

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22 (21); Philippians 2:6-11; Mark 14:1-15:47

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last

Mark 15:21 They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. 22 Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). 23 And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. 24 And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

25 It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. 26 The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." 27 And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. 29 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

33 When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34 At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 35 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." 36 And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." 37 Then Jesus

gave a loud cry and breathed his last. 38 And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. 39 Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

40 There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. 41 These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

42 When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. 45 When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. 46 Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The story of Jesus' trial, crucifixion and burial is told in all four Gospels and broadly the accounts are similar. However, there are differences both in small details and in larger scenes, as well as in sequence and theology. The writers use



Thought for the day

There is a core similarity between the four accounts of the death of Jesus in the New Testament. However, they differ in sequence and in details, allowing various understandings of the cross to unfold. Because the death of Jesus was and is such a deeply mysterious and indeed perplexing event, different dimensions are explored and laid bare by different New Testament writers. None is more stark than Mark's Gospel: all who knew Jesus have failed him; his only "helper" is a complete outsider, Simon, the unknown passer-by. The only acknowledgment comes from the unnamed Gentile soldier, accidentally present.

Prayer

O Lord, we tell again of the death of your Messiah, Jesus the Christ. In his story we see the story of your love as you reach out to us in the darkness of tragic death and tremendous suffering. Touch our hearts again with your compassionate love that we may be return to you with all our hearts.

these differences to present in narrative form a variety of explorations and theologies of the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. Attention to the details provides clues as to what each of the Gospel writers wished to emphasise for the audience of the time of writing. Altogether, they form rich four-fold account for the believing reader.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a large narrative made up of many scenes. It is very likely that the earliest account of Jesus' life was precisely the story of his death and resurrection. This was the central faith event which motivated all the other memories of his teaching and ministry. It is very likely that in Mark's account we have the earliest written version of the last week of Jesus' life.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Among the references to the OT, these stand out as especially significant here:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” (Psalms 22:1, 6-7, 18)

“They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” (Psalms 69:21)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There is a powerful foreground in Mark’s Gospel itself. As has often been observed, the narrative offered by Mark is in two great halves, chapters 1-8 leading to the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (8:27) and chapters 9-16 leading to the confession of the centurion at the cross (15:39). This broad shape is anticipated in the first line of the Gospel which functions as a kind of title: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* (Mark 1:1).

The true confession of Jesus as the Messiah calls for correction so that the kind of Messiah he would be might be communicated. This is the substantial content of a bridge section, chs. 8-10, which this teaching is found coupled with a corresponding teaching on discipleship. “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” (Mark 8:31) “They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”” (Mark 9:30-31) “He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”” (Mark 10:32-34)

ST PAUL

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good per-

son someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 21-24 Simon of Cyrene is known to the community and so his sons are mentioned. The drink was a gesture of pity to dull the awareness. V. 24 hints at the fulfilment of Psalm 22.

Verses 25-32 In this Gospel, the sequence is carefully marked: “As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.” (Mark 15:1) “It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him.” (Mark 15:25) “When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.” (Mark 15:33) “When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath...” (Mark 15:42). The jeer about the Temple is interesting and may reflect back on the Temple Action in 11:15-19, as well as being a reference to a conversation at the trial (“Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” But even on this point their testimony did not agree.” [Mark 14:57-59]).

Verses 33-39 The darkness is symbolic, using apocalyptic imagery to say that something with the end of time has taken place. The prayer of Jesus comes from a *psalm of trust*. Elijah was commonly expected to usher in the Messiah, so mention is ironic on the lips of the bystanders and theologically fitting for the faithful readers. The tearing of the Temple veil shows that the new access to God is through this Jesus. The centurion’s words fulfil the programme of Mark 1:1 and also illustrate that it is not insiders who have the best insight but outsiders.

Verses 40-41 This is unexpected—suddenly we are told Jesus was not totally without support. It is important that they are women (only); women will also be the first witnesses to the resurrection. A flashback across the ministry is also triggered.

