

Isaiah's Song of Redemption

Isaiah 43: 1-7

In January 2010, a visitor to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art fell onto a Pablo Picasso painting, called 'The Actor' valued at £80m (\$130m). When the woman fell onto the 1.8m by 1.2m canvas, she dented and tore the canvas and according to the authorities, the clumsy woman who lost her balance accidentally and crashed into the painting, knocked off half its value - £40m!! Experts knew they would be able to fix the 15cm tear and restore the painting.

It was refreshing to hear that the museum curators didn't just say: "Oh, that's a pity. We've got some other paintings in store, will replace it." In our throwaway society that was encouraging. The fast and unstoppable digital, technological and computer revolutions and the emphasis on cheaper and less durable products encourage us to throwaway and replace rather than restore and mend. No, the museum curators whisked the painting away to be repaired, and began forming a plan of restoration. It was ready for a museum exhibition in March.

As a theme today I have turned to our Old Testament reading, to Isaiah 43: 1-7. Isaiah's Song of Redemption is one of my favourite Old Testament passages. On the occasions I do focus on the Old Testament, I always feel rewarded. Today the reward, I feel, is incredible.

Isaiah tells us in this Song of Redemption that God has a plan of restoration. He doesn't throw the artwork in the dustbin and begin creating a new painting of a new subject. Think of Picasso's canvass restoration – how difficult, tedious, laborious, time-consuming it must have been! Colors, shading, textures all to be matched perfectly. Yet what if the restorer were to be the original artist? Imagine how frustrated, even angry you would feel, knowing that your work had been clumsily damaged, knowing that it was perfect the first time. Why not scrap it, forget about it and start again, with a blank canvass and a new subject? God, the original artist, knew he created us as a perfect image of himself. But Isaiah knew that his people had done irreparable damage to themselves. Only the creator has the ability to conduct a repair.

These powerful words of scripture were addressed to a defeated, despairing people, a people conquered by the Babylonian empire and taken into exile. Worse than defeat was a sense that God had abandoned them, their exile was God's punishment for their sins. Powerfully, God is the speaker here. God's message is addressed to the people of Israel. He had formed them as a nation, freed them from slavery in Egypt and will now bring them home again. And God says, to his people, "Do not fear." Along way from home, almost extinct, under Babylonian domination, they are a people without hope and a future. They fear that God has abandoned them. Twice God tells them, "Do not fear." "You belong to me," he tells them. "You are my own people, precious and loved by me, created by me to reflect my glory". God will not give up on the people he calls his own.

In the art world, a piece of artwork becomes inseparably linked to the artist's identity. Those in the know, and even those that are not, recognize an artist's work and hence the artist. Its value lies not only in its artistic expertise and skill but also in whose name it is associated. People will pay \$100m or more for a damaged Picasso canvass but thousands of other artists cannot give their artwork away. It is all in a name.

God used this Song of Redemption to reassure, collectively, the people of Israel, but we can see how it is so powerfully relevant to us. If you have a relationship with God, His name is written on you. You are a piece of artistry painted and signed by the Creator of the Universe. And for the sake of his glory, he will restore you. Paul tells us that we were once damaged just like that torn Picasso painting in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Yet God restored us as his workmanship. The word "workmanship" in the Greek is *poiema* – literally meaning masterpiece. However I am not restored as a masterpiece canvass to be hung on a wall to be admired by others? I am restored so that I may reflect God's glory. This was Israel's reason for existence - a light to the world, drawing people to the glory of the Name of the Lord.

Every time I read this song, and I read it again and again, especially at times when I am stressed, anxious and discouraged, I see it as an extremely powerful and personal message of hope, to me, from my God. I encourage you to read it with me and insert your own name as I do:

"But now says the Lord, he who created you, [Peter] he who formed you, [Peter]. Do not fear, [Peter] for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, [Peter] you are mine. When you pass through the waters, [Peter] I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.... because you are precious in my sight, [Peter] and honoured, and I love you." Through these powerful words of scripture, God spoke to me, calling me by name, affirming me as God's own child, precious and loved, and promising to be with me always, no matter what.

How can we fail to be assured that God loves us and that God has a purpose for our life? As we begin 2013 there is much that might cause us to fear. We don't know what is going to happen. On a personal note my year has not started well. And times I find me answering my own questions with, 'I just do not know'. Fear can cast a shadow. We are afraid of all kinds of things – afraid of change and uncertainty, of loss and separation, afraid of failure and rejection, of growing old and losing our faculties, afraid of death and dying. The foundation of all our fears is the fear of abandonment, of being left alone.

We don't have to be afraid because we belong to God. Through our baptism into Christ, God has called each one of us by name and claimed us as God's own. By God's grace, we have been received into God's family. Each one of us is precious in God's sight, valuable beyond understanding, loved beyond comprehension. Knowing ourselves to be loved, just as we are, is a wonderful experience because it empowers us to love others just as they are, to reflect the glory of God in our own seemingly insignificant lives, in what we feel, think, say, do. That is so important.

In her book, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*, Marianne Williamson writes in 'Our Deepest Fear' a paragraph that was quoted by Nelson Mandela, in his inauguration speech as President.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”¹

Isaiah's Song of Redemption mentions the problems - the waters, the fire and flames, even the dark valley of shadows but do not fear, God is with us. That is incredibly good to know as we battle to shine our little light to God's glory.

Peter Smith

¹ Marianne Williamson (1992) *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*; Harper Collins; New York