



HOLY WEEK

Holy Week Isaiah Songs

Monday of Holy Week

Isaiah 42:1-7

The crucifixion of Jesus was a real challenge to the first Christians. When trying to understand the “what” and the “why”, they went back to their Bible (our “Old Testament”). Four poems in Isaiah, called today the Songs of the Suffering Servant, were very helpful to them and today we hear the first of these poems.

Tuesday of Holy Week

Isaiah 49:1-6

Today, the lectionary gives us the second of the Suffering Servant Songs. This particular one echoes the call of a prophet and portrays the great trust of God’s messenger.

Wednesday of Holy Week

Isaiah 50:4-9

The third Song of the Servant is very striking. There is a wealth of “body” language (ear, back, beard, face) but the real message in spiritual: listening, non-violence and faith.

Holy Thursday Exodus

Exod 12:1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: 2 This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. 3 Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.

4 If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. 5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6 You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. 10 You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

11 This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. 12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. 13 The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

Exod 12:14 This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

It is quite like that the Last Supper was

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not a Passover meal and that the timing in the Fourth Gospel is more accurate. Nevertheless, it was in Passover week and the feast is part of the context. In that sense, the first reading is the obvious one to read today.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

This passage reflects a long history, with the final shape reflecting later Passover practices.

The origins of what became the Passover may go back to agrarian spring fertility rites, offerings of the first fruits of the flocks and of the crops (nomadic / settled).

These practices were then linked then to the Exodus and ever after as a memorial or zikkron.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a narrative which supports and explains a ritual practice. The best commentary for the *function* of the ritual may come not from the Bible but from the Mishnah, where the explanation is very close to our practice of the Eucharist:

In every generation a person is duty-bound to regard himself as if he personally has gone forth from Egypt, since it is said, And you shall tell your son in that day saying, it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt (Ex. 13:8). Therefore we are duty-bound to thank, praise, glorify, honour, exalt, extol, and bless him who did for our forefathers and for us all these miracles. He brought us forth from slavery to freedom, anguish to joy, mourning to festival, darkness to great light, subjugation to redemption, so we should say before him, Hallelujah. (Pesachim 10:5)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

So Moses told the Israelites that they

should keep the passover. They kept the passover in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai. Just as the LORD had commanded Moses, so the Israelites did. Now there were certain people who were unclean through touching a corpse, so that they could not keep the passover on that day. (Numbers 9:4–6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The telling combines ritual details, practicalities and a kind of allegorical interpretation. The reading reflects the practices of early Judaism, by which time the Passover had become *the* pilgrimage feast.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Memory—as we know sadly from its loss—has tremendous power for maintaining both identity and hope. Can you recall any particular memories which sustained when time were difficult?

2. In this reading, the sense of anticipated liberation is powerful. In our Christian exodus and Passover, we too are set free.

PRAYER

We praise you, loving God, for your many gifts: gift of love, hope and liberation. Help us to embrace the freedom you offer and to keep it alive by the good choices that we make.

Holy Thursday 1 Corinthians

1 Cor 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is the earliest account of the Lord’s Supper to come down to us. Nevertheless, it already shows the marks of liturgical evolution, such as the repeated injunction, “do this in memory of me.”

Paul has this story as one of the very few incidents in Jesus’ life which he recounts.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The context in the community is strife and division, especially along the lines of rich / poor. It seems clear that the poor members are being disparaged and not properly recognised as equally members of the body of Christ. Paul does offer an immensely practical solution (see below), but being lies his great theology of the body of Christ.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a tradition report, using some of the technical language of the rabbis.

RELATED PASSAGES

Theological considerations

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1Corinthians 11:27–32)

Practical solutions

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come. (1Corinthians 11:33–34)

From the Didache

And concerning the broken bread: We give you thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge that you have made known to us through Jesus, your servant; to you be the glory forever.

Just as this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and then was gathered together and became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever. (Didache 9:3–4)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 23 Paul used the technical term for handing on Pharisaic traditions. NB a single loaf. Cf. the Didache.

Verse 24 A prophetic gesture, disclosing to those present the meaning of Jesus’ death on the following day.

Verse 25 The word over the cup recall the covenant as well as being an echo of the last Suffering Servant Song.

Verse 26 As always, Paul is aware of the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of Christian living. In contrast to the Corinthians, some of whom think everything is now and that is all there is, Paul teaching that the present moment is only a first instalment of what is to come.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. When I experience a truly memorable Eucharist? What made it special? Has the memory of it helped me understand something of ever Eucharist?

2. Community is essential to the Eucharist and when that is fracture then the celebration is impaired and its true meaning hindered. This is still true today: community celebrates Eucharist and Eucharist makes community.

PRAYER

May familiarity never blind us to the immense riches we have in the Lord’s Supper. By our celebration tonight bring us back to a true celebration that we may encounter the Risen Lord in Word, Sacrament and community. Amen.

Holy Thursday Gospel

John 13:1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” 7 Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” 8 Peter said to him, “You

will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” 9 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” 10 Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

(i) The Fourth Gospel is in two parts, Jn 1-12 and Jn 13-21. The Holy Thursday reading serves a double function: to begin is a highly solemn way the Book of Glory (with vv.1-4) and to begin the story of the Passion with the Last Supper (vv. 5-15).

