

Matthew 26: 27-66

Dear Preachers:

In ordinary usage, when we call someone “prophetic,” we tend to refer to an ability to predict the future. The Isaiah reading reflects the nature of a true prophet, what a prophet does, and the consequences of the prophetic life—suffering and sometimes death. Each verse of the passage reflects some aspect of the prophetic life, and of course, as we begin this most special week, when we focus on what Jesus is doing for us, this reading also speaks eloquently of Jesus. Jesus most fully summarizes the prophetic life as described by Isaiah.

There are four songs or oracles in the second part of the book of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, called “Deutero-Isaiah”. These oracles describe the chosen servant of God, they are called “the Songs of the Suffering Servant.” Today’s is one of them, the third Servant Song. The prophet tells us about a special servant whom God has appointed to a prophetic ministry---- to speak to a people in need. As happened to other prophets, the servant suffers fulfilling this calling. Nevertheless, the servant is totally dedicated to God’s will despite the great suffering that following this will causes. Who is this servant? It could be Israel itself as it fulfills its calling to be a “light to the nations;” it could be any great leader or wise one who leads the people back to God. This servant is remarkably holy and so was interpreted as a messianic figure. We can see why Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of this holy one of God.

So, in a parallel to today's gospel, this innocent and gentle servant suffers; but notice there is no complaint. The servant is chosen "to speak to the weary," and while there is no evidence of being able to change their condition, he is faithful to his calling. He speaks to the weary "a word." (The prophet of Deutero-Isaiah dwells more than any other prophetic writer on the power of God's Word.) And these people are weary. While the first part of Isaiah spoke to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, these later chapters are addressed to the exiles enslaved in Babylon. Earlier in Isaiah there were dire warnings to Jerusalem to mend her ways, but now the tone is one of consolation and hope. The prophet promises Jerusalem's restoration and a renewal.

The Servant is sent to speak “a word”, but words can be empty or “pie-in-the-sky” encouragements. But the words the prophet speaks is given by God. And they are given “morning after morning.” They are “up-to-date” words spoken to address a current crisis and need. When people don’t follow up on their words, we accuse them of “speaking just words, empty promises.” But we have known words that are powerful indeed, heart-healing and spirit-rousing. Words at their best have the presence and commitment of the speaker behind them. They bring and commit the speaker to the person and situation. “I will help you till we solve this problem.” “I won’t fail you.” “I forgive you.” “I will love you till death do us part.” Such “words” give us a clue to what God’s Word would mean to the weary exiles. They would know that God had not forgotten them, that the God of the Exodus would once again do the impossible and deliver them from the hands of their captors. They feel hopeless and isolated, but they hear that God is going to do something to deliver them. How do they know this? God has sent a spokesperson with an assuring word and God stands behind this word.

Our society mistakenly refers to someone being “prophetic” as having the ability to predict the future. Today’s passage helps us see some of the aspects of the prophetic life—the prophet’s “job description.” First, this one is chosen and gifted by God—“God has given me a well-trained tongue.” The prophet does not assume the mantle on his/her own authority. God is the source of the gift, has provided the essentials to fulfill the task. But a “well-trained tongue” implies a disciplined way of living. I think of the well-trained tongue of the lawyer who gives up the chance of a lucrative career to argue for the rights of the indigent or those on death row. Such work is often financially unrewarding, means a sacrifice of time and prosperous surroundings, and the ongoing discipline of study and burning the midnight oil. In addition, a disciplined life can be a training ground, a preparatory place where one may hear the call that sets one apart to be a chosen and unique servant of God. Discipline takes many shapes---prayer, study, simplification of lifestyle; fasting for and with those who hunger; spending time with and listening to the “weary” to be attentive to their needs and listening to hear what God would have us say to them and for them.

The reading suggests that this prophet is even subjected to physical abuse in fulfilling his task. We don’t know why but his opponents are infuriated by him. What stirred them against him? Perhaps he heard a word from God, and he was

stirred by the plight of the needy and has spoken a “word that will rouse them.” How many prophets (like Nelson Mandela) have, from a disciplined attentiveness, been moved to speak by word and example to an oppressed people and rouse them? Perhaps the punishment the prophet received (“beat me...plucked my beard...buffets and spitting”) comes from those who don’t want those under them to be roused to awareness of their plight; nor want them to know, that despite their seeming low status, God has heard them and has come to them through the words of this servant, this prophet. A prophetic person doesn’t have to shout and scream to be heard; especially when speaking to those crushed under a heavy burden, as were the Israelites under Babylonian captivity A gentle prophetic word can breathe new life (“raise them”) into them.

We sense the loneliness and difficulty in this prophet’s fulfilling his call. he suffers “disgrace”. Neither physical nor psychological abuse deter him. He willingly accepts the consequences of this choice. In such circumstances, being beaten, having his beard plucked and rejection, could easily have been interpreted as God’s not being on his side. He might have concluded that he was cut off from God, that God was not on his side. If God is on my side, one might reason, why am I suffering trying to perform this good task? Aren’t I doing God’s work? Was that Jesus’ feeling, expressed in today’s gospel, while he was dying on the cross—“My God, my God, why has thou abandoned me?” We can hear the “tempter’s” challenge from the First Sunday of Lent, “If you are the Son of God....” One has plenty reason to doubt when plans for the good of those in need collapse as totally as Jesus’ seemed to have done from his perspective on the cross.

