp the true nature of his kingdom and were fearful of the consequences of being his followers. Finally, in fulfilling God's purpose for his life the Romans crucified him. The hardship of his life is foretold in Isaiah 49:7 when God's servant is referred to as "despised and abhorred by the nation."

We will now listen to John 1:35-42, again on Page 750 of the church bibles.

Jesus Calls the Disciples

When two of John the Baptist's disciples started to follow Jesus, they asked, "*Rabbi,*" (*which means Teacher*), "*where are you staying?*" He invited them to come see. By inviting them to "come" he was calling them but in a different sense to the "call" that the Servant and Jesus, as the chosen one, had received. There is a sense that the two disciples had a choice as to whether they took up the invitation and if it would develop into something more.

When Jesus asked the two would-be disciples "what do you want," they responded by asking him "where he was staying." The disciples spent quality time with Jesus not just that day but for his whole ministry, listening to him teach, questioning and being questioned, seeing signs and discussing their significance and observing his interactions with all types of people. Jesus call to come was never a command but an invitation to be with him and to deepen their relationship with him. As it turned out the call to come to see where Jesus was staying became a call to live as disciples of him.

When Peter is brought to Jesus, Jesus looked at him and said, "*You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas*" (*which, when translated, is Peter*).

In this case the word "called" is synonymous with the word "named" but the new name carried with it overtones of a future purpose for Simon's life, as Cephas means "rock." Simon's renaming signifies not just a change of identity but it also foreshadows Peter's future role as a founding leader in the early church. The act of naming a person in Scripture often brings with it new authority and purpose. By calling him a rock, Jesus indicates His understanding of Peter's potential. It illustrates how Jesus sees beyond Peter's impulsive nature to what he can become through God's grace.

I don't think it is reading too much into the verse to say that God sees beyond our present flawed nature to what we can become when, through his grace, he calls us. There is a message here of hope for development and growth in faith for all of us.

Called to be holy

Paul begins this letter to the church in Corinth by stating from that he is *called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*. In the New Testament, the word "apostle" most often refers to the specific role filled by the 11 disciples of Jesus and Paul. They were all sent by Jesus to carry the message of Christ's good news to the world. Paul did not choose this role for himself. He tells us in v1 he was "called" by the will of God.

Of all the churches mentioned in the New Testament it would be hard to find one as troubled as the church at Corinth. It was fractured by factions and divisions. It suffered from elitism. Members took each other to court. The rich look down on the poor and ignored their needs. People were indulging in sexual immorality. There were those getting drunk at church meals. There were those who were bickering over spiritual gifts in the church. During meetings prophets would leap up with a word from the Lord, while others would leap up to speak in tongues much to the irritation of those who weren't into those sorts of things. In addition, even though Paul was the founder of their church, the Corinthians didn't seem to think much of him and his foolish message.

Yet despite their flaws and difficulties Paul when he writes to them, addresses them as a group of people who are *sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*. (1 Corinthians 1:2)

When Paul calls the Corinthians sanctified in Christ he is referring to how they stand in relation to God. At some time they came to believe that Jesus was the "Lamb of God." They trusted that through the death of Jesus their sins were forgiven, they were cleansed from sin through their union with Jesus, and they were reconciled with God. Consequently, Paul declared they were sanctified. Just as the temple utensils were consecrated and set aside for special purpose, they too, in being sanctified, were set apart from the world for God's special holy purposes. Sanctification was not achieved by the Corinthians good behaviour but was received through their union with Christ Jesus and through his work.

Although the Corinthian church behaviour reflected poorly on what it meant to be a Christian, Paul didn't dispute the fact that they were sanctified, and because they were sanctified their identity was changed. They behaved in a worldly manner, but they were saints by calling and are expected to behave accordingly. They were called to holy living.

Essentially Paul tells them they are holy because they belong to Christ, a status that requires them to live according to that calling.

In v4,5 of this passage we read Paul always gives thanks to God *because of his grace given to you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way- in all your speaking and*

in all your knowledge- because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. We normally think of grace as God's undeserved favour shown to mankind. In as much as while we were sinners Christ died for us so that we would not bear the punishment for our sins and so that we would be reconciled with God

But in verse 4 the word grace does not just tell us about the nature of God, it indicates the influence or power of God that worked in the church at Corinth. God's grace was the reason why they had increased in knowledge and they had the capacity to speak in an edifying way. In v7 Paul goes on to acknowledge that they are a church that lacked no spiritual gifts and that Christ would keep them strong until the end.

The Corinthian church seems to be an extraordinary church in as much as they did not lack any spiritual gifts, yet were a church with multiple failings.

But when Paul reminds the church in Corinth that they are sanctified and called to be holy he doesn't see them as being unique. We see from v2 that Paul sees this is to be true of all who call on the name of the Lord.

Some of us may have only recently heard the call to come to Jesus, like Andrew and the other disciple. Delighted by what we are discovering and learning about the one chosen by God to be our Saviour we may be wondering if God has prepared a special role for us.

Some of us may have heard the call a long time ago and have long been part of a community of believers. We may rarely think in terms of ourselves as being "called." It could be a long time since we seriously considered that we were called for any particular purpose. The demands of everyday living have pushed reflections on the purpose of life to the background.

It is important to remember that although we may not hold much status in worldly terms, we are God's people. When we think of who we are, remember this:

i) We are sanctified by the blood of Jesus

ii) We are called by God to holy living. In historical terms we may not play a role as significant as Cyrus or Peter or Paul. We may not feel we have a special gift of the Spirit. But foremost, most importantly we are called to live lives that don't reflect the world's values but the values of God's kingdom as taught in his Word. We are called to be holy.

iii) As the people of God, then like the servant of the Old Testament we are meant to display God's splendour (glory). By living a holy life we bring glory to God.

iv) The servant of Isaiah 49 was called to be a light to the Gentiles. Jesus, as God's servant, brought salvation and hope for the people of Israel and for the Gentiles. As followers of the Servant we are meant to bring light into the world. By living according to our calling we bring the light of Christ to the world around us.