(ii) The washing of the feet is found only in the Fourth Gospel. It may draw its inspiration from the Synoptic tradition (see under D below) but the vocabulary and interpretation are entirely Johannine.

(iii) In the Fourth Gospel—remarkably—there is no account of the Lord’s Supper during the Last Supper. This much may be said: looking forward historically, the Lord’ Supper interprets the death of death by means of prophetic gesture. In this Gospel, the washing of the feet fulfills exactly the same function (see below for details).

(iv) Finally, we notice the heading “before the festival of the Passover.” This alerts us to the fact that in this Gospel, the Last Supper is not a Passover meal. According to the Johannine calendar, the Passover that year was Friday night through Saturday. Jesus as the Christian Passover is a significant layer in this Gospel (see 1:29; 19:29; 19:33-36).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Passover is already indicated in the first reading for this liturgy. Another important background is found in prophetic gestures.

KIND OF WRITING

There are three moments here.

(i) Vv.1-4 form a solemn introduction or exordium.

(ii) Vv. 5-11 The story falls into a recognisable category from prophetic writings, that of “prophetic gesture”. Across the Hebrew Bible but especially in the prophetic books, we find “prophetic gestures”. These were mini dramas, which vividly illustrated the message of a particular prophet. Of the many examples, here are some from Ezekiel: Ezekiel made a model of Jerusalem - Ezek 4:1-3; the rationed food - Ezek 4:9-19; the hair - Ezek 5; the exile’s baggage - Ezek 12:1-16; Ezekiel’s “non-bereavement” - Ezek 24:15-27.

(iii) Vv.12-15 form an exhortation drawing out some of the meaning of the passage.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:24–27)

(iii) Water: this word has an immense significance in this Gospel from start to finish. It points to the source of salvation in Christ, the event of salvation in lifting up on the cross and the gift of salvation in the heart of the believer. John 1:26, 31, 33; 2:7, 9; 3:5, 23; 4:7, 10–11, 13–15, 46; 5:7; 7:38; 13:5; 19:34.

(ii) The words used have special reference in this Gospel. In Greek, for example, it does not say he got up from the table but that he rose. Likewise, it does not say in Greek he took off his garment but that he laid down his garment. All the words refer in some way to the death and resurrection.

Rose: 13 times, almost always in reference to the resurrection of Jesus.

Took off: 18 times, usually in reference to Jesus’ laying down his life.

Wrapped: 3 times, but the links brings to the miracle in Jn 21.

Water: 21 times, but the contexts are always illuminating

Washing: 13 times.

Wipe: 3 times only.

Feet: 14 times

“*Never*”: 12 (lit. “into eternity” with a special meaning).

Bringing these various strands together, we may summarise as follows. The Washing of the Feet is a prophetic gesture in literary form, inspired by the Synoptic tradition. It is not simply an exemplum of service, leading to a primarily moral teaching.

As a prophetic gesture at the Last Supper, indeed as a prophetic gesture replacing the Lord’s Supper, its function is identical to that of the words and actions over the bread and wine: the washing of feet interprets the death of Jesus as an act of loving service. The need to insist on this is best felt by remembering the shock of the crucifixion and the immense difficulty this was for Jews at the time.

This means, for example, that the dialogue with Peter is not really about the washing of the feet, taken literally. On the level of Johannine spirituality, it is really about being able to accept that God-in-Jesus loved humanity to such an extraordinary level that God lovingly served humanity by means of his death on the cross.

ST PAUL

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:1–8)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 There are three Passovers in this Gospel. “Hour” means the special time of salvation / glorification in the lifting up. Depart: because he came and was made flesh. Love to the end means (a) up until the end and (b) perfectly. The

latter forms a frames with Jesus' last words in this Gospel: "it is perfected" (literally).

Verse 2 Jesus faces not just wickedness but evil as such.

Verse 3 The reference is to the "Word made flesh" being "lifted up".

Verse 4 Literally, he rose and laid down.

Verse 5 The Johannine Jesus illustrated the teaching of the historical Jesus on service: For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

Verse 6 The reversal of roles is shocking; however, the real shock is not the immediate issue of foot washing but that God in Christ served humanity on the cross. This was the crux of the matter for Jews who could not accept Jesus. Cf. Mk 8:31-33—also on the lips of Peter.

Verse 7 Understanding later is a commonplace in John's Gospel. This later understanding is a gift of the Spirit. See 2:22; 12:16; 16:12-15.

Verse 8 The objection is stronger and Jesus reply is a key: having a share with him in what?

Verse 9 Feet, hands and head: cf. the treatment of Jesus himself.

Verse 10 Possibly a reference to Baptism at the time of writing.

Verse 11 This negative, jarring note reminds us immediately of the death of Jesus.

Verse 12 An open question, taking us behind the simply act of washing.

Verse 13 Cf. Lk 22:24-27 above.

Verse 14 Why so concrete? Why not a general principle? Because the cross was concrete and our service too is always particular and practical. Thus having been service by the crucified, we live a cruciform discipleship.

Verse 15 The little word "as" (kathós) is vital in this Gospel: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:12) It means more than to follow an example; it means to live from the originating gift.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Loving to the end and perfectly—when has that been my experience?

