



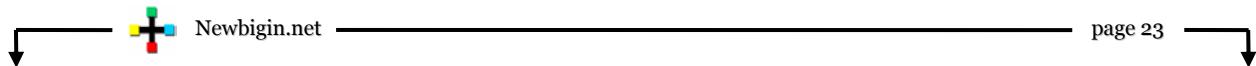
## Jesus the Servant and Man's Community

1963

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

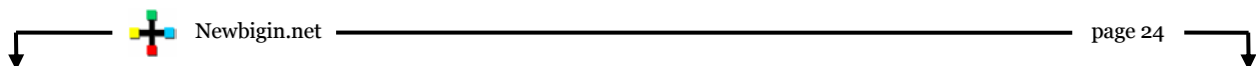
*In Christ's Call to Service Now* (ed. Ambrose Reeves; London: SCM Press, 1963): 23-33.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



As I have re-read and pondered the chapters in the book of Isaiah in which the portrait of the Servant is outlined, I have been struck, as I am sure you have been, by the fact that the whole context of these chapters – the background of the portrait – is the world of international affairs. The rise and fall of empires, the pride and humiliation of civilizations, marches and invasions, these form the background of the picture – and indeed more than the background; they are part of its substance. We are not just dealing here with private and domestic religion. We are dealing with an interpretation of world affairs, and of the role that Israel is called to play in them. The context is the world, the whole known world; the horizon is the ends of the earth. The remotest nations are in the picture. The calling of Israel has a universal reference; it is not just for herself but (to quote the 49th chapter) that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

But, and this is the second point that strikes one in re-reading these chapters, the calling of Israel is *not* to undertake a worldwide campaign on behalf of God. It is not to 'change the course of world history'. God does not call Israel to assist him in coping with the otherwise unmanageable power of the great pagan empires. On the contrary, these great empires are flimsy nothings before him. He can blow them away with a breath, or pick them up like dust. The argument of these chapters is interspersed with ironic pictures of the people of Babylon busily engaged

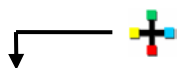


in a revival of religion, fussing away with their idols and their festivals. In truth, they haven't a clue to what is happening, because they do not know the One who is in charge. But he is in charge. His masterful voice thunders through all these chapters. He is the Lord, simply and absolutely. Israel is his servant – a servant whose weakness and poverty are in ludicrous contrast to the greatness of the calling. 'Fear not, you worm Jacob', says the Lord. There is nothing 'like a

mighty army' here. Israel has no greatness, no glamour, no comeliness except this; that God has called him to be his servant.

This calling is to obey, to suffer, and to witness. Obedience is possible because God has revealed his character to Israel and Israel knows what kind of behaviour God wants. This is the simple, direct obedience of the servant to his master. The suffering is necessary because only so can God's character be understood under the conditions of human rebellion against God's rule. The witness is possible because God has revealed himself to Israel. The phrase 'you are my witnesses' occurs repeatedly, and it marks the contrast to the situation of the pagan nations who are in the nature of the case unable to understand what is coming to them. Israel can understand, and can declare it, because God has made himself plain to Israel long ago. The phrase 'you are my witnesses' refers to the interpretation of the events of secular history. It is the repeated reminder that Israel ought to be able to understand and to interpret these events.

What is foreshadowed in this portrait of the servant was embodied and fulfilled in Jesus. He alone perfectly understood and obeyed the Father's will. He accepted suffering as the cup which the Father gave him. And in it all he bore witness to the Father's rule. Again this witness concerns the events of secular history. It concerns the real meaning of the situation of Israel in the midst of the power-politics of the Roman Empire. It is a summons to recognize that these events are in the Father's hands, and that it is he who is bringing upon Israel the moment of decision to accept or reject the Father's Kingdom in the person of the Son. He does not himself seek to change the course



of secular history. He accepts the Father's disposition of secular events as the form in which his obedience is to be wrought and his witness given. And repeatedly he requires of his disciples that they be able to understand what is happening, to read the signs of the times with the same shrewdness with which they read the sky and interpret the changing weather. They are to expect suffering as the normal form of their witness. They are to expect tumult and strife. Above all, they are to expect bogus messiahs – individuals and movements which claim to offer total welfare for mankind on other terms than his.

The gospel records give us a vivid picture of the way in which the presence of the Word made flesh among men created a sort of polarization. Like a magnet which imposes the pattern of its magnetic field upon a random mass of iron fragments, so the presence of Christ imposes a new pattern upon men and women who have so far appeared merely as a natural cross-section of human society; they are either drawn to him, confessing him as Lord and Master, or they are repelled by him, denouncing him as blasphemer. In his presence ultimate neutrality becomes impossible. But the New Testament also shows us the extrapolation of this process through human history to the end. It shows us a process of polarization going on. The issue of total salvation for the human race having once been raised (as distinct from the idea of blessedness for the individual), this question can never be dropped. In so far as the historical movements which flow from the coming of Jesus reach and penetrate the life of peoples, this process of polarization is precipitated. All things converge inexorably towards a single issue – Christ or antichrist.

I repeat that the biblical use of the word witness to describe the work of the Servant is inextricably bound up with an interpretation of the events of man's secular history. This is not popular doctrine at the present time—at least in the western world. Perhaps because of understandable recoil from the formidable power of the Marxist interpretation of history, the western world at the present time seems to shrink from any attempt to speak of a coherent meaning of secular history. The tendency is to think rather in terms of personal fulfilment.

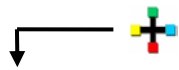
This takes many forms – an excessive emphasis upon the individual and inward dimension of Christian discipleship, the search for meaning in some form of existentialism, or – ultimately the most powerful of them all – surrender to the ancient attraction of the pantheistic mysticism of the East. In contrast to all these, I believe that the biblical revelation requires of us an understanding of the meaning of secular history, offers us such an understanding, and invites us to find meaning for our personal lives not apart from but as a part of our involvement in God's dealing with the secular world.

I do not mean to suggest that the Gospel offers us a theoretical interpretation of world history by which we could understand the significance of each detail of its development; certainly not. The Christian walks by faith not by sight. But this faith is in the One in whom it has pleased God both to create all things and to consummate all things, the Servant who is also the Lord, the crucified, despised and rejected one who is also the risen king seated at the right hand of God, the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne. If we are totally committed to him and to participation in his servanthood, then we shall find that not only God's ordering of our personal lives, but also God's ordering of the course of secular history has a shape, a pattern which is discernibly related to his purpose to sum up all things in Christ. I repeat that this is a matter of faith, not of sight; of a faith constantly tested against new trials. Such trial of faith is of the very stuff of the Servant's calling as it is set out in both testaments. But it is a discernment of reality. It is the only way to an understanding of the human situation which gives meaning to the whole drama of human history without in the end evacuating each man's personal history of meaning. It is because this understanding is accessible to those who share in the servanthood of Jesus that they are called witnesses; in the midst of those for whom human history is a meaningless process or else a heartless one, they bear witness by their entire being, by their participation in the business of the secular world, by their unwavering hope, by the way they are set towards what Teilhard de Chardin calls the 'Omega point' – they bear witness to God's kingly rule.

Let me draw attention to three elements in the present human situation which are – I believe – illuminated by the biblical faith.

1. First, consider the fact that now for the first time in history all the peoples of the world have been drawn into the current of a single history. It is no longer possible to speak of the separate civilizations of the Far East, of Africa, of the Islamic world. We are witnessing the coming into existence of a single human civilization. This does not, of course, mean that the ancient human traditions of – for instance – India, or China or Africa do not still have an enormous power. Probably we shall have to reckon with that power in unexpected ways in coming decades. But the fact is that in all parts of the world the direction and the pace of human development is now set by the great cities which form an integrated global network of human relationships. The issues with which the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa are wrestling are not issues arising out of their ancient religions, but issues posed by the impact upon them of the type of society which has been developed in western Europe. Above all, their life is dominated – in a way which would have seemed quite incredible to students of world affairs even 25 years ago – by the concept of development. From one point of view, development might almost be described as the substitution for the traditional cultural values of a set of values derived from western Europe and North America. From another point of view, one can say that the driving power of the concept of development is furnished by the vision of a world in which total welfare is assured for every citizen. But this vision has not arisen from any of the ancient faiths of Asia or Africa. It is a secularized version of the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God. The effect of this is to destroy beyond the possibility of repair the ancient sacral types of society, in which the whole human community was held together by religious sanctions. More and more the normal

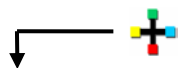
human being in every country is the secularized person, who takes his decisions as an individual, and for whom the traditional religion is not the given form in which all experience is interpreted, but rather something to be looked at and evaluated



strictly from the point of view of its character as an asset or a liability in the quest for development.

