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# Where is the Servant?

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*Text: Isaiah 42:1-7*

It was exhilarating! Back in Paris again—to continue my research on the worker-priests. They were my models of the Christian life, these Catholic clergy who earned their bread in the hard toil of factory life. Their sacrifice, their courage, their trade union militancy touched me deeply. For me, they embodied what the anonymous Isaiah meant when he talked of “the servant of the LORD”. His words cross the centuries:

Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations.... He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.

For me, this passage described the worker-priests, and here I was, back in Paris, ready to re-enter their lives in France’s urban ghettos. This was not just research. It was my mission—to tell their heroic story and to draw strength from their radical commitment to Christ’s gospel.

I viewed Sunday mornings in beautiful Paris as my golden witnessing opportunity, for it was at that time that I regularly attended an adult Sunday School class at the American Church in Paris. And what a church it was—situated on the banks of the Seine and flanked by the embassies of various nations. There, in its hallowed precincts, worshipped America’s corporate and military elites. So there I went, justice message in hand, filled with the rage of the righteous, a David with carefully-selected stones, bent on challenging Goliath—that is, until Robert threw a monkey wrench into my well-organized agenda.

Robert was a young man, about nineteen—sensitive, bright and good-looking. And he had cerebral palsy. When he moved in his awkward, even grotesque way, I felt mortal and vulnerable. Internally I rebelled against him and his presence because he reminded me that I was dust and would die. But I didn't reject him—until he opened his mouth. His long and laboured conversation took up so much time—time I craved to speak out about radical justice, time that he was using up. No matter that he was expressing views that paralleled mine. And add to all that, I had to concentrate to understand him. It took so much energy. And to make things worse, he liked me. That just made me feel all the more miserable. I acted out of duty and pity toward him—successfully, I think, hiding my rejection, my fundamental feeling that I did not want him around.

One Sunday morning the teacher asked us, "How do you feel when you see a poor person?" Robert leaped right in. He said, in laboured tones, "I f-f-fffeel v-v-vvullnerABLE." And the tears rolled down my cheeks. In one sentence Robert had shown me the solidarity of justice not only "for" but also "with" the broken. He had shattered all my defences and touched my heart. Gone was my pity; gone was my sense of duty; gone was my resentment. His twisted gait, his laboured painful words, had touched my vulnerability. Robert had freed me to feel, to hurt and to love.

He was Isaiah's servant bringing justice to me: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." So gentle he was. His body was broken, and mine was whole. But I was the bruised and broken reed that he touched and opened to flower—ever so tenderly. He took this justice-pounding sledgehammer and brought it to flower in a single painfully articulated, "I feel vulnerable." He could have been handsome, but cerebral palsy had distorted his physique as well as his voice. And here is how the deutero-Isaiah describes God's servant:

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him; nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity and as one from whom others hide their faces. He was despised and we held him of no account.

That was Robert, in my eyes, until the witness of all he was (body, faith, words) transformed him into Isaiah's servant: "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our

diseases... He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment which made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." Thank you, Robert—for being God's servant of justice to me!

This anonymous justice-bearing servant of the prophet is an elusive creature. Who is she? Who is he? The entire covenant people? "Yes! Called to bring healing to all humanity!" Or a remnant group, a tiny portion of the covenant people, called to bring justice and light both to God's special people and to the whole globe? "Yes! That too!" Or a single redeemer mandated to undertake and complete this task? "YES!" Any and all of these—at different times, in different places.

But whether an individual, a tiny remnant of the covenant people, or all of God's flock, the task and style are one and the same: justice for the oppressed and broken—peace, healing and restoration. How? Not by success, but rather through brokenness, through persistence—from underneath, from rejection and failure. From vulnerability. Our roadblocks to be served and servant are our talents, our skills, our successes—indeed every area of competence and comfort. The words of Dorothy Day underscore that:

It is with the voice of our contemporaries that Christ speaks. With the eyes of store clerks, factory workers and children that He gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers and housewives that He gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that He walks, and with the heart of everyone in need that He longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ... We can do it too. We do it by seeing Christ and serving Christ in friends and strangers, in everyone who we come in contact with... Christ made heaven hinge on the way we act toward Him in His disguise of commonplace, frail, ordinary humanity... We don't need the goad of duty to prod us to serve Christ. This is not our duty. It is our privilege.<sup>1</sup>

We do not bring Christ to these broken ones. Rather it is in them that we meet Christ. There we encounter Isaiah's servant. Dorothy Day knew that. So does Robert. So also does another Robert—Joseph Robert, a worker-priest in northern France: "Je ne suis pas évangélisés les pauvres," he testified. "Ce sont les pauvres qui m'ont évangélisés." ("I have not proclaimed the gospel to the poor; rather it is the poor who have proclaimed the gospel to me.")

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Ellsberg, ed., *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983) 94.