

Sermon for 20th October 2024, Year B, Proper 24

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Isaiah 53:4-end "The Suffering Servant"

Sermon

This week, I thought I'd take a break from discussing the endless mistakes the disciples are making in Mark's gospel as they try to selfishly and cluelessly manoeuvre their way into the most powerful positions in God's kingdom, not realising that to be glorified at Jesus's right and left hand is to share his fate on the Cross, and instead take a look at the Old Testament reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. This passage concerning the so-called 'Suffering Servant' is one of the most complex and contentious passages in the Old Testament. Just who is this 'Suffering Servant' that Isaiah describes in such painful detail, and what is their role in the history of God's people?

Chapter 53 of Isaiah is part of what scholars call 'Second Isaiah', writings set down most likely during the period of Jewish exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC. This is a period in which Jewish writers reflected on what mistakes had brought them into captivity, what God was asking of them now, and what the future might hold.

Even with that historical context in mind, it is still difficult to see exactly who or what the Suffering Servant refers to. Some Jewish scholars believe it refers to Israel as a whole, the people of God sent into exile who must somehow be a blessing to others while suffering themselves. But the text seems to suggest that this servant has a mission *to* Israel, so others argue it could refer to a king or prophet, perhaps even King Cyrus of Persia, who conquered Babylon and so liberated the Jews to return to Jerusalem. There is no consensus on this even today, so perhaps it is no surprise that after the crucifixion of Jesus, the apostles

immediately realised that Jesus Christ might fit the bill almost perfectly – a man oppressed and afflicted who refused to open his mouth and defend himself, a man led away to be executed by a perversion of justice, a man who did no violence, who had no deceit, who was crucified with criminals but buried in a wealthy man’s grave, who was punished on account of the sins of others, and by whose wounds, others were healed.

You will remember the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in the book of Acts, who was reading this exact passage when he encountered Philip. “Of whom does the prophet speak?” the eunuch asked, “himself or someone else?” and in response Philip “starting with this scripture, proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus”.

Since then, this passage in Isaiah has become a core part of Christian theology. In the earliest surviving lectionaries dating from the fifth century, this reading was prescribed for the noon liturgy on Good Friday, a tradition which continues until this day. And according to Egeria, a fourth century nun who made a pilgrimage from Spain to the Holy Land and wrote letters about everything she saw, every single one of the worshippers wept continuously during a three-hour service in which this passage was read, being so moved by the manner in which our Lord suffered for us.

But identifying Jesus Christ as the Suffering Servant is only the start of the theological complexities that emerge from this passage. Questions immediately arise as to the *meaning* of the suffering of Jesus. In the early Church two ideas developed. First, Jesus was seen predominantly an example of virtuous forbearance in the face of injustice. But this led directly to later unfortunate ideas such as insisting that slaves must always obey their masters, even those who are cruel and harsh, rather than seek freedom and justice.

Later, Jesus’ suffering was seen as a redemptive payment for all humanity, his willingness to die on the Cross somehow allowing God to forgive the sins of

humanity and restore the relationship between us – a theological idea called penal substitutionary atonement, in which Jesus takes the punishment from God that we rightly deserve, and thus reconciles us to our very displeased Creator.

But this idea opens up a huge can of worms about why a compassionate and loving God is somehow required to violently punish his compassionate and loving Son, in order to be able to forgive the rest of humanity. Some theologians even referred to this as ‘cosmic child abuse’ to demonstrate just how out of character it feels for a God of love to act this way. It seems to set up some universal law of justice that’s even higher than God, that God is somehow forced to obey. Theologically it makes no sense to me, and I hope it makes no sense to you either.

The great danger in all these ideas is that we take a theological idea about the redemptive and healing power of those who choose to suffer *voluntarily* on behalf of others, such as medics in warzones, family carers, and so on, and impose it on those who suffer involuntarily, such as slaves, refugees, the sick, the poor, the oppressed and abused, anyone who pays the cost so that someone else can live affluent and comfortable lives of freedom. Scapegoating, the idea that one person’s suffering can redeem or pay for the sins of others, is virtually obsolete today as a religious practice, but it is still alive and well in secular society. Many people love to find others to blame for their own woes and far too many people secretly or not so secretly find comfort when someone they dislike is suffering.

But imposed suffering has no virtue in it, and no one should be tempted to say, as the old monks and nuns used to, that the more a person passively endures hardships and ‘offers up’ their suffering, the more souls are somehow released from purgatory or escape from hell. This, in my opinion, is not holy servanthood, but a base justification of abuse.

What I believe makes the suffering servant virtuous is the voluntary nature of the suffering, their determination to embody love in the world regardless of any

negative consequences for themselves. This isn't something we can or should be cajoled into, browbeaten into, brainwashed into, or in any way pressured to submit to by others. Jesus invited us to take up our cross and follow him, not let others hang millstones around our necks, let alone hang millstones around anyone else's.

Some of the most transformative people in history are those who suffered under oppression without losing their own vision of love, forgiveness and truth. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela were all twentieth century examples of people who could have submitted or colluded with oppression, but they had visions of a different way, a glimpse of the Kingdom of God right in front of them, a dream if you will, and no amount of suffering was going to stop them from steadfastly journeying towards it, healing the suffering of so many others who travelled alongside and behind them.

In the end, it may not matter whether we can precisely identify the Suffering Servant from Isaiah's writing. Perhaps God never intended it to be applied to a single nation or an individual person from history, or even solely to Jesus Christ himself, but rather intended it to show the path that all God's servants are called to in the world, even us here today. We are all wielders of the power and blessing of love, transformed by experiencing God's love into people willing to endure all things to show that love to others. The more love we have received, the more deeply we are able to endure in order to love others. Perhaps some of us may even one day dare to agree with Jesus, that 'Greater love hath no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends'.