

In my filing cabinet at home, I have a collection of letters that I have kept over the years. Letters from my parents, from friends, from different people. Periodically I would take them out and read some of them. These letters tell a story of people who have loved me, encouraged me, supported me over the years and in so doing they tell me something about myself.

The scriptures, these written texts that lie at the heart of our worship, our very faith, represent a message of love, of encouragement, of rebuke - a story of a relationship between God and his people. They tell me something about God, something about myself.

Like the letters in my file, there are some passages that are particularly important to us. These strike a particular chord in our hearts. Written as they were thousands of years ago to a different culture, into very different circumstances they none the less seem to be written just for us - there is something of a timelessness to the scriptures as they speak across the barriers of time and culture into our own particular lives.

The passage that we read as our Old Testament Lesson this morning is one that fits into that particular mould for me.

Its original setting is very different to ours; spoken to a people in exile who have known national humiliation and despair. The people of the old Southern Kingdom of Judah had seen Jerusalem overrun by a foreign invader who had ransacked the city. They had seen their king taken off in

chains; the Temple had been looted and destroyed before their eyes and large numbers had been taken off into exile.

The great prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all reflect on this national tragedy. It was a tragedy that struck at the very heart of a nation's understanding of itself as the People of God. Had God abandoned his people, had God been vanquished by the gods of their enemies?

In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, the prophet reflects on the disaster as it approaches - he sees it as nothing less than God's righteousness on a people who had sinned - sinned in their dealings with each other, sinned in their loyalty to God as the one and only God worthy of their worship and obedience.

Then around chapter 40 of this book, the mood begins to change and the prophet begins to speak words of hope and consolation:

"Comfort, comfort my people,
speak tenderly to Jerusalem

.....

she has received from the Lord double for all her sins.

Then we read the first of the Servant Songs, that viewed from the perspective of our knowledge of Jesus, speak so clearly to us of his coming ministry, helping us to understand the meaning of his ministry of teaching and healing, his death and resurrection.

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen in whom my soul delights

.....

I have put my spirit upon him.

Then this passage that we read this morning that speaks of the all embracing purposes of God for his people. The God who created, who formed. This speaks not so much of a manufacturer, more of an artist or craftsman, lingering over, rejoicing over that which he has made. That continuing care and concern is brought out in what follows.

Fear not for I have redeemed you
I have summoned you by name
you are mine.

There is something intensely personal in this language. I have redeemed, I have summoned. This is the language of a very personal care and concern. The 'you' in these sentences is not the plural, as spoken to a large group; rather it is the singular, as spoken to an individual. It is as if God is addressing each person who hears this individually.

You may recall when the National Lottery was first established, the advertisements featured a finger that came out of the sky and pointed at a particular individual, as a voice boomed out, "It could be you!" The

message that comes out of this passage is not that "It could be you" but rather, "It is you".

It is you that I have redeemed.

It is you that I call by name.

This is a God who stays with us through all the ups and downs of life:

When you pass through the waters

I will be with you

.....

For I am the Lord your God

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour

.....

Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

I created you, I formed you, I redeemed you, I summoned you, you are mine.

Then set this alongside our Gospel reading this morning, which tells us of the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, the beginning of his public ministry. As Jesus comes out of the water, we are told of a voice from heaven. Luke tells us that the voice is addressed to Jesus, others have it addressed to all - the thrust is the same.

"This is my beloved Son" This is the one in whom is expressed my total commitment to mankind, this is the one who shared in my work of

creation, this is one through whom I will act to redeem, to call people back to myself. We grasp something of the enormity of the words of Jesus, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

And so as we begin to follow Luke's account of the ministry of Jesus, that same Jesus reaches out across barriers of time and culture with that same timeless message:

It is you that I have redeemed.

It is you that I call by name.

He stays with us through all the ups and downs of life:

When you pass through the waters

I will be with you

.....

I am your Lord

I am your Saviour

.....

Do not be afraid, for I am with you to the very end of time.