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**THE SERVANT
OF GOD**

by G.R.Beasley-Murray

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that goes out to the peoples of the earth; that is the text, Isaiah 42. 4, the climax of the first Song of the Servant of the Lord: 'He will not fail nor be discouraged till he has established true religion in the earth, and the shores and islands wait for his teaching'. Even this is prophecy, but for us in the new age it has become present reality, inspiration and challenge.

My task is to raise some questions about this crucial utterance of the greatest Old Testament prophet. Who is it who will not fail or break in resolution till he has established the faith in the earth? What is involved in his doing it? and how will he achieve it?

1. The identity of the Servant

The prophet describes this evangelist of the earth as 'my servant'. But of course, the speaker is God. The Servant therefore is known as the Servant of the Lord. We find another song about him in Isaiah 49. The most famous song of the Servant is embodied in Isaiah 53, the chapter that tells of the man of sorrows who bears the sin of many. The Servant is the saviour of the world.

But more: the second song contains the declaration, 'He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified"' (Is. 49. 3). It is now recognized that this statement gives the basic clue about the Servant: he is the Servant-People of God, created and called to serve God and man. The Servant-People have a representative. He is the Servant *par excellence*, in whom the vocation of saving service is brought to perfection. But this Servant-Christ and the Servant-People are inseparable.

In the New Testament this thought reaches profound dimensions. 'The Son of man came not to be served', said Jesus, 'but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'. His supreme service was to lay down his life, the one for the

many. And the many know the power of his redemption when they become united with him in faith. This is the meaning of their baptism. His death was their death, and his resurrection the beginning of life from the dead for them. United with him they become his body in the world. Consequently they rejoice in salvation and become the instrument of salvation. They go out with him to proclaim to the many who don't know how great a deliverance he has wrought.

The implications of this for the church are immense. The church exists for salvation. I gather that there has been an argument among those interested in missions as to whether we ought to say, 'the church *has* a mission', or, 'the church *is* mission'. In the one case it is urged that the church has an importance of its own to God plus the task of witness to the world, in the other that mission is the essential being of the church. But surely this is an unreal opposition. Can you separate the person and the work of Christ? Well, you can, but you shouldn't! Theologians who have done so have confused the issues and us as well. For Christ is understood only in the light of what he does. Christ is saviour; that is, he saves. Christ is Lord; that is, he rules. Christ is the word of God; that is, he is the means of God's speech and action. Similarly with the church. It is the body of Christ. That means it is one with him and it is his means of action. Because it is one with Christ it is *saved*, for he is saviour of the body. Because it is one with Christ it *saves*, for he is saviour of the world. You cannot be linked with Christ without getting involved in his work. Personally applied it means that if you are Christ's and in his church, your real significance is that Christ has saved you and Christ saves through you. Any other characteristic of your life, that you are man or woman, married or single, young or old, rich or poor is subordinate to this overriding one: you are joined to Christ in his work of salvation.

How to give expression to this insight in the life and action of the church is perhaps our most urgent problem today. It

is the outstanding problem of the ministry, more important by far than episcopacy and ordination and the like. In this connection Lesslie Newbigin pointed out that most of the forms of our churchmanship were laid down in a time when Christianity was a contracting and not an expanding religion, when the church was hemmed in by Islam and had lost contact with the cultures of the east. Hence the ministry is classically considered in terms of the care of the flock and the sanctification of the members rather than witness and service to the world.

We have to think therefore of the whole church being organized for witness to the whole world. You may know that there is a renewed interest in our denomination in the idea of including in baptism the laying on of hands. Not the least merit of this practice is the possible revival of the primitive view of laying on of hands as the ordination of the laity: whoever is baptized to Christ is ordained to the service of Christ. Bishop Azariah had his own way of expressing this: when people in his diocese were confirmed he made them place their hands on their head and say, 'Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel'.

The method and organization are secondary. Where Christ's people have that sort of vision they will find means of putting it into effect. They will tread the places of need, they will be a mouth for Christ, and their hands will be stretched out to grasp the hand of the lost. The Servant-Saviour and the Servant-People will be one in fact as well as in faith.

2. The task of the Servant

What does this text prescribe as the task of the Servant, and where does he perform it?

His work is 'to plant true religion on the earth'. This includes *all* the earth, Israel and the nations.

In the second song of the Servant his task is described in a significant manner: 'And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and that Israel might be gathered to him. . . It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Is. 49. 5f.). The Servant is to bring Israel back to God and bring the world to God. In modern terms, he is to organize home and foreign missions!

Here distinctions have to be made. For in the Old Testament Israel the people of God is ideally coterminous with Israel the nation. It is a revived Israel that takes the good news to the nations. So far as the church is concerned we distinguish a threefold task:

i. *The people of God has to be revived for mission.* The first task of the Servant was to call the Servant-People to be the Servant of God. Similarly the first requirement of the church today, before we start evangelizing anybody outside, is to address this message to ourselves.