Verses 42-47 This intriguing story suddenly brings on stage a faithful man, this time a Jew, matching the faith of the

Gentile centurion. He respects the law about criminals mentioned in Deuteronomy 21:22-23 and so requests the right to bury Jesus. Again, the ministry is recalled by a mention of the kingdom of God. He performs minimal burial rites and closes the tomb. In Mark 16:1 Mary Magdalene will be mentioned again.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The injustice and brutality of the Passion of Jesus make it a difficult story to read as good news. Yet in the midst of that cruelty the courageous, faithful and self-sacrificing love that Jesus shows for us shines through. Recall moments when the account of the passion has moved you in a special way. How have you experienced blessing through it?

2. Human love can also be painful. When have you experienced the courage, fidelity and self-sacrifice of others in their love of you? When have you shown that kind of love to others as a parent, a spouse, or a friend or in some other relationship?

3. We read the Passion story in the light of resurrection. What seemed a humiliating and shameful failure for Jesus was not the end of the story. Perhaps with hindsight you can look back on something that seemed like a tragedy at the time but out of that tragedy new life and new possibilities followed for you.

4. For each of us there arise situations in which we feel things are outside our control and we are utterly helpless and powerless. We are not alone in this experience. In his Passion, Jesus is one with us in this human helplessness. When have you found that the presence of another helped you through a crisis? When have you been able to help another with your presence?

PRAYER

O God of eternal glory, you anointed Jesus your servant to bear our sins, to encourage the weary, to raise up and restore the fallen.

Keep before our eyes the splendour of the paschal mystery of Christ, and, by our sharing in the passion and resurrection, seal our lives with the victorious sign of his obedience and exaltation.

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

Jesus became obedient to the point death on a cross

Phil 2:5 *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,* 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Phil 2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Where did Paul get his information on the Christian tradition? Even before his encounter with Christ, he knew the basics of what the Christians were saying. No doubt the time in Damascus included a great deal of initiation. In the undisputed letters we find traces of acclamation, credal formulae and hymns. Of the hymns, none is more famous than this reading.

KIND OF WRITING

Philippians is a real letter, with the following outline:

- 1:1-2 Letter opening
- 1:3-11 Thanksgiving
- 1:12-26 Paul's own story
- 1:27-2:16 *Exhortations*
- 2:17-3:1a Paul's own story
- 3:1b-4:9 *Exhortations*
- 4:10-20 Thanksgiving
- 4:21-23 Letter Conclusion

Our passage comes from the first set of exhortations and the whole section should be read to see *why and how* Paul makes use of the hymn at this point.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The letter is addressed to the first Christian community founded by Paul in Europe. The letter mentions that Paul was in prison. The identification of the locations also determines the date: Ephesus (54-55), Caesarea (57-59), Rome (60-61). The occasion of writing to express gratitude for the gift sent with Epaphroditus.

There are several practical issues. Overall, the letter is very personal, with a good deal of autobiography and great affection for the Philippians. There are issues about conduct and behaviour, which bear directly on the function and message of the hymn in the letter.

RELATED PASSAGES

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11)

Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. (Philippians 3:15-16)

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2Corinthians 8:9)

But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that *Jesus is Lord* and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:8-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The overall pattern in the hymn is pre-existence, existence and post-existence. Given that the hymn in non-Pauline, it may predate him.

Verse 5 The introduction “stitches” the hymn into the ethical persuasion. “Mind” in Greek is really the verb to think. A good parallel in Paul would be Rom 12:3.

Verse 6 Form (*morphē*) is difficult. Current in classical and Hellenistic Greek,

with a wide range of meanings —“stature, form, condition, feature, external appearance, reproduction”— *morphē* is used relatively little in the Bible. Exploited is also difficult: It may mean not only ‘to grasp something forcefully which one does not have’ but also ‘to retain by force what one possesses.’ Thus, it is possible to translate 2:6 in two quite different ways.

Verse 7 “Emptied” in relation to the cross comes up in 1 Cor 1:17. Again, the form—*morphē*—of a slave.

Verse 8 Humble is found in the teaching of Jesus (Matt 18:4; 23:12; Luke 3:5; 14:11; 18:14). Obedient to death—cf. Hebrews 2:10-18. V. 8c could be an addition by Paul, reflecting his own emphasis on the cross (Phil 1:29, 3:10, 18 and 1Cor 1:23; 2:2).

