

What is it about grace that infuriates people?

Today's first reading from the *Book of Isaiah* was composed sometime around 550 BC during the exile of Jewish captives to reservations within the Babylonian Empire (generally modern Iraq). Since the glory days of Kings David and Solomon the Kingdom of Israel had declined until it became simply the Kingdom of Judah (the only tribe left standing). And then even this remnant was crushed by Babylon leading to the above mentioned exile.

The exiled Jews were of the more cultured variety including priests and merchants, urban types. No longer a political state, Judah was now on its way to becoming Judaism, a "church", i.e. a community united not by borders but movable, migratory, and by a creed built upon its old traditions as reinterpreted by its exiled priests in the light of its recent disaster. Indeed, having been uprooted from old borders, the exiles began to envision a wider, cosmic sense of itself – the dispersal of its tradition to the whole world. Far from being confined to alien reservations, this newly found sense of destiny had them gathering the whole world into their universe, as they understood it.

Especially interesting is Isaiah's mention of a *Servant* of God who would play a role in this expansion of Judah's mission to the world. But who was this Servant, mentioned in four different places in Isaiah's later chapters? Scholars think it refers to some individual within the exiled community of the 500's BC. He is addressed by God as *my chosen one* upon whom God has put his spirit to bring forth justice to the world.

He wouldn't do this in the way justice is usually enforced (in the manner of John Wayne) but by way of extreme gentleness. He will not shout, break a bruised reed, quench a smoldering wick. He will open peoples' eyes, making of them visionaries; he will release people imprisoned in one way or another; put an end to dungeons – draw people enclosed in their biases out into the open air – to expand their breathing. He shall speak a new language by way of his well-trained tongue. His word will relieve the weary, wake up the whole world. Indeed his very way of gentle, gracious, eloquent being will in itself draw the attention of others.

But will he succeed? The prophecy suggests the world's response will be otherwise. He will meet insult, physical violence, spit, disfigurement, made appalling rather than attractive, knowing pain. Yet somehow his very wounds, his suffering will awaken the conscience of a belligerent world. Of course, the New Testament saw in this *Servant* of Isaiah a forecast of the mission and outcome of Jesus' role in history . . . even to weaving Isaiah's language into its description of his crucifixion.

Yet the question can still be argued: do such Servants of God have any success in changing the human race? The point may be argued but the question remains: what is it about being merciful, forgiving, gentle, speaking with care and concern that - rather than captivate - triggers off hostility, even violence from century to century? Why is it that when one turns the other cheek, he nevertheless ends up with a broken jaw? What is wrong with us?

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