Whom am I called to love like that?

2. There is a reversal of roles taking place—illustrating the heart of the Gospel. Have I ever broken the mould of expectation and acted "out of role"? What gave me courage?

3. Peter finds it hard to be served—sometimes it is easier to give than to receive. When have I hesitated to receive? Do I find it hard to receive from God?

4. There are no ethics as such in the Fourth Gospel—love is all, summarised provocatively by St Augustine: *dilige, et quod vis fac.*

PRAYER

O God, in the fullness of time, you revealed your love in Jesus the Lord. On the eve of his death, as a sign of your covenant, he washed the feet of his disciples and gave himself as food and drink. Give us life at this sacred banquet and joy in humble service, that, bound to Christ in all things, we may pass over from this world to your kingdom, where he lives and reigns with you now and always in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Good Friday Isaiah

Isa 52:13 See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. 14 Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals— 15 so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate. 53:1 Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Isa 53:4 Surely he has borne our infirmi-

ties and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isa 53:7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. 9 They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Isa 53:10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper. 11 Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In Second Isaiah (40-55), God's help to Israel is expressed in three ways: creation/redemption, the vindication of the Servant and the return to Zion. In particular, there are four Suffering Servant Songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11 and 52:13-53:12). Scholars have struggled to establish the meaning at the time of writing and Jewish readings note the parallel with the ministry of Jeremiah (Jer 10:18-24; 11:19) and similarities with other texts in Isaiah. At these same time, these poems have proved an especially rich resource for early Christian reflection on the cross. Today's passage is the most striking of the four.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The reading comes from Second Isaiah, that is Isaiah 40-55, written during the Babylonian exile.

WHAT KIND OF WRITING IS THIS?

This passage is a poem, displaying the common features of biblical poetry: OT reference; metaphors; parallelism (i.e. two lines saying the same thing in different words [synonymous]). Is 53:1-9 illustrates the parallelism very clearly. As for the typical language, cf. Psa 18:5-6, 30:4; Jonah 2:2, 8; Is 5:1-6; 2:12-14; 11:1-10; Psa 91:15-16.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the first poem (Isa. 42:1-4 [5-9]) Yahweh describes his servant as chosen, endowed with the Spirit, humble, and compassionate. He will persevere until he brings justice to the nations. In the second poem the servant testifies that he is called before birth, prepared as Yahweh's special, hidden weapon; the servant feels that his labour is in vain, yet he will trust in God to vindicate him (49:1-4).

Here Israel is identified as the servant (49:3), whose mission, paradoxically, is to restore fallen Israel and to be a light to the nations (vv. 5-6). Although the term "servant" is missing from 50:4-9 [10-11], most scholars consider this passage to be part of the series. Here the servant is Yahweh's faithful, obedient disciple, enduring scorn, abuse, and painful beatings, yet continuing to trust in God to vindicate him.

In the fourth poem (52:13-53:12) a group, probably the nations, speaks of the servant's vicarious sufferings on their behalf and his ultimate exaltation. There is a wide discussion of the identity of the servant and those who speak for him.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The prayer of the Psalmist, fully of confidence, prepares us for the confident last words of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: It is accomplished.

LINK WITH THE GOSPEL

The reading prepares for the Gospel by meditating on the value of the unjust death of the innocent, seen as a sacrifice for others.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 13 Cf. Is 42:1-4. The poem begins with exaltation from God. Cf. Is 49:7.

Verse 14ff. The humiliation is expressed through its effects on others; suffering disfigures (contrast Psa 8:5) and frightens.

Verse 1 A "chorus" speaks ("we"), probably Israel. The Lord's presence is difficult to discern, even though the action and message confirm each other mutually.

Verse 2f. A biography starts: 2 (birth and maturation); 3 and 7 (suffering and passion); 8 (execution and death); 9 (burial); 10-11a (glorification). Who exactly this person is remains mysterious. Cf. Psa 31:11ff.; 38:8, 9, 12; Lam 3:1, 14. "Root" and "majesty" hint at Davidic status, perhaps even Messianic identity.

Verse 4f. Here it is not the victim but the spectators who confess their sins. Initially, following biblical teaching, they interpret the suffering as punishment. The chorus expresses the paradox of suffering which healed. Cf. 1 Pet 2:22-25.

Verse 6 A classical image of sin (gone astray) which prepares us for v. 7.

Verse 7 The silence of the servant is directly mentioned—contrast Job 3!

Verse 8 Unjust condemnation—Psa 7:7, 9, 12; 35:11, 23, 24. In contrast, this servant does not lament the injustice of his suffering. Cf. Hab 1:12-17.

Verse 9 I.e. the common grave of criminals.

Verse 10f. The shock here is that the humiliation was complete, without relief or apparent vindication. Expiation—unique in Isa, but cf. Lev 4-5; 7; 14; 19. A light dawns as a symbol of reversal and salvation.

Verse 12 God confirms his promise given at the start of the poem, declaring null the human exercise of justice. Somehow, this innocent suffering brings salvation to the many. Cf. Lk 22:37.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. This Song of the Suffering Servant, originally referring to the Jewish nation, applies very aptly to Jesus. As you read it, how does it highlight for you the love God has shown us in Jesus?

