

Back 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 but admitted it would never recover its original worth.

It was refreshing to hear that the museum curators didn't just say: "Oh, that's a pity. We've got a few other Picasso's in the back room, we 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.

Isaiah tells us in this Song of Redemption, we heard just now, 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! Colours, 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.

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 upwards of \$100m for a damaged, slightly dented 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. Paul tells us that we were once irreparably damaged just like that torn Picasso painting in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Yet God restored us as his workmanship. We are restored not as masterpiece canvasses to be hung on a wall, though, admired by others! We are restored to reflect God's glory.

Isaiah powerful words of scripture are addressed to a despairing people, conquered by the Babylonian empire and taken into exile. Worse than defeat was their sense that God had abandoned them, God was punishing them for their sins. Powerfully, God is the

speaker here and He is addressing the people of Israel. He had formed them as a nation, freed them from slavery in Egypt and will now bring them home again. He says, to his people, "Do not fear." Way from home, under Babylonian domination, the people are 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 used Isaiah to reassure, collectively, the people of Israel, but ONE thing keeps standing out for me. 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.'

I came across Pieter Stok's poem (posted August 2011) of Isaiah's Song of Redemption.

My Creator
Loves me, His creation.
Nothing,
Not a thing,
Will thwart His redeemed child from
Being brought to Him.
Waters high and
Rivers deep
Will not drown me,
Or wash me from His saving arms.
He will pay my ransom:
My Jesus, my Saviour!
I am His.
A polished jewel in His crown,
Rubbed clean with the cloth
Of His Holy Spirit.
Whether in the N. S. E or W
He brings me,
His prodigal,
Home!

In our reading God was addressing the people of Israel but: 'My Creator loves me', writes Pieter Stok, 'My Jesus, my Saviour, I am His'. Through these powerful words of scripture, God spoke to a nation. Through these words of scripture he calls you and me by name, affirming us as God's own children, precious and loved, promising to be with us always, no matter what. I will not forget reading about the reaction of Chinese born Lo Cheng, who had very recently become a Christian, when he read the words of Matthew 28:20, in the King James version. Lo read that Jesus says: "Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." I think he was absolutely blown away by that.

This is a love that is not dependent upon who we are or what we do, a love that is ours without our deserving, a love that promises to help us live out what God wants us to be. This is our authentic self, not some imagined idea of who people think we should be or

told that we are, created and sustained by the culture and society in which we live. I am reminded of that old Dennis the Menace cartoon, where Dennis and his little friend Joey are leaving Mrs. Wilson's house, their hands full of cookies. Joey says, "I wonder what we did to deserve this." Dennis answers, "Look, Joey. Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice." God loves us not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

We are all coping with so many uncertainties. Many of us with specific and acute issues and others with just general worries and anxieties. The real and massive stresses and worries of coping with the pandemic and so many other medical conditions, mental well-being, the real grief of losing someone we love, the problems with the weather, financial insecurity and unemployment..... the worry of JUST COPING with so many things and situations. And that is for things we know have happened or are happening. What about the things that we don't know about? So many times I find myself answering my own questions with, 'I just do not know'. Fear and anxiety can cast a shadow, whatever its focus.

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. The fact that the Universe's creator calls us by name is surely beyond our comprehension (it is beyond mine!) but knowing ourselves to be loved, just as we are, is a wonderful experience because it empowers us to love others just as they are and to reflect the glory of God in our lives, in what we feel, think, say and do.