2. Secondly, consider the fact that this secularizing process has had its profoundest effect within the old Christendom itself. The ancient sacral society in which the Gospel was first projected, striving to maintain its unity around the sacred person of the emperor, rightly saw in Christianity a threat to all the divinities by which human society had been held together. But perhaps it was also inevitable that, once these old divinities had been dethroned, the attempt should have been made to establish a new kind of sacral society around the person of the Christian emperor: The fact and the idea of such a Christian society have had a very long history since the Edict of Milan, a history which has as one of its most notable chapters the story of the expansion of Christian missions into every part of the world backed by the spiritual and material power of the old Christendom. But the Constantinian era has now ended and will not return. There are no more Christian societies, except in such places as Samoa-where one can see a pure Christendom situation still in existence. Christian missions no longer have behind them the superior resources of the western nations. Such outposts of Christendom as the old mission schools, colleges and hospitals in Asia and Africa are being secularized. Christian staffs are being scattered-sometimes as a matter of deliberate policy, as in Ceylon; sometimes by the ordinary process of development. Christians are in a radically new situation, which is neither the Constantinian situation of a Christian sacral society, nor the pre-Constantinian situation of a pagan sacral society, but something new and different: a society which has been secularized irreversibly by the operation of forces originating in the Gospel itself.

3. Consider thirdly the fact that now, also for the first time in history, the Christian Church exists among almost all peoples. This also is new. We are inclined to forget how very new it is. There are important areas of the world into which the Gospel is only now penetrating for the first time, and there are very large groups of people completely unreached by the Gospel.

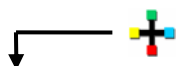


It is a sad fact that the Churches which share in the ecumenical movement have been on the whole so impressed by the worldwide extension of the Church that they are neglecting their opportunities of continuing to share in the greatest of all privileges -that of bringing the Gospel to those who have never heard it. There really is no privilege so great as that! But I do not dwell on this for the moment. My purpose is simply to draw attention to the fact that this also is one of the wholly new elements in our situation – that the Christian Church exists now in dispersion throughout most of the peoples of the world.

Now consider these three things together in the light of the biblical vision of the role of the Servant of the Lord: do they not become luminous when seen in that light? God is in control of history. His control is not slipping. 'Have you not known, have you not heard, that the Lord, the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, does not faint or grow weary?'. History is in his grip, and he continues to propel it to the end for which all things were created – namely that they might be consummated in Christ. The centre point of all history is the invasion of the End into the midst of the story, in the man Jesus in whom the word was made flesh. By that invasion, the crisis of history is precipitated. Slowly but inexorably all men and all nations are brought within the range of that event and are faced with issues for which natural religion has no place – the issue of the ultimate consummation of all things. They become involved, often without their understanding, in this crisis. The ancient structures of meaning are dissolved. Men are adrift

without the traditional sacral ordering of things to guide them. The issue which has been raised for the human race by the coming of Jesus – the issue of total welfare for mankind – becomes the determinative issue. If men do not find the answer to it in a total commitment to Jesus, they seek it in some other kind of messianic hope, some prospect of total welfare on other terms than his, or else they seek some way of personal spiritual security apart from the anguish of humanity as a whole.

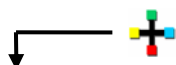
But what does ‘total commitment to Jesus’ mean? It means partnership in his servanthood. It means to obey, to suffer, and



to witness. It does not mean being visibly on the winning side. It does not mean a campaign to contain the revolutionary forces of our time. It does not mean success and influence for the Church. It means precisely what it has always meant – the obedience of a servant for whom the only thing that matters is to do his master’s will; the acceptance of whatever share of suffering is accorded in the doing of that will; and the witness to God’s rule which is the hidden but sovereign power shaping all things towards the end for which they were created.

We are always tempted to hanker after another role; we look for a kind of authority and influence for the Church which Christ neither sought for himself nor promised to his disciples. Consequently when God again and again scatters the Church we see only pastoral problems and fail to recognize missionary opportunities-because our idea of Christianity and therefore of pastoral care is shaped by the experiences of the era that is past. We fail to see that God is doing this scattering precisely in order that there may be a new gathering, and that those to whom the Gospel of God never came may have the chance to hear it and to be gathered into the company of the fellowservants and witnesses of Jesus.

The context of the Christian Gospel is the whole world, its creation and its redemption. There is no true commitment to Jesus Christ which does not involve commitment to partnership in the fulfilling of his will for all nations. There is no tolerable meaning for the personal life which is not part of an understanding of what God is doing with mankind as a whole. And there is no place where it is possible to find meaning at the same time for the personal life and for the life of the world except at the point where he in whom and for whom all things were made accepted the form of a servant and was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. If you have known him, crucified, risen for you and all mankind, you know the centrepiece of your own life and of the life of mankind. But to know him so means to be finally committed to him, to obey him, to accept the suffering which obedience may bring if God wills it so, and to witness to him, the crucified and risen Lord, as



the one sovereign of mankind in allegiance to whom alone is their fulness of life.