2. There have also been people in more recent times who have been Suffering Servants and whose suffering has been a source of life for others: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela and others. Whose lives have spoken to you in his way?

3. The story of any long-term helpful and life-giving relationship may have

moments with an echo of the Suffering Servant theme. Who has been a Suffering Servant for you, through whose sufferings you have been healed? For whom have you shown that kind of love?

4. One can also use this passage as a way of understanding the personal experience of coming face to face with the shadow side of ourselves. Have you ever been "appalled" at what you have seen in yourself? Have you felt you were "disfigured", "without beauty", "a thing despised? Did you want to "screen your face" from what you saw? Yet have there been occasions when by painfully and patiently facing the truth of what you saw, the experience turned out to be a "punishment that brings peace" and by your wounds you were healed?

PRAYER

Be mindful, Lord, of this your family, for whose sake our Lord Jesus Christ, when betrayed, did not hesitate to yield himself into his enemies' hands and undergo the agony of the cross. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Good Friday Hebrews

Heb 4:14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Heb 5:7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9 and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10 having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Theses two passages are probably the best-known and best-loved from the Letter to the Hebrews. The Letter as a

whole is a highly sophisticated document, with a somewhat tortuous style. The author alternates between reflection on the Christ even, seen through the lens of the Temple, and exhortation, presented as practical advice.

The distinctive rhetorical character of Hebrews is evident in the introduction (1:1–4), which sets the tone in both content and rhetorical power for the remainder of the homily. The author demonstrates the ultimacy of the Christian revelation in comparison with God's previous disclosures in the OT (1:1–2), and develops the high Christological claim with the rhetorical device of comparison ("greater than"; cf. 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 11:16, 40; 12:24). Because of the exaltation to God's right hand (Ps. 110:1), Christ is greater than all counterparts from the OT.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The key text behind all of Hebrews is Psalm 110: "Of David. A Psalm. The Lord says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty sceptre. Rule in the midst of your foes. Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter heads over the wide earth. He will drink from the stream by the path; therefore he will lift up his head. " (Psalms 110:0-7)

"After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him one tenth of everything. Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself." But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the Lord, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything

that is yours, so that you might not say, 'I have made Abram rich.' I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them take their share.'" (Genesis 14:17-24)

KIND OF WRITING

Although Hebrews contains an epistolary conclusion (13:18–25), the remainder of the book has a totally different character from the Christian epistolary tradition that began with Paul. It lacks the epistolary opening, the common epistolary topics, and the argumentative structure of the Pauline Epistles. Indeed, the author refers to his message as a "word of exhortation" (13:22), a term which is used elsewhere (Acts 13:15) for a synagogue sermon. This was a rhetorical form that had developed in the Hellenistic Jewish synagogue consisting of 1) an indicative or exemplary section in the form of scripture quotations or theological points; 2) a conclusion based on the exemplary section; and 3) an exhortation to the community. Unlike the Pauline Epistles, Hebrews follows the common pattern of the word of exhortation. The epistolary conclusion is added to the homily because the author's sermon had to be sent.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Temple symbolism is important in the Gospels and in Paul. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." (1Corinthians 3:16-17)

ST PAUL

"For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith." But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:10-14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 This is an exhortation, starting in 14 and concluding in 16. The readers already believe Jesus was the Son of God. High priest = representative priest. "Passed through" referred originally to the High Priest entering the sanctuary, but here Jesus enters the real sanctuary, heaven, symbolised by the earthly temple.

Verse 15 This is the topic of the letter: Jesus' priesthood is through the unexpected step of compassionate solidarity with sinners—like us is every respect—not sacred separation. In Hebrews, there is information on the treatment of Christians (friction with society, abuse, imprisonment).

Verse 16 The grace (= gift, literally) is underlined twice, so that we need have no hesitation coming to this intermediary, who has achieved his priestly office in his death and resurrection, assuring us of the mercy and help we need.

Verse 7 The full section here would be vv. 5-10. Jesus' offering was similar (prayers and supplications) and different (reverent submission by the Son of God). His prayer to be delivered from death is on one level not heard and at another level heard for the benefit of us all. Out (*ek* in Greek) can mean "from" and "out of". He prayed to be saved from death and God saved him (and us) out of death.

Verse 8 This verse is difficult theologically. Although Jesus was never disobedient to God, he could not demonstrate obedience until he was placed in situations where the will of God was challenged and obedience was required. There was constancy in Jesus' unflinching obedience to God's will, yet as Jesus encountered new situations, his faithfulness to God was challenged and his obedience was shaped accordingly.

Verse 9 Perfected—as a human being before God and as a priest—and therefore exalted as the fulfilment of the Temple service. Suffering does not negate salvation, but is the way God's brings about salvation.

Verse 10 Melchizedek is a mysterious figure about which there was much speculation at the time of Jesus. He is used in Hebrews for several reasons. (i) He predates the Levitical priesthood, which permits the author to say Jesus was a priest although not a descendent of Levi. (ii) "Without father, without

mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.” (Hebrews 7:3) Jesus, as the Son of God, is “without genealogy, without beginning of days” and as resurrected from the dead (without end).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. One of the greatest blocks in a relationship is when you meet with a person who is unable to sympathise with where you are. Think of the difference it has made to you when you met someone who was able to tune in to your experience of difficulties, worry or pain. What does it mean to you to think of Jesus as one able to sympathize with you in all your weaknesses?

2. The author encourages us to ‘approach the throne of grace with boldness’. Can you recall times when your trust in another enabled you to approach that person with confidence in a time of need with the result that you ‘received mercy’ and ‘found grace’? What has encouraged and built up your confidence to approach God, or Jesus, in that way?

3. Life can be a harsh teacher, and for none more so than for Jesus. He suffered for his unwavering trust in God. His ‘reverent submission’, his ‘obedience’ in the face of unbelievable suffering and opposition enhance the credibility of his testimony. He lived what he said. What people have you known that you trusted because you knew just how they had been tested and stood firm? Have there been times when your words have been given added power because you spoke from lived experience?

4. It was through the fidelity of Jesus to the mission given him by God that he became the source of eternal salvation for others. Have you ever found that your ability to cope with reality enables you to help others? Or have you found that when you can draw on your faith and trust in God to help you in difficult circumstances, then you can also be a source of ‘salvation’, or help, for others?

PRAYER

Lord God, whose compassion embraces all peoples, whose law is wisdom, freedom, and joy for the poor, fulfil in our midst your promise of favour, that we may receive the gospel of salvation with faith and, anointed by the Spirit, freely proclaim it.

Good Friday Gospel

John 19:17 Carrying the cross by himself, Jesus went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” 20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. 21 Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” 22 Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.” 23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. 24 So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.” This was to fulfill what the scripture says, “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” 25 And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” 27 Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

John 19:28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), “I am thirsty.” 29 A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. 30 When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19:31 Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. 32 Then the soldiers came and

broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. 33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. 35 (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) 36 These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, “None of his bones shall be broken.” 37 And again another passage of scripture says, “They will look on the one whom they have pierced.”

John 19:38 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. 39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. 42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

All the accounts of Jesus’ death tell fundamentally the same story. However, the details vary considerably and are highly significant. It is not just a question of what people remembered. The added stories and words consistently reflect the understanding each Gospel writer offers of the meaning of the cross and resurrection. The primary frame in this Gospel is new creation.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) New Creation: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (Gen 1:1–3) And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Gen 2:2–3)

(ii) Psalms: On you I was cast from my

birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. (Ps 22:10) I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots. (Ps 22:17–18) They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink. (Ps 69:21)

(iii) **Passover:** Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. (Exod 12:22) It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the animal outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. (Exod 12:46)

KIND OF WRITING

This is a combination of a basically historical narrative with symbolic details to carry the interpretation of the evangelist.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. (John 2:1)

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. (John 18:15–16)

One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking (John 13:23–25)

ST PAUL

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:6) So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor 5:17) For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! (Gal 6:15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

(i) 17-25a Discussion [with Pilate]

In this Gospel, Jesus always used “lifted up” to refer to his death. Jn 3:14; 8:28;

13:32, 34. Simon: important elsewhere and surely historical – here deleted on account of Jn 10:17 and 17:19. Psalm 22:16 – see Jn 10:8; Three languages – commerce, culture and religion. Nazareth: Jn 1:46; 7:41; 7:52.

(ii) 25b-27 Mother and Beloved Disciple

One for each soldier: headdress, cloak, belt, and shoes (i.e. four soldiers). Instead of underlining the mockery of the soldiers, John underlines their unwitting fulfilment of scripture – Psalm 22:18; Mother / woman: symbolic of the daughter of Zion. Beloved disciple: symbolic of discipleship. The words have a deeper meaning: an appeal to mother Judaism to recognise the legitimacy of her offspring Christianity and an appeal to Christianity to recognise the maternity of Judaism. From that hour – see especially Jn 16:32.

(iii) 28-30 Death of Jesus

“Finished” frames the scene; also perfected as in 13:1; Vinegar: Ps 69:21. “I thirst”: Psalm 63:1; Jn 4:7. See also Jn 18:11. Hyssop: stick elsewhere; hyssop here because: Num 19:18; Ex 12:22; cf. Heb 9:19; Finished / perfected: Gen 2:2. Cf. In the beginning in Jn 1:1 and Gen 1:1; “Handing over the spirit” is likewise unusual. It is interesting to note that the Synoptics usually avoid using the ordinary terms for dying of Jesus (*apothneskō* and *teleutaō*):

Mark and Luke: he expired (*exepneusen*)

Matthew: he let his spirit depart (*apheken to pneuma*)

John: he handed over his spirit (*paredoken to pneuma*)

Also, the words of the Risen Lord in John: receive the Holy Spirit. Cf. Jn 7:39; 16:7; 20:22.

(iv) 31-37 Discussion [with Pilate]

Nor breaking legs: Passover symbolism. Ex 12:46; Num 9:12; Ps 34:20. Blood and water: Jn 7:37; 4:14; 16:7; 19:30. Pierced: Zech 12:10; cf. Rev 1:7.