Verse 9 Exalted: the simple form (*hypsōō*) is found in John and Luke-Acts to refer to the resurrection (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34; Acts 2:33; 5:31). The complex form (*hyperupsōō*) is found only here in the New Testament and in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) only once: “For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.” (LXX Ps 96:9)

Verse 10 There is a suggestion that this verse may be a liturgical instruction.

Verse 11 Confess (*homologeō*) is a foundational Christian word, both as verb and as noun (Matt 7:23; 10:32; 14:7; Luke 12:8; John 1:20; 9:22; 12:42; Acts 7:17; 23:8; 24:14 etc.).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Working and living with others is always difficult. Even among Christians, the risk is that we “read” this reality politically and not, like Paul, spiritually, that is as part of discipleship.

2. Jesus emptied himself: perhaps I have known people like that myself or have been called myself to some extraordinary generosity.

3. When I did I first say “Jesus is Lord” and mean it from the heart?

PRAYER

On the path of discipleship, you call us, loving God, to follow and imitate your Son.

Give to us the generosity to give our all, to lose our lives, that we be true followers of Jesus, who made himself poor that we might become rich. Amen.

I did not hide my face from insult and spitting

Isa 50:4 The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

Isa 50:7 The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 8 *he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.* 9 *It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There are four so-called “Suffering Servant Songs” taken from the prophet known to scholarship as Deutero-Isaiah: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. The most substantial of these poems is the last one, all of it read on Good Friday. Our passage is slightly longer than the lectionary selection and for the sake of completeness, the remaining two verses are included in italics.

KIND OF WRITING

This is poetry, in which the writer responds to the sufferings of Israel. The images used are always significant and in these few verses, note the extensive use of the part of the body: tongue, ear, back, cheeks, beard, face.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Isaiah 40-55— Second Isaiah—comes from teachings proclaimed towards the end of the great Exile in Babylon, when hope of homecoming and return was beginning to dawn. The exile was understood in part to be a consequence of infidelity on the part of the priests and people.

RELATED PASSAGE

For I hear many whispering: “Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!” All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. “Perhaps he

can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him.” But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten. (Jeremiah 20:10-11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The audience, this time, is Israel.

Verse 4a The prophet pays attention to older prophetic texts and learns from them. Cf. Jer 1:4-10; Is 42:3; 49:5-6. The weary are the disheartened exiles. The suffering of the “servant” is somehow exemplary for the fellows Israelites, and in that sense “on their behalf.”

Verses 4b-5 The prophet is fully open to God’s word. Unfailingly everyday the prophet is called to listen.

Verse 6 In an exemplary fashion, and in contrast to Israel as a whole, the prophet undergoes the just punishment and humiliation. His opponents this time seem to include fellow Israelites (cf. Jer 20:7-13).

Verse 7 The sufferings of the prophet are endured in view of a later vindication by God.

Cf. *See, I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. Like the hardest stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not fear them or be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.* (Ezekiel 3:8-9)

Verse 8 The call for a just hearing (a “riv” in Hebrew) resembles Job at this point. The language is that of the courtroom.

Verse 9 God alone vindicates; all human oppression has a sell-by date (using the traditional metaphor of the moth).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We are called to “hearers of the word,” open to the voice of God. How do I respond, day by day?

2. No one escapes suffering and we all “deal” with it in different ways. What has my experience been?

3. Has it ever been that some good came from unjust suffering?

PRAYER

God of all, we are hearers of the word. On our own path of suffering, give us constant faith in you, the author of all that is good.

Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

THE THREE READINGS

Second Isaiah’s four “Servant Songs” were a great resource for the understanding the cross of Christ.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Ps 22 (21) responds very fully, with the same concern for suffering and confidence in vindication.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 50:4-7

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 third of these poems.

Second reading

Philippians 2:6-11

Like the first reading, this is poetry, really a kind of hymn. In it, we hear the very feelings of the very first generation of Christians as they reflection on the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Gospel

Mark 14:1-15:47

Today we hear the story of salvation in Mark’s Gospel: the shortest and the most stark. The account is familiar, of course. If we are to hear it “again for the first time”, we need to listen out for what speaks to me in this story. Mark wrote the story of the death of Jesus because he believed Jesus to be risen from the dead. Paradoxically, the story of Jesus’ death is a life-giving story even today.