

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” GOOD FRIDAY:
CELEBRATION OF THE LORD’S PASSION

Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12; Psalm 31; Hebrews 4: 14-16, 5: 7-9; John 18: 1-19:42

By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

This year I have decided to let John’s passion narrative speak for itself and I will preach from the first reading from Isaiah. So, that is where I will focus these reflections. If you have been looking for an opportunity to preach from the Hebrew texts, here is your chance.

Today’s Isaiah passage presents the “Servant.” This figure appears in chapters 40-55. In the servant we have a figure who has stirred much speculation and controversy among interpreters. The original language of these texts makes it hard to determine what the author(s) had in mind. Is the servant one person? A series of persons? A collective---a person representing the whole people of Israel? Which leaves many possibilities for the preacher. There are four appearances of this servant in Isaiah: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52: 13-53:12. Today’s passage is the Fourth Servant Song/Oracle.

John Mc Kenzie, S.J., in his *DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE*, says the title “servant” has a broad background. It could mean “slave,” as when used as a title of honor, “the slave of the king.” While it has a humble tone, here it refers to one of high ranking, close to the monarch. Moses and David were referred to by the term “servant,” so were the prophets. In an idealized way, Israel was identified as a servant to the world. Thus, the term “servant” alludes to those who have been used as God’s instruments for saving deeds. In Isaiah’s context, the servant does not seem to be identified with the messiah. Yet, especially in today’s passage, Christians have seen a reference to Jesus’ passion. This, and passages like it, helped the early church deal with the scandal of Jesus’s rejection, suffering and death.

Either implicitly or explicitly, the Isaian servant poems are used throughout New Testament writing. For example, in Jesus’ baptismal and transfiguration accounts the words spoken over Jesus by the voice from heaven are almost identical to 42:1-- if we change “servant” to “son.” The notion of the redeeming death of the servant has strong links to the way the New Testament describes Jesus’ life and mission. Today’s passage was also used for the fundamental Christian teaching

about Jesus' atonement for sin. There is an implied parallel: as the servant is to Israel; so Jesus is to the church---just as the servant's suffering is linked to and sanctifies the people of Israel, so does Jesus' suffering sanctify the church. Also implied in this use of the servant imagery is the understanding that Jesus continues to suffer in the members of the church and this suffering is instrumental for the church's purification.

Today's passage began with God's stating clearly, "my servant shall prosper, he shall be raised high and greatly exalted." We need to keep this opening line in mind since what we are about to hear is very discouraging---the vivid description of the servant's abject suffering. He will be unrecognizable, "...so marred was his look beyond human semblance." His suffering will cause people to turn away. And what was worse, his suffering seemed to be a punishment by God; for that is how such affliction was interpreted. The line that sticks in my craw is, "But the Lord was pleased to crush him in infirmity." Who is this God, I wonder, who gets "pleasure" from seeing a just and innocent one crushed? I am sure when people hear this line they will conclude that this is the infamous "Old Testament God," the one with the hard and mean reputation. But a closer reading of the passage shows that it is written in dramatic form. There is a shift in speakers. At the beginning and the end, God is speaking. The center section narrates the on-lookers' response to the suffering they observe in the servant. They speak among themselves, drawing conclusions from what they observe. To them, God is "crushing" the servant. This sounds similar to what we say today when we, or someone we know, is suffering. Some conclude, "God is testing my faith." Or "God doesn't give us more than we can bear." Aren't these horrible pictures of God, testing us or weighing us down to the edge of breaking?

The on-lookers are trying to understand what is going on; how can they explain the servant's suffering? They come to the astonishing conclusion that the servant's death is for the very people who considered him guilty and rejected him. His suffering saves them. This realization changes the on-lookers. They were wrong in condemning him; they are confessing their guilt. Their sin has been taken up by the servant, they and we are the beneficiaries, "...he shall see his descendants in a long life and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him."