(v) 38-42 “Royal” Burial

Joseph of Arimathea suddenly appears; likely to be historical. Nicodemus – the longer journey of the Jew – illustrating reconciliation / inclusion? Aloes and myrrh? Psalm 45:8; Prov 7:17 Song 4:14 especially (i.e. a resumption of the nuptial symbolism from John 1-4;). Garden – echo of Eden and anticipation of the “gardener” in Jn 20?

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. “The Good Shepherd lays down his life” (John 10). What has been my experience

of being loved? Who has made sacrifices for me? Do these human experiences help me approach the death of Jesus, for me? Prayer of being loved.

2. “God so loved the world” (John 3). The leap of faith in the cross and resurrection is not so much to believe a doctrine but to trust God, as God of living. What is my experience of trust and being trusted? Prayer of faith and love.

3. “This is the Lamb of God” (John 1). Jesus’ death sets us free. How am I unfree? Have I ever experience release? Who helped me? What was it like? To what in me is the Risen Jesus speaking a word of liberation today?

4. There was always God’s Spirit in the world. Yet, after Jesus death and resurrection the role of the Spirit has so changed that we can speak of a new gift of the Spirit. What is my own experience of “before and after” events? What have been the “before and after” events in my life as a believer?

PRAYER

From the throne of grace, O God of mercy, hear the devout prayer of your people.

As your Son is lifted high upon the cross, draw into his exalted life all who are reborn in the blood and water flowing from his opened side.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Passover and our peace, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, holy and mighty God, for ever and ever. Amen.

For the Vigil Readings, a very brief introduction is provided, as well as a some historical contextualisation and related NT texts, either for personal reflection or liturgical use.

Easter Vigil OT Readings

READING 1 GENESIS 1:1-2:2

Our contemporary wonder at the universe was shared by the ancient writer who composed this poetic account of creation. All God made is good, even very good!

Historical Note

Written probably during or after the Babylonian Exile (587-539)

Related NT Passages

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1–5)

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2Corinthians 4:6)

READING 2 GENESIS 22:1-18

What could be behind this reading? Perhaps the experience that trusting in God sometimes feels “counter intuitive”. For all its difficulty, Abraham comes across as our father in faith.

Historical Note

Originally, it may have been a cult legend against child sacrifice. As it stands now in the Bible, the story is the tenth of the ten testing of Abraham, the man of faith.

Related NT Passages

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Romans 4:16–17)

READING 3 EXODUS 14:15-15:1

This story of liberation—even with its disturbing dimensions—dramatically portrays God as a God of liberation. This readings has inspired people over the centuries, especially the oppressed, because our God desires us to be free.

Historical Note

Behind out text there may well be an ancient memory of a slave escape, written up theatrically, perhaps during the Babylonian Exile. It became the foundation myth of the Israelites (myth in the strong sense!!).

Related NT Passages

For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. (1Corinthians 5:7)

Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. (1Corinthians 7:21–22)

READING 4 ISAIAH 54:5-14

Using the experience and metaphor of married love, the reading offers a rich exploration of God’s constancy, God’s faithful love to Israel and to us all.

Historical Note

Written probably during the Babylonian Exile, when people felt God had abandoned them.

Related NT Passages

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” (Revelation 19:7–9)

READING 5 ISAIAH 55:1-11

We thirst for God and, in a strange way, God’s thirsts for us.

Historical Note

Written just after the return from exile in Babylon, during a period of faltering reconstruction: God’s word achieves what it sets out to do.

Related NT Passages

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

READING 6 BARUCH 3:9-15, 32-4:4

A wise person is a great friend to have...

and what is wisdom? This reading offers a challenging portrait.

Historical Note

Jeremiah had a secretary called Baruch but he is not the author of this short book. The book is of uncertain date, probably written in the Diaspora. The message is: recognise your sin and return to God, the fountain of life and wisdom.

Related NT Passages

Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. (Revelation 21:6)

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1Corinthians 1:22–25)

READING 7 EZEKIEL 36:16-28

Where do we find hope? Where to we find the springs of renewal? Our final reading was written when people had more or less given up.

Historical Note

Ezekiel worked during the Babylonian Exile: God herself will bring about a change of heart and give all new hope by a change of heart.

Related NT Passages

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ (John 3:5–8)

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Easter Vigil

Romans

Rom 6:3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Rom 6:5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In the course of Romans 5-8, Paul gives a very comprehensive account of all that the Roman Christians—both Jews and Gentiles—have received from Christ. It makes for remarkable reading and not least is his account in chapter 6 of Baptism. His hope is that with so much in common, the Roman Christians will be able to overcome their differences in the light of all they have received.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

No one knows who founded the Roman churches—certainly not Paul. As note in the Initial Observations, the community split along Jewish and Gentile lines. The presenting issue was how much of the received Jewish tradition should be insisted upon. What happened in Rome mattered Paul because it touched the heart of his Gospel—the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in Christ—and because it was happening in the capital city of the Roman Empire.

KIND OF WRITING

In the letter, Paul argues from many angles. At this point, he is trying to get the Roman Christians to registers in their minds all they have received and,

he hopes, in light of that to be able to set aside their differences.

RELATED PASSAGES

In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. (Romans 7:4–6)

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. (2Corinthians 5:14–15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 3 Paul is arguing here from their experience and a good interpretation of it.

