

## **The Servant Songs of Isaiah**

The early church often understood the life and death of Jesus through the lens of the servant songs found in what is called Second Isaiah (that is, chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah). The references for the four songs are Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12. (It would be a good Lenten practice to read these four servant songs as you make ready for Easter).

The emphasis in the first song falls on the call of the servant to 'bring justice to the nations'. The people of Israel are in exile in Babylon. The second song is a call to restore Israel and for the servant to be 'a light to the nations, that you may be my salvation to the end of the earth'. This song marks a transition and a new hope. Until now the prophecy has been on Jacob/Israel still in Babylon; now it turns to Jerusalem / Zion, a city that virtually none of the exiles have ever seen.

The song begins with an address to the 'islands' – the Gentiles who live in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem. They will be affected by this homecoming. The servant is called from the womb for this task – the initiative lies with God. It is through the human voice that prophetic word of God will be proclaimed. The servant has been labouring in vain for some time: the fruit of his labours (42:1-9) are not yet apparent.

The people have been humiliated; they have been effectively enslaved to a foreign power. They are vulnerable; they have failed. They are living in exile, no longer in control of their own surroundings. It has been a form of migration, though it has been imposed on their forebears; now the prophetic word invites to be a 'remigrant' – a people who migrate back to their homeland.

They are not the same people they once were, though. The experience of living in exile has taught them new things and it will mark their ongoing history and future story. The purpose of this second servant song is to announce the release from exile and the return home and see that as a work of God.