No one has urged this more strikingly than the foremost missionary strategist of the church, Hendrik Kraemer. In a work devoted to the problem of communicating the gospel to the world, Kraemer had this to say:

The problem of communication is not to be solved by evangelistic activity or by building a theology of evangelism. Both are very necessary. If one prefers, I am prepared to say that they are a matter of life and death. They should happen, in season and out of season. They will, however, remain adventurous, fascinating exploits, which will certainly yield results, even in the world of today, but nothing more, if the church itself with all its empirical triviality and dignity does not radically change, inflamed by the desire to conform itself to its true nature and so become transformed.

It is a humbling thought that the first necessity laid on us, before all considerations of how we are to accomplish our

mission in the world, is that we should be the church and not a mere imitation of the reality in Christ.

ii. *The people of God should view their home territory as their immediate area of mission.* And observe the word is mission—outgoing witness to Christ, the church being the home base for the proclamation of the gospel. By every means at its disposal, the church must make the gospel known to the people among whom it is set.

Let me recall the words of our second text: ‘The Lord formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and that Israel might be gathered to him’. The servant was created to bring his nation back to God. So also the church of Christ was set in Britain to bring Britain to God. God forgive us for the dismal way in which we are carrying out the purpose of our creation! Yet no church in our land ought more readily to lead the way to a revival of true evangelism than the Baptist denomination; for evangelism is our life’s blood and our theology of baptism is an expression of it. Amidst the uncertainty of the churches today, let the gospel be heard among the Baptists, clear and powerful, pointing to the Lord who can deliver every man, woman and child of our nation.

iii. *The people of God have to extend their mission to the whole world of nations.* There is no question of antagonism or rivalries here, as though concern for the lost at home excluded concern for those abroad. Our text gives the strongest possible expression to the necessity for both aspects of the mission to be prosecuted. Listen: ‘And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him . . . It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth’.

It's too slight a task for the Servant to win his own nation; he must win the world! Translated into terms of our obligation, that means it is too slight a task for the Baptists and other churches in Britain to win Britain for Christ; we and they must reach out to Africa, Asia, the Americas, and all the continents and islands! Isn't this crazy language? No, it's not! It's the language of almighty God, to whom it would be an impossible limitation of his purpose to concern himself only with Britain's salvation. For him nothing less than every continent and island will do as the scope of the saving mission.

South-east of Jordan there is a strange and fascinating city known as Petra. It is set within an enclave of towering rocks and it looks very much like a bit of scenery for a Walt Disney film. Its buildings were literally carved out of the rock, which is soft and multi-coloured, like the many-hued cliffs of the Isle of Wight. The approach to it is through a long narrow gorge, and therefore the place was virtually impregnable. The Nabataeans of ancient times settled here. They made an easy living by attacking caravans from their rocky hide-out. Eventually they adopted the easier method of taxing the caravans as they passed by, leaving them unmolested as long as they paid up. There was no reason why this shouldn't have carried on for ever, had it not been for a simple event: the caravans changed their route. Petra was not ruined by an invader. It died because the world passed it by. It stands as a marvel of nature and the ingenuity of man—beautiful, but dead. Let the churches of Christ take warning. Let the Baptists take warning. The risen Lord commanded, *Go* and make disciples. If we coddle ourselves in our hide-outs we shall simply *petrify*, and the Lord will have to look elsewhere for his evangelists.

3. The way of the Servant

How are the Servant-People to carry out their mission at home and abroad? Not as the loud-mouthed propagandists

of this world but by the unspectacular and more costly way of suffering.

Allow me to illustrate. Visitors to the Kremlin in Moscow, after viewing its many churches, are commonly shown two exhibits. One is an enormous bell, the greatest I have ever seen. It was intended to be placed in the bell tower of a church, but it could not be lifted. It transpired that a fire broke out in the building in which the bell was housed and the heat cracked it. So now it stands in the open air, a useless curiosity, the bell that has never been tolled. Nearby stands a cannon, immense and magnificent in appearance. Its cannon balls are so huge, the cannon cannot fire them. An ordinary explosive charge would make them merely plop out of the cannon's mouth. A charge big enough to fire them properly would probably blow the gun to pieces. So there it stands, polished and brassy, the cannon that has never fired a shot, next to the bell that has never been rung.

Contrast these examples of the mania for size and impressiveness, so typical of our age, with the description of the Servant's way: 'He shall not call out or lift his voice high, or make himself heard in the open street. Like a reed which is bruised but does not break, or a smouldering wick which no one can snuff out, he shall set forth true religion to every race' (Is. 42. 27). The last Servant-Song of Isaiah 53 declares that this way of bringing the nations to God entails suffering unto death. That is the price of redemption, and that is the cost of making it known.