Verse 4 Paul evokes the symbolism of immersion and draws consequences for the way we live in *newness of life*.

Verse 5 This is our Christian hope, the hope of transformations, which begins now in our inner selves and in our way of living.

Verses 6-7 Paul implies that the behaviour of judging our neighbour is evidence that we are not yet set free.

Verse 8 The alarming information that we have (!) is echoed later in Colossians 3:1-4.

Verses 9-10 Christ is now free from death and has conquered sin. *Therefore*, the live he lives he lives to God (an apocalyptic expression). There are consequences for us today, as we see in the very next verse.

Verse 11 And, therefore, we too out to be radically new and transformed in our lives and manner of treating others. Given all we have received—life, forgiveness, and hope—we simply *ought* to be living transformed lives.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. As most of us were baptised as infants, we have to make an effort to recover the power of baptism and its

meaning for us. What has helped you recognised your dignity as Christian baptised into Christ?

2. Paul has a strong sense of truly being set free and while he doesn't use the Obama expression, he believes "yes, we can" lead a new a full life in Christ now in the present moment. Its a challenge!

PRAYER

As we recall our baptism on this very night, help us embrace of our new life in Christ that we may be his followers in name and in fact.

Matt. 28:1 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary

Easter Vigil

Gospel

Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

We distinguish "empty tomb proclamation narratives" and "resurrection appearance narratives". In all four Gospels, there are empty tomb proclamation narratives. Mk lacks any resurrection appearance narrative; the other Gospels have a variety of stories, but they do not repeat or confirm each other. There is, however, a historical core which all the accounts share: the first day of the week, early, women, divine figure(s), empty tomb, reassurance, a

proclamation. After that each set of stories has a different angle on the events, exploring different dimensions. In Matthew, we catch a glimpse of the construction of a resurrection appearance narrative based on the empty tomb proclamation narrative. Again in Matthew, the apologetic aspect is to the fore, as may be seen from the unique story of the guards.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Resurrection, in the sense of a genuinely personal after life, is not mentioned in the Bible until we come to the books of Daniel, 1 and 2 Maccabees. It is mentioned metaphorically in Ezekiel, when he tells the exiles that a future generation will arise and will return to the land of Israel. That said, across the OT generally, death is not a problem—just the natural next stage, as long (a) you have children and (b) do not die prematurely.

(ii) The development of resurrection faith was triggered by the experience of martyrdom. It is a teaching of the OT that God, eventually, rewards the just and punishes the wicked, even if this is not always obvious. But in the case of those who have been faithful to the point of death, when could God reward them unless there were some life after death?

The OT background to resurrection, foreshadowed in Is 25:6-10 and Ezek 37, is found in only two biblical books: Daniel and 2 Maccabees. The third text below is from the Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran), a unique text linking resurrection with the Messiah. Gaps in this defective manuscript are indicated by three dots.

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase.” (Daniel 12:1-4)

The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honourable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish

within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman’s reasoning with a man’s courage, and said to them, “I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws.” (2Maccabees 7:20-23)

... For the heavens and the earth shall listen to *His Messiah* and all which is in them shall not turn away from the commandments of the holy ones. Strengthen yourselves, O you who seek the Lord, in His service. Will you not find the Lord in this, all those who hope in their heart? For the Lord attends to the pious and calls the righteous by name. Over the humble His spirit hovers, and He renews the faithful in His strength. For He will honour the pious upon the throne of His eternal kingdom, setting prisoners free, opening the eyes of the blind, raising up those who are bowed down. (Psalm 146:7-8) And forever I shall hold fast to those who hope and in His faithfulness shall ... and the fruit of good deeds shall not be delayed for anyone and the Lord shall do glorious things which have not been done, just as He said. For He shall heal the critically wounded, *He shall revive the dead*, He shall send good news to the afflicted (Isaiah 61:1), He shall satisfy the poor, He shall guide the uprooted, He shall make the hungry rich, and ... discerning ones ... and all of them as the holy ones ... and ... (4QMessianicApocalypse f2ii+4:1-15)

KIND OF WRITING

(i) The content of the story is, by definition, unique. However, the literary form is recognisably that of “epiphany”, i.e. an encounter with the divine, the transcendent (symbolised here by earthquake, angel, descent, heaven, lighting, clothing). Classically, religious experience shows these features: (i) the encounter is unexpected; (ii) the participants experience awe and dread—in our version this is called “fear”; (iii) the message from the divine figure(s) is “do not be afraid”.

(ii) In these verses there are two epiphany

nies, one very like the other. The first is an “empty tomb proclamation narrative” and the other is a “resurrection appearance narrative”. It might be argued that the second epiphany is a making explicit, in somewhat less metaphorical language, of the content of the first epiphany.

There are two sets of interesting parallels here, which may help us to recognise what kind of writing this is. The first is a parallel in religious symbolism between the death and resurrection:

Matt 27:51-54

51 At that moment; the earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 they were terrified.

Matt 28:2-4

2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

The second parallel is between the appearance and words of the angel and the appearance and words of the Risen Lord.

Matt 27:51-54

2 And suddenly ... 5 But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; ... 7 “indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

Matt 28:2-4

9 Suddenly ... 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

From a literary point of view, this symbolic empty tomb proclamation narrative.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) The Passion Predictions include the hope of resurrection (Matt 16:21; 17:22; 20:17-19).