We can see why the Isaian passage was chosen for today—it corresponds to the Passion narrative and the events of this week. Jesus chooses a gently king’s entrance into Jerusalem, as today’s opening processional reading from Matthew tells us. For this entrance Jesus, using a ruler’s prerogative, presses an animal into his service. He doesn’t enter on foot with the other pilgrims; he enters as David’s royal descendent. But he enters as the Servant about whom Isaiah wrote, one whose face is “set like flint” to do God’s will; no matter what the consequences.

Today we celebrate those faithful servants of God who showed incredible courage under great opposition to speak a word to the weary to rouse them. They bucked the majority opinion to speak for oppressed people. They suffered adverse opinion for doing what was right. They showed that God does not have a deaf ear for the

needy and that God chooses special ones to speak on God's behalf. God does not just initiate the servant's calling and then walk away; but stays by the side of the chosen one "morning after morning," to continue to guide and inspire. I think of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose prophetic ministry started in a small way but step by step, through events like the Birmingham bus boycott, grew to a larger and more visible world stage. Each day God opened his ear to hear, and, with sometimes tremulous steps, Martin responded and spoke to the weary a word that roused them.

I hear the gracious God behind this passage, the God who notices the blight of the beaten-down. God reaches out to them in every generation and circumstance. Do we think that this passage was just meant for the really important biblical figures or larger-than-life people of today's world? All of us who are witnessing the events of this week are being addressed by God. We hear "morning after morning" of God's concern for our injured world and God's working to help us by speaking to and forming people; gifting them with words that rouse. Think of who those "weary" and enslaved in our lives: those in crumbling marriages; our siblings struggling with job insecurity; a friend in terminal illness; an acquaintance facing a round of chemotherapy; a co-worker whose spouse has died; the hungry and homeless in our own land; abused women and children, etc. We can feel so helpless, especially when all we feel we can do is say a word. But to the one who listens and receives a word from God, a word can be new life to its recipients.

We need to practice attentiveness to God so we can be well-disposed listening posts and catch the word God wants to plant in our hearts. Do we not spend the whole first half of this liturgy today listening to the word of God and responding to it in prayer and then eucharistic thanksgiving? Perhaps we have already heard something that speaks to a situation we are trying to address. Perhaps again God has blessed us with an encouraging word so that we might receive what we need to speak a word to the weary..

MATTHEW'S PASSION ACCOUNT---- IN GENERAL

There is no "generic" account of the Passion narrative. Besides having different sources, each evangelist puts the account in a different light, interprets it for his readers' backgrounds and their needs. Matthew's gospel generally follows Mark's outline, yet he does flavor the story for the people for whom he is writing.

Matthew is called the most “Jewish” of the four Gospels. Thus, one needs to be aware of the Hebrew Scriptures when reading Matthew. He wrote for a largely Jewish - Christian community after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70 AD). He was trying to help them see that what they now believed as Christians, was consistent with their former Jewish faith and, in fact, was a continuation of it. Matthew’s community still considered themselves Jews and so they tried to show how following Jesus flowed from their Jewish faith. Matthew reflects this community’s perspective. It was not till later that the complete break from Judaism took place.

In the light of the Jewish background of this Gospel, this passion account reveals Jesus as the hoped-for Messiah. Matthew shows how the details in the passion of Jesus are part of God’s plan for the Messiah. God and Jesus are working in accord with one another. Thus, Jesus is not a helpless victim; but is very much in charge. Notice how aware he is as his fate unfolds. He tells his followers at the meal what will happen to him and them; he predicts Peter’s betrayal; in the garden he is awake and vigilant, praying while his disciples sleep; during his betrayal he seems to orchestrate events according to a divine plan he knows he is fulfilling; at his trial he keeps silence before his accusers. And so it goes, Jesus, the expected Messiah, is fulfilling the longings of the people and is acting according to the will of the One who sent him.

Throughout the narrative, Matthew uses allusions and images the Jewish-community would “get”. For example: Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem (today’s “processional Gospel”) points out that he rides on the “foal of a beast of burden,” so that “what had been spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled”; the “blood of the covenant” reference during the supper would stir up Exodus memories and his harsh treatment by his captors would be reminiscent of Isaiah’s suffering servant who quietly endured suffering at the hands of enemies.

CONCERNING THE PROCLAMATION OF THE PASSION NARRATIVE
Consider the following:

“The way that the passion narrative is proclaimed has varied through the centuries and varies today from parish to parish. Many parishes rely on the format commonly published in missalettes: three readers taking the roles of the narrator, Jesus, and other speakers, with the assembly taking the “crowd” parts. Some

communities further divide the individual speaker parts so that one person does not represent multiple figures. Other parishes use several readers but do not give the crowd parts to the assembly; this allows the assembly to listen rather than read along and avoids casting it in a negative role of calling for Christ's death. Some communities have opted to have the whole passion proclaimed by one well-prepared lector who can make the story come alive. Others use a succession of readers, each proclaiming one section of the narrative, often with the assembly singing an acclamation or a verse of a song after each section. If singing is not used, a brief pause after each section will help the assembly recognize the shifts in the narrative.

Whatever way your parish decides to handle this proclamation, it should be proclaimed by people who have prepared long and well. Though the story is familiar, we need to hear it proclaimed competently and powerfully. Be sure each reader knows the proper pronunciation of names and places. If multiple readers are used, clarify where each will stand as well as how and when each will take his or her place. Remember that this is a ritual event, and it needs competence and style and solemnity to be effective."

---WORKBOOK FOR LECTORS AND GOSPEL READERS: YEAR A, 1999
(Liturgy Training Publications, page 150)

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2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers

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3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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