Jesus had no illusions about this in his ministry. As soon as he was in a position to disclose to his disciples the necessity of his suffering he made it clear that they would have to suffer too. Mark states that it was when Peter uttered his confession that Jesus was the Christ that Jesus told them of his impending suffering. Then it was that he issued his only public call to discipleship, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'.

That is, if any man would join the company of Jesus, he must accompany him to Jerusalem and be prepared to shoulder a cross by his side to the place called Calvary. The disciples could no more take that seriously than they could take in the news that Jesus himself must suffer. Surely the Messiah must reign, not suffer! And his people are to share his glory, not a passion! No, said Jesus, that's the language of the devil, not of God; any man who takes it on his lips, even though he be the chief of the apostles, makes himself the spokesman of the devil instead of God.

It is sad to contemplate how often the church has gone into the wrong lobby on that issue.

I recall the surprise when I first grasped the fact that the earliest declaration of Jesus about the gospel going to the nations was given not in the glory of the resurrection but on the eve of his death, amidst warnings of persecutions for the disciples. 'You will be delivered up to councils', he said. 'You will be beaten in synagogues and hauled before governors and kings; but the gospel must first be preached to all nations; in these circumstances you are not to get anxious, for the Holy Spirit will be with you as your inspiration.' It suddenly occurred to me that the earliest record of the church's mission, namely the Acts of the Apostles, sets almost all its sermons in the context of tumults and trials—like Peter before the Sanhedrin, Stephen on trial for life, Paul before the howling mob in Jerusalem, before the governor Felix, before King Agrippa, and so on. Nobody in the early church was surprised to read these things. It was the normal way the mission went on. I am constrained to ask: why should the modern church expect any easier conditions as it carries on the same mission?

Take in the simple fact: the greater part of our contemporary world wants neither the faith of Christ nor the church of Christ, and many are anxious to see the end of both. Half Europe is east of the iron-curtain. The other half

is throwing off the centuries long domination of the church and discarding Christianity. The largest nation in the world is dedicated to communism and its spread through the earth; Africa is in travail, wherein suffering is inescapable for the church; India and Pakistan maintain an uneasy peace, though both are still open to the gospel. We rejoice in the expansion of the church in the two Americas, but let us be candid enough to recognize that there is no other continent like them and we have to come to terms with the other four. A book shortly to be published by the Carey Kingsgate Press, Forman's *A Faith for the Nations*, cites a classification by Chinese communists of people according to their value to society. The list goes like this: soldiers, labourers, farmers, government workers, artisans, intellectuals, craftsmen, businessmen, prostitutes, missionaries. What kind of a reception can the church expect where that view prevails? But, granting that reception, can the church shirk its mission in places where it does prevail? No, not unless it wants to part company with its Lord. Yet clearly, to mean business in mission in many areas of the world is to invite trouble.

Here straight thinking and plain speech are needed. Who is responsible for this mission to the nations? The church. That is, you and I. We are the Servant-People, with the Servant-Christ as our head. By his passion and resurrection the Lord achieved redemption for all; in the same spirit of sacrificial suffering we make it known to the whole world. The gospel of the cross and resurrection is declared by us and is embodied in us as we openly bear a cross after Jesus. In Paul's words, we the Servant-People are completing that which remains to be fulfilled of the sufferings of Christ as we walk with him along our Via Dolorosa. Now be candid: how do you react to such statements? I'll tell you my reactions to them. They are as near unreality as anything I've said in all my life. They are pure theory and say what *ought* to be, not what *is*.

We are the Servant-People of the mission. How does our calling to share the passion of our Lord square with the level of our giving to the Home Work Fund? How does it relate to our Baptist Missionary Society deficits? Some of our congregations may be giving in the spirit of the bloody sweat of Gethsemane and the offering of body, soul and spirit of Calvary, but if we maintain that that typifies us all, we are either unable to see straight or we are guilty of blatant hypocrisy. Let us recognize the fact: our giving to the mission at home and abroad is not reconcilable with our calling in Christ.

We are the Servant-People of the mission. How does that square with the amount of time we give to the spread of the gospel? We earlier spoke about the need for lay ministry in the church. But have we any intention of exercising that ministry? When did we last bring an outsider under the sound of the gospel in our church? How often have we made known our Christian convictions in our place of employment? When did we last lead someone to Christ? Have we ever done such a thing? When did we last engage in visitation for the church? Have we ever lent our aid to that greatest casualty of the church today, the Sunday School? Almost any church can run a youth fellowship on a Sunday, given a few leaders who will dedicate themselves to the task: is my church waiting for me to do it?

We are the Servant-People of Christ. Then why the lack of response to the call for the ministry? Our country needs missionaries of the cross of Christ; we've got them by the dozen, but they are holding back. We have reached almost an all-time low in the number of ministerial candidates offering for missionary service with the B.M.S., and the need for them is desperate. What is wrong? Is it because young men believe our Society is outmoded, or is it due to blindness to human need, deafness to the voice of Christ and unwillingness to serve with him in obscurity? I fear the

answer is plain. But what is the cause? Is it the degeneracy of youth, or is it a reflection of the condition of our churches? Again the answer is plain. Churches get the ministers they give—good, bad, or none at all; and the missionary society similarly suffers when the churches are low. I have been told that there are areas in our denomination—areas, note, not merely churches—that have never given a man to the ministry. It would be difficult to find a clearer illustration than that of the loss of a sense of vocation to be the Servant-People, raised up for the salvation of the world.

Now I do not believe that our churches are deliberately disobedient to the heavenly wisdom, but it does indicate that we need to see the vision again and to give it a long, hard look. The Servant-Saviour identified himself with those he had come to save in Jordan. He went after the one lost sheep and sought it till he found it. He befriended the outcasts and showed them the Father's love. He spent his time largely outside the churches of his day and made known to all he could reach the good news of God's kingdom. He gave himself in life and in death for the sake of the world. When the Servant-People join the Servant-Saviour in this way, giving themselves for those outside their borders, and using their total resources for mission, they'll know what he did: the power of resurrection and the Father's victory.

4. The spirit of the Servant

One last word. In what spirit does the Servant go out to his task? '*He shall not fail or be discouraged till he has planted true religion in the earth*'. (Is. 42. 4). That represents determination to win through, dedication for the task and unswerving faith in victory.

This was characteristic both of Jesus and his men as they went on their mission. Jesus never used the term Servant of the Lord. He always spoke of the *Son of Man* who was called

to suffer. But the Son of Man is he who is destined to receive from God the kingdoms of this world, and this Jesus knew well. His calling was to advance through humiliation to vindication by the power of God. That is why he used this title of himself.

Similarly the presupposition of the church's mission is the enthronement of Christ over the world. 'All power is given to me in heaven and on earth', said the risen Lord. 'Go therefore into all the earth, to every place where my authority extends, and tell every man, woman and child that the ransom is for them, they are mine'. In this work the Lord is with us—not to ease the way, but to help us stand firm as we share the blood and toil and tears of his travail, and to bring us through to victory. In the long years of the church's mission the harvest has never been so abundant as when the precious seed has been sown with tears.

No more remarkable example of this is known to me than the Telugu mission of South India. In 1836 a missionary couple, Mr. and Mrs. Day, were sent by the American Baptist Foreign Mission Board to the Telugus in the Madras area. They returned home ten years later, broken in health. The only visible result of their toil was a tiny church of eight members. A further couple was sent to replace them, Mr. and Mrs. Lyman Jewett. At the end of three years they added three members to the church roll. Three times in the years that followed the missionary society resolved to close the mission, but each time they were induced to withdraw their decision. In 1853 Jewett took four Christian women to a city called Ongole in the hope of founding a church there; he failed to establish one. He records how he stood on a hill overlooking the city and pleaded that God might yet set the church there. Fourteen years later a fresh missionary couple named Clough joined Jewett and they went to that place. This time they were extraordinarily successful. Within ten years a church of 3,000 members had arisen. Then came a

famine in which many died of starvation. The new missionary had been an engineer. He organized relief works, including the building of a canal and a railway, and brought succour to multitudes. The Telugus awoke to discover in their midst a religion that could not only deliver the individual, but save the community as well. They turned to this faith and the man in whom it was embodied. On 2nd July, 1878, 614 converts were baptized in the river. The next day 2,222 were baptized, on the following day many more hundreds. It was Pentecost again, but on an even greater scale. Within six months 9,606 converts were baptized, so that the church increased to 12,000 members. When Clough died in 1910 the Telugu churches numbered 55,000 members. Their number is now three times as many as that. A friend of mine, who knew the story of the heartbreak of the early mission there, told how moved he was to stand in their church and realize that probably more people have been baptized as believers there than in any other place in the world. True religion was surely planted in that bit of earth by the toil of Suffering Servants of the Lord.

In such a spirit let us go to our mission. Chicken-heartedness and pessimism have no place in Christianity—nor feeble knees, helpless hands and hang-dog looks. We are the people of the resurrection, with the message of life for the world. If conflict is inevitable, so is the victory. In the determination of Jesus and the power of his Spirit we can tackle Britain. It is a light thing in the sight of the Lord of Hosts! And by them we can pursue the mission abroad, for this is the declared intention of the Lord.

Share then the faith of Jesus. Do not fail nor be discouraged. Set his gospel in the earth. For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.