

HEARERS OF THE WORD



HOLY WEEK

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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.

John 12:1-11

The role of Judas — always fascinating to people — becomes darker in the later New Testament. Here is character is blackened further by his desire for money. The Gospel established the drama of Holy Week.

The anointing at Bethany is received differently all four Gospels. Mark (14:3-9), Matthew (26:6-13) and John place it *before* the Last Supper while Luke tells a very similar story much earlier in his Gospel (7:36-50). In the Synoptic Gospels, both the woman and those who complain are nameless. John’s Gospel, by contrast, cre-

actively identifies the woman as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and names the complainer as Judas. John offers no account of the payment of Judas but perhaps the 300 denarii are a late, inflated echo of the 30 silver pieces.

By means of such deft editing, the writer creates a truly powerful scene, contrasting not only love and betrayal but also life and death. In his roundabout way, the evangelist takes us to the very heart of Holy Week. The cross is no mere miscarriage of justice or a tragic judicial murder. On the contrary, we are invited to behold nothing less than the struggle between good and evil, personified in Mary and Judas.

In all the darkness, there is a glint of hope signalled by the ointment. In our story of the first anointing, the *quality* matters: *the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*. At the end of the passion narrative in John there is an anointing *before* the burial by *men* (in flat contradiction of Mark 16:1). In the second anointing,

the *quantity* is the key: *a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds* (19:39). The contrast between the two anointings, however, is only apparent. Mary anoints Jesus on account of her love for him. Joseph and Nicodemus use “myrrh and aloes”, a pairing associated only with marriage symbolism in the Old Testament (Psalm 45:8; Proverbs 7:17 and Song 4:14; significantly, nard is found only in the Song of Songs 1:12; 4:13-14).

Thus the story of Jesus’ last days is framed by eloquent, even sensual symbols of love — love which proves victorious over the forces of evil, appalling betrayal and even death itself.

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.

John 13:21-33; 36-38

In the Fourth Gospel, Judas is vilified at each mention (John 6:71; 12:4; 13:2, 11, 26, 29; 18:2-3, 5). Lest we miss what is really happening, the evangelist adds two notes. The first is evident: *After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him.* The second oblique: *As soon as Judas had taken the piece of bread he went out. Night had fallen.* This is not the night of clock time but the hour of darkness. In the words of the Paschal Sequence, *Death with life contended: combat strangely ended! Life's own Champion, slain, yet lives to reign.* The Light of World (John 8:10 and 9:5) faces into the night of death on our behalf. But we know from the Prologue how this will end: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it* (John 1:5).

The vilification of Judas risks turning him into a scapegoat, allowing us to take the spotlight off ourselves. The writer knows that all of us are capable of betrayal and that even those who knew Jesus himself did indeed fail at the decisive moment: *All of them deserted him and fled* (Mark 14:50). In the present Gospel, the writer helps us with a triple contrast: Judas, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, combining realism with idealism. The beloved disciple (only in this Gospel and only from chapter 13 onwards) symbolises perfect discipleship: present at the Supper next to Jesus (13:25), a witness to the trial and the crucifixion (18:15 and 19:26-27), and the first to come to Easter faith (20:8, in lapidary fashion). In this way, the beloved disciple acts as foil to Peter: Peter who betrays Jesus (13:36-38; 18:15-27) and does not come immediately to Easter faith (20:3-7). Nevertheless,

there is again a glint of hope: *Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward* (John 13:36), words fulfilled in Peter's three-fold rehabilitation around a charcoal fire in John 21:15-19.

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.

Matthew 26:15-25

We move to Matthew's Gospel for a second account of the betrayal of Judas. During the joyful feast of Passover, the dreadful judgement of Judas is given. This is quite frightening and puzzling.

It is frightening because of what is said of Judas: It would have been better for that one not to have been born (Matt 26:24). Later on, in the same Gospel, we hear of his suicide: Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself (Matt 27:5). However the historical Judas understood his actions, by it the time the Gospels were written he was being held up as a grim example of what can happen even to someone who knew Jesus. It is also puzzling because somehow the dark deed of Judas made possible the events that gave us new life in Christ.

This betrayal is in sharp contrast with the context of Passover, a truly joyful celebration of freedom, identity and community.



THE EASTER TRIDUUM



Exodus 12:1-14

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

THE PASSOVER FEAST

The spirit of the feast is captured in an early Jewish document called the Mishnah, where we read:

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. (Pesah 10:5)

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 likely that the Last Supper was 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.

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 (see the box above):

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*. 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 times 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.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

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.

KIND OF WRITING

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

ORIGIN OF THE READING

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.

RELATED READINGS

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 fractured 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.

John 13:1-15

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 in 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's Supper interprets the death of death by means of prophetic gesture. In this Gospel, the washing of the feet fulfils 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).

As often in John, there is much more to this story than a simple example of mutual service.

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

(v) This story is unique to John, although it echoes parable-like sayings in the other Gospels.

(vi) The washing of the feet belongs to the category of prophetic gesture — well-known in the Old and New Testaments — by which a prophet illustrates his meaning.

(vii) The washing *replaces* the action with the bread and the wine, but has the same function, that is, to disclose the inner meaning of Jesus' death.

(viii) The words used takes the story to another level. For example, the opening words in Greek read literally: he *rose* from the table and *laid down* his outer garment, using exactly the same words used elsewhere for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

(ix) The word “example” in v. 14 is used in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) to point to the foreshadowing of a noble death. (6) The important introductory verses tell us that the action somehow spells out the “hour” and Jesus’ “return to the Father”.

So, there is a very great deal more to this scene than a mere moral example. John's Gospel teaches that Jesus' death was an act of loving service, by means of which God — the sustainer of the cosmos! — humbly served humanity to disclose the depth of his breath-taking love. This is a reversal of roles and would be, in any culture, shocking. Peter's reaction registers such shock — and we should be at least disconcerted as well as delighted. The washing illustrates, in story form, a verse from Mark (*Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* [Mark 10:45]) and fulfils a central affirmation from John himself (*God so loved the world: He gave his one and only Son* [John 3:16]). Can I “al-

low” myself to be so loved, so served by the great Creator and loving Father?

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-be-reavement” - Ezek 24:15-27.

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

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

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

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.



Isaiah 52:13-53:12

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 infirmities 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.

KIND OF WRITING