Service is rather a popular word at present. It is generally thought that to go to the under-developed nations with material aid and technical assistance is more useful and perhaps less arrogant than to go to them to preach the Gospel. This attitude needs to be challenged by a more biblical understanding of what it means to be a servant. It could also be challenged by looking a little more through the eyes of the potential recipients of our service. I do not stress here the very obvious fact that much of what the affluent nations are doing in this respect is clearly motivated not only by pure benevolence but also by the desire to win friends and influence people – a desire which is easily recognized. Nor do I stress the question whether some of our efforts are not rather visibly compounded with a sense of guilt about our colonial past and a desire to justify ourselves by our good works. I want simply to ask whether it is not true that much of the rest of the world has ceased to expect anything from the West except material aid and technical know-how, and has made up its mind that for the more costly gifts of wisdom, of understanding concerning the



deepest issues of human existence, it should look elsewhere. I fear that it *is* true, and that so long as it is true, service will be a means not of mutual understanding but of mutual contempt. It is not merely that Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim scholars have shown themselves almost totally uninterested in the spiritual roots of the western science and technology which are so profoundly changing the life of man; it is that western Christians themselves seem to be uninterested, or even embarrassed about the spiritual roots of the culture which they are busy exporting. An Indian friend of mine has remarked that western Christians seem to be passing through a period of adolescence comparable to that which causes some schoolboys to be embarrassed in the presence of their parents. It may seem rather a rude remark, but how else shall we explain the anxiety of many western Christians to explain that their admirable good works have nothing to do with Christianity and are quite free from the taint of evangelistic enthusiasm?

What shall we say of the church press release which announced with evident pride that instead of sending Bibles to the underdeveloped countries, we were now sending consignments of radioactive isotopes? One might have pinned a text from Isaiah on the box: 'Who is blind as my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send?'. Are we really so blind to what is happening in the world that we cannot see that the vast revolution of our time has its roots in this Book, that the Bible remains incomparably the most revolutionary piece of literature in the world?

To share in the servanthood of Jesus means also to be his witness. It is not our service which shapes history or gives it its meaning. History has been given its meaning by God, who created all things in Christ to be summed up in Christ, and it is shaped by him who ceaselessly directs all things to that end. The servant of the Lord is sent to live under obedience to that direction, and to bear witness to it by the manner of his participation in the ever-changing life of the world. But, because his life will always obscure God's rule at least as much as it reveals it, he is required to bear witness also by the explicit word which points beyond himself and his service to God made manifest in Jesus Christ, and to that dying and rising in which the meaning of history was finally disclosed.

Now one can demonstrate in advance that this interpretation of history is true. The Christian agrees with the Marxist that theory cannot be severed from commitment. In order to understand, one must be committed. To know, one must dare. One must go beyond the point where the cross of Christ is simply an object of reflection; one must have – so to say – embraced it. There is no evading this unity of understanding and commitment, which belongs to the stuff of reality with which we have to deal whichever way we turn. To share in the servanthood of Jesus means to be committed totally, as he was, to the service of God in and through him.

A servant does not choose how and where he will serve; he accepts the direction of the master to whom he is committed. Jesus did not choose the manner of his service; he did not choose

the Cross. He accepted the Father's will as it was disclosed to him step by step along the path of obedience in the concrete circumstances of the place and time in which he was. The same must be true of ours. Service is not a sort of gesture; it is a response to the realities with which God confronts us. One of the ironies of the present situation is that while there is an almost embarrassingly large number of people willing to offer for short-term experimental periods of service in all kinds of volunteer groups, the agencies seeking men and women for the ordinary jobs that need to be done in the developing countries – teachers, administrators, technicians of all sorts – unanimously report that people of the necessary quality, experience and commitment are not available. There seems to be a sufficient number of people willing to serve on their own terms; there are not enough people willing to do the jobs which actually have to be done. I am

speaking not only of missionaries, but also – and even chiefly – of the men and women being sought by the governmental and inter-governmental agencies, schools and industry. To take seriously the faith that God rules the secular affairs of men must surely mean that we recognize that serving God means doing the ordinary jobs which need to be done, and in that doing, witnessing to God's rule. This, of course, has little propaganda value. I commend to you a sentence from one of Oswald Chambers' books: 'It takes God's Spirit in us to make us so absolutely human that we are utterly unnoticeable'. That is why it needs the anointing of the Spirit to make us God's servants. It is the same Spirit who is able to bear witness through God's servants to the End to which God is directing all things, and who therefore enables us in all our service to rejoice in hope.

The context of the Christian life is the end of the world and the ends of the earth, because Christ is Lord of all. Its centre is at the point where the Lord of all was manifest as the Servant of all, giving his life that all mankind might have life, not by seeking it but by surrendering it.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.