So, God's will was that our sin be taken away by the servant's taking on our guilt, suffering and dying for it. What a mystery! Our ways of reckoning are befuddled, since there was not the usual show of the power we would expect to accomplish

this enormous task. Instead, in the servant, God presents to us a stark example of vulnerability and weakness. In the end we experience God's saving power in this sign of contradiction. One can see how adaptable this servant song was to New Testament writers like Paul, who saw in Jesus God's power and in his rejection a sign of contradiction that nevertheless accomplished much for us. In weakness we have seen God's power. The author of Hebrews also encourages us not to hold back in fear from the "throne of grace," for we know that God has allowed the servant Jesus to share our weakness and experience pain on our behalf. Therefore, we have not been frightened off by any false notions of a hard "Old Testament God." Instead, through the servant, God has shown a most approachable face.

The servant is present to both God and humans. What a combination of the divine and human is revealed in Isaiah's servant song! First, he is obviously a representative to us of God; he stands on God's side. God names him, "my servant." In him, "the will of the Lord shall be accomplished...." The servant also stands with sinful humanity, a "marred" and suffering one who bore our infirmities and endured our sufferings. He stood with us, identifying with our condition. We will look on this one and see how God was trying to get through to us and how much God did for us. Where the servant stands we look and see the saving acts of God.

The servant is not without participation in this suffering; he consents to it. He is willing to take the sin of evil doers upon himself; he even submitted to his own death. While he is subject to a divine plan, he is also a free and voluntary agent. This divine and human coalesce, this working together has accomplished a great deed for us, for this servant has, "taken away the sins of many and wins pardon for their offenses." Who is making the sacrifice, God or the servant? Both. God makes a sacrifice of the servant; the servant makes a willing sacrifice of himself. The text speaks for the "we." "We had all gone astray like sheep...." It turns out this servant isn't the sinner after all. But his suffering has awakened in us an awareness of our own sin.

God has taken what is an impossible situation and turned it around. The silent and innocent servant has been falsely accused, taken off, put to death and buried. But what seems over and defeated God has turned into victory. The One who is speaking and making a promise as the passage begins is the Creator (cf. 51: 9-10). This is the One who led the Israelites out of slavery, through the waters of the Red Sea and created a people out of no-people. Things are in God's hands now that the

servant is dead. Only God can bring life where life is over. Evil has had its victory and that seems to be that. But God will do what no human can do, give life and prosperity to the faithful dead. We are reminded that God will again bring life out of death, will conquer sin and make a faithful people out of a people who were not faithful, who rejected the very one God sent to save them.

QUOTABLE

Definiteness is the life of preaching.
A definite hearer, not the whole world;
a definite topic, not the whole evangelical tradition;
and, in like manner,
a definite speaker.
Nothing that is anonymous preach;
nothing that is dead and gone;
nothing even which is of yesterday,
however religious in itself and useful.
----John Henry Newman

JUSTICE NOTES

Jesus was a victim of the death penalty. Certainly, preaching about the death penalty would be appropriate today. Your diocesan peace and justice office should be able to get you some information if you need it. Here is a prayer by Sr. Helen Prejean, SCJ you might want to pray it or publish it in your bulletin.

God of Compassion

You let your rain fall on the just and the unjust.
Expand and deepen our hearts so that we may love as You love,
even those among us who have caused the greatest pain by taking a life.
For there is in our land a great cry for vengeance
as we fill up death rows and kill the killers in the name of justice,
in the name of peace.
Jesus, our brother,
You suffered execution at the hands of the state
but you did not let hatred overcome you.
Help us to reach out to victims of violence
so that our enduring love may help them heal.

Holy Spirit of God,
You strengthen us in the struggle for justice.
Help us to work tirelessly for the abolition of state-sanctioned death
and to renew our society in its very heart
so that violence will be no more. Amen.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

This might be an appropriate action to take on Good Friday, the day of Jesus' execution. Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "*People of Faith Against the Death Penalty*." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- James E. Williams #0441726 (On death row since 11/3/93)
- Levon J. Jones #0217191 (11/20/93)
- George E. Goode #0149506 (11/20/93)
- Martin A. Richardson #0343075 (11/22/93)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching,"

Jude Siciliano, OP

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