

4The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 5The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 6I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. ^{7(For)} *The Lord God helps me; therefore, I have not been disgraced; therefore, I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 8he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 9It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.*

Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Sermon based on a sermon by Pastor Matthias Krieser (of Fürstenwalde, Germany), who studied Theology in Germany and the USA, and in 1993 was called to teach Theology in Botswana where he was sent by the Lutheran Church Mission. He learnt the Tswana language and spent 10 years training volunteer workers of the church. (Interesting bit of local history!)

Our sermon-text belongs to one of the famous **Servant of God Songs** in the Book of Isaiah. It seems at first, as if the prophet Isaiah is talking about himself when he says: *"4The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word."* The use of the pronouns "I" and "me" is confusing here. When he says: *6I gave my back to those who struck me, ..."* is the prophet talking about himself or is he talking about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who brought salvation to mankind through his suffering, death and resurrection? This "Servant of God" is, in fact, a Master, the Lord, - who **rode on a donkey's colt all those years ago as he entered Jerusalem** on the way to Calvary. It is the Lord Jesus Christ, who made himself a servant out of love for us. In Philippians 2, 7 we read that *"... of his own free will he gave up*

all he had and took the nature of a servant." In Isaiah 49, 6 we read of God's plan for him: *"I have a greater task for you, my servant. Not only will you restore to greatness the people of Israel who have survived, but I will also make you a light to the nations - so that all the world may be saved."* (Good News Bible) Christ, the Lord and Master of all, lowered himself, became a servant and disciple. And thus, he **speaks here through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, saying:** *4The Lord God (in other words: God the Father) has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.* The man Jesus of Nazareth had a human tongue, a human mouth, human speech, human feelings, and human thoughts. He understands us, meets us at eye-level and is able to comfort us. With this servant's tongue he says: *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11, 28). Yes, indeed, he knows how to speak to the weary at the appropriate time. How often has his Word given us strength and comfort in difficult times!

Jesus has a teacher's tongue, but he also has a teacher's ears. He is instructed by his mentor, his heavenly father. And so, he speaks through Isaiah with the words: *4...Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 5The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.* Jesus **heard and was obedient** - like a good disciple who listens to his teacher and a good servant who listens to his master. In this manner he was submissive to his Father, as we hear in Philippians 2, 8: *He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death - his death on the cross.* God's Son carried out his Father's will obediently and saved the world - even though it was bitter and extremely difficult for him, even though it led him to the cross.

Isaiah then speaks of the **sufferings of the Servant of God** with the words: *⁶I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.* Because of his obedience to the Father and his love for us he allowed himself to be whipped until his back was covered in blood. He allowed himself to be slapped in the face and suffered degradation and humiliation. He even allowed himself to be spat at - all because of his obedience to the Father and his love for us. And eventually he died on the cross in extreme agony. At the same time, he experienced something that he had never known before: he felt completely and utterly alone, seemingly deserted even by his Father in heaven. He suffered all this for us; in this manner he took the punishment for our sins upon himself - the Servant of God and the Saviour, who **prophesied this seven hundred years prior** to the event, through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah.

After the first three verses of our text in which the Christ, the Redeemer, is referred to with the word "I", there is a change in the text. In some translations it is omitted, also in our own translation. But in older versions, verse 7 is introduced with the little word "For": ("*Aber*" in German) "*For the Lord God helps me.*" It could also be translated with "and"; all it does is to indicate a **change from what has gone before**. Something new, something different is being said now. The act of salvation by the Servant of God on the cross brings redemption to human beings who trust him. In the following three verses (verses 7,8 & 9) **the redeemed human** being says: "*The Lord God helps me: "He who vindicates **me** is near"* and again: "*... the Lord God helps **me**.*" He sees himself in relation to Christ, his Redeemer.

Verse 7 expresses **trust in the midst of suffering and temptation**: *⁷The Lord God helps me; therefore, I have not been disgraced; therefore, I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.*" A boxer who parries blows to his body can understand what is meant with the words: *I have set my face like flint ...* If you tighten your muscles and make them hard,

you will not feel the blows as intensely as when the muscles are soft and pliable. In the same way, blows to the face can be endured better if the facial muscles are made taut. We all have to endure hardships and suffering in our lives; that is just the way life is. But whoever trusts in God's help can diminish the suffering through faith. We know that the suffering cannot totally destroy us because Jesus has redeemed us. We know that neither our sin nor the consequences thereof will put us to shame before God, because Jesus has removed the curse of sin on the cross.

Verse 8 explains **how this comes about**. The redeemed person, the "me" in the text, says: *⁸... he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.* These are the words of a fighter, fighting for his life. The apostle **Paul** latched onto these words in his letter to the Romans when he wrote in chapter 8, 33-34: *Who will accuse God's chosen people? God himself declares them not guilty! Who, then, will condemn them? Not Christ Jesus, who died, or rather, who was raised to life and is at the right-hand side of God, pleading with him for us!* This is the **core message of our faith, the doctrine of justification**: I cannot fight my way through; Christ fights for me. God justifies me; he sees me as someone with whom everything is right, everything is okay - but not because I do everything right, but because Christ has done it all for me. He has put right what I have done wrong. Here Satan has no chance anymore. Even if he succeeds in making me sin again and again, he cannot go to God and accuse me, saying: Look at this sinner. You must punish him severely! **Because the Servant of God has already paid my price.**

Verse 9 then takes a look at the **future glory**. The redeemed person says: *⁹It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them (who declare me guilty) will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.*

Whoever wants to accuse me and blacken my name before God will one day disappear from God's presence, but I am **allowed to remain with God** together with all the Redeemed.

It should now become clear that our sermon text speaks from **two different points of view**. Three verses deal with the words of Christ, the Redeemer, as the Servant of God who brings us salvation; three subsequent verses speak with the words of the redeemed person who praises God for his salvation. These two perspectives, one from the point of view of the Redeemer and the other from the point of view of the Redeemed really **belong together**. They belong together in the same way as Christ and the Christian belong together. He lives in me and I live in him. Without him I am nothing, but with him I have everything. He is the head and I am a limb of his body. He enters my body in Holy Communion and I am a part of him. It is a **mysterious unity** in which Christ and all the Redeemed join in the proclamation of the great and wonderful deeds of God with which he has made us free, now and in eternity.

Amen

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, be with you and remain in your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen