

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22 (21); Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

This is the King of the Jews

Matt 27:32 As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him. 37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Matt 27:38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" 44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

Matt 27:45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." 50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks

were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Matt 27:55 Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Matt 27:57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

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. Thus both Mark and Matthew treat the death as tragedy, the tragic outcome of the ministry of Jesus, rejected by his people and abandoned by his followers. Luke, in contrast, treats the death of Jesus as that of a martyr-prophet, on the model of OT prophets, who suffered for their preaching and in anticipation of the death of Stephen in the Acts (by Luke also). In the Fourth Gospel, the portrayal is that of a triumph, which brings together the lifting up, the hour and the glorification of Jesus. 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 NT writers, the earliest being Paul.

KIND OF WRITING

The scenes recounted belong to the

Thought for the day

Official memorial celebrations are familiar to us, marking wars or national events. Often, these are coloured by a mixture of sadness and gratitude. The Christian memorial of the last week of Jesus' life is entirely different. First of all, we tell the whole story again *because he is risen from the dead*. Secondly, this memorial is an *effective* one: as we do this in memory of him, the very same gifts of compassion, forgiveness, love and healing are offered again to all present, precisely because Jesus *is risen from the dead*. Our Christian memory is not a dead remembering but an *effective* bringing into the present of the great events that gave us new life in Christ.

Prayer

Saving God, as we recall in word and gesture the great events of salvation, let us know your healing love once more. Amen.

genre of biography, dealing with the tragic end of Jesus' ministry. Using narrative "adjustments", it offers its own interpretation.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) In all the accounts, there is an underlay of reference to the Psalms and the Prophets. By delving into the Hebrew Bible, the first generation of Christians hoped to understand what had happened on the cross as somehow in continuity with God's earlier word. Ps 22, in italics below, is especially rich in resonance.

Ps 69:21 They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink. Ps 22:18 *they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.* Ps 22:7 *All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;* 109:25 I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads. Lam. 2:15 All who pass along the way clap their hands at you; they hiss and wag their heads at daughter Jerusalem; "Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy

of all the earth?" Ps 22:8 "Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!" Wis. 2:18 for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. 19 Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. 20 Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected." Amos 8:9 On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. Ps 22:1 *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?* Ps 69:21 They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink. Ezek. 37:12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Deut. 21:22 When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.

(ii) An especially rich resource for early Christian reflection were the Suffering Servant Songs in Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12). In the historical context the Servant is, perhaps, Israel. The early Christians saw here passages which helped them come to grips with the crucifixion. The links are as follows:

First Song: Is 42:1-4; Mt 12:18.

Second Song: Is 49:1-6; Mt 12:18.

Third Song: Is 50:4-9; Mt 5:39

Fourth Song: Is 52:13-53:12. See below for the detailed reference.

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. (Isa 53:4 = Mt 8:17)

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. (Isa 53:7 = Mt 26:63)

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. 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. 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. (Isa 53:10-12 = Mt 20:28; for v. 12 see all Mt 26:28, 27:38)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

i) The Passion Predictions help us see the theology of the writer and, perhaps, something of the understanding of Jesus himself: Matt 16:21; 17:22; 20:17-19.

(ii) The words at the Supper also interpret the death: Matt 26:26-29.

(iii) Earthquakes are introduced to indicate God's presence and action.

ST PAUL

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1Corinthians 11:26)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 32 Simon, a historical figure, here models authentic discipleship: Matt 10:37-39; 16:24-28.

Verse 37 Cruelly ironic in the light of the rejection at 27:25.

Verse 39 A combination of the important temple saying with the temptations at the beginning of the ministry. Jesus confronts evil as such.

Verse 45 Symbolic darkness, signalling that the cross is an end-time event.

Verse 46 The first words of Ps 22, placing the death of Jesus in the context of a psalm of lament, which itself returns at the end to deep confidence in God.

Verse 47 Elijah was expected at the end (Mal 4:5); his mention tells us that something to do with the God's final, end-time purpose is unfolding here.

Verse 50 The actual death is a wordless cry.

Verses 51f. The curtain stands for the mother religion of Judaism, represented

by the curtain which veiled God's presence. The earthquake is symbolic. Matt, Lk and Jn bring the consequences of the death forward, in a symbolic way.

Verse 54 A profound Gentile confession, matching Peter's at 16:13ff.

Verse 55 The women at a distance contrast with the women John 19. Some of them will be witness to the resurrection (see v.61).

Verse 57 Probably a historical recollection; the burial is dignified and matter-of-fact.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

The account of the Passion is a vivid story with a variety of characters and much action. To enter into the passage we can read the story slowly and see if we can identify with different characters in the story. Also any one scene within the story can provide us with much food for reflection and prayer. Keep in mind that one of the aims in reflecting on the passage is to discover the GOOD NEWS the story has for us. Here are just a few general 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. Jesus gives us an example of patient endurance and faithfulness in suffering. Suffering is something we all encounter. It is not something that anyone likes but sometimes we cope with it better than others. What have you found helps you to cope better with suffering?

3. As you read through the narrative of the Passion where do you find yourself resonating with a character in the action? Is there any message there for you that is life-giving?

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 with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, holy and mighty God for ever and ever. Amen.

Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave

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 these hymns, none is more famous than our reading today.

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 read to see why and how Paul makes use of the hymn at this point.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

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. Over-

all, 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 use of the hymn.

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. (2 Corinthians 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 represent early Christian worship.

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 1 Cor 1:23; 2:2).

Verse 9 Exalted: the simple form 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 is found only here in the NT and in the 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 be rich.

I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard

Is. 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 awakens—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.

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 Second Isaiah: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. The most substantial of these poems is the last one, read in its entirety on Good Friday. The verses omitted by the lectionary are included here to complete the poem.

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, faces. In contrast to earlier generations, this Israelite has an open ear. This is really a psalm of confidence.

This particular song is notable for its repeated use of the full name of God in a quite emphatic and personal way: “Lord GOD” translates ʾādōnāy YHWH (Lord Yahweh).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Isaiah 40-55 comes from teachings pro-

claimed 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 the people. The “servant” is called upon to undergo the pain of exile in an exemplary fashion to that all Israel can use the bitter experience for spiritual purification.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, ...to give one’s cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. (Lamentations 3:27, 30)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

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. Teacher = lit. one taught. Cf. *Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples.* (Isaiah 8:16)

Verses 4b-5 The prophet is fully open to God’s word. Compare and contrast with Is 6:10-11 (above). Contrast also Isaiah 48 (closed ears).

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. Ezek 3:8-9. He is able to endure because of the help from God.

Verse 8 The call for a just hearing (a “*riiv*”) resembles Job at this point, perfectly appropriately. The rhetorical questions are more open than usual.

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. Amen.

READINGS 1 AND 3

Second Isaiah and especially these poems were a great resource for the understanding the cross of Christ.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

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

THE LITURGY

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 sentiments of the very first generation of Christians as they reflected on the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Gospel

Matthew 26:14-27:66

The Gospels were written *because* the evangelist believed in Jesus, risen from the dead. Even today, we retell the Passion precisely *because* of our faith in Jesus, who is our resurrection. Matthew makes this clear with the extraordinary addition of the story about the earthquake. Already, the *effects* of salvation are brought forward for dramatic and didactic purposes.