(ii) Jesus’ own teaching of the resurrection may be found in Matt 22:23-33.

(iii) Matthew has a substantial apologetic interest, as is evident from the story about the guards which follows. (The guards story is quite improbable historically. Wansbrough speaks of “the trans-

parent idiocy” of the excuse given by the guards.) This apologetic interest affects his burial scene, his tomb appearance and also provides an insertion between the appearance story and the commission story. His other great interest is the church. Matthew seems to be dealing with an established community, which has a certain structure (see Matt. 16:19 and 18:18). This is the context for the last resurrection scene in Matt., which includes a promise to “be with the always, to the end of the age”.

ST PAUL

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 6:9–11)

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe. (1Corinthians 15:3–11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 In Mk, three women buy spices on Saturday night and on Sunday come to anoint the body. All those details are missing in Matthew: two women come to the tomb, apparently to mourn (“to see the tomb”), with no thought of entering. Cf. Matt 27:58, 61.

Verse 2 The earthquake is an addition of Matthew—he introduces three earthquakes into his Gospel. An earthquake is a biblical metaphor of God’s presence and action. An “angel” is a symbolic figure, again signifying the transcendent (Mk, a young man in white; Matt, an

angel like lightning outside; Lk, two men in dazzling clothes; Jn, two angels in white, inside). Precision does not matter here—the key is the symbolic function of these apocalyptic “props”.

Verse 3 Lightning is one of the end-time symbols in Matt and in Revelation (Matt 24:27; 28:3; Rev 4:5; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18). Ditto for the snow (Matt 28:3; Rev 1:14). White is the colour of heavenly garments. This is the nearest any of the canonical Gospel come to describing the resurrection. (Cf. the non-canonical Gospel of Philip!)

Verse 4 Only Matt because of his apologetic interest in the guards. The reaction of fear belongs to the epiphany genre.

Verse 5 The reassurance is likewise part of the genre. Carefully, the risen one is identified with the crucified one—possible against those who disregard the importance of the cross in Christian faith.

Verse 6 The empty tomb—the empirical residue of the resurrection so to speak—corroborates the proclamation rather than vice versa.

Verse 7 Authentic epiphanies include a mission and the women are given a message to proclaim. As there are no resurrection appearance narratives in Galilee, the reference is puzzling. It could be that Matthew is thinking that towards the end of a brief mission to the Gentiles (Galilee), they would meet the Lord in the Second Coming. Cf. Matt 26:32 and the fulfilment in Matt 28:16–20.

Verse 8 Matt discretely converts the silence of the women in Mk (“they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid”) into “great joy”. Matthew, with a future church structure, has no place for the abject failure of the disciples (a theme of Mark). Clearly, the women did not stay silent!

Verse 9 This encounter unfolds the symbolic meaning of the previous one. The message is identical and the only addition is the making explicit of the person of Jesus. The reaction describes the *mysterium tremendum*.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The identity of Jesus is revealed as the Messiah and the Son of God, not with a display of human power, but as one who was prepared to suffer unto death to show us how our God loves us. How does the Passion story speak to you as a revelation of how God loves you?

2. We are dealing here with an encounter with the divine characterised by (i) the encounter is unexpected; (ii) the participants experience awe and dread; (iii) the message from the divine figure(s) is “do not be afraid”. When have you had some kind of an encounter with the divine?

3. The women had just experienced the trauma of the crucifixion an event that spoke of death and not life. What had happened took on a totally different significance in the light of the resurrection. It spoke of life rather than death. When have you received a message of hope and life in a time of pain or discouragement?

4. “Do not be afraid” is one of the most repeated phrases in the gospels. Who have been the ‘angels’ who have helped to calm you and take away fear? For whom have you been able to do this?

5. The women were told to go and convey the message they had received to others. What is your experience of being a messenger of good news to others? whether trivial or significant. Does past experience come back to me?

PRAYER

O God, your saving plan has brought us to the glory of this night.

Slaves, we become your sons and daughters, poor, your mercy makes us rich, sinners, you count us among your saints.

Bring us to know the place that is ours in the unfolding story of your purpose, and instil in our hearts the wonder of your salvation.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, our Passover and our peace, who lives and reigns with you now and always in the unity the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen

A NOTE ON THE FRESCO*The Risen Lord*

Jesus is presented in the very act of rising, that is bursting through the gates of death. He is surrounded by light, the energy of the resurrection. Beneath his feet are the gates of hell and below that symbols of imprisonment and devils.

Adam and Eve

Representing the whole human race, our first parents are depicted rising from their tombs, very lifeless.

Behind Adam

We can identify three figures: John the Baptist, pointing our Jesus. Next to him are two kings, Solomon (the younger) and David (the older).

Behind Eve

Abel stands with a shepherd's crook, representing all unjust and early death. Behind him it looks like apostles looking on but they cannot be identified.

He Anastasis

The writing in Greek reads, Η ΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΙΣ, the resurrection. The Orthodox iconography is very close to biblical and early Jewish ideas of the resurrection. Unlike western representations, it is not an individual rising nor it is a resuscitation or mere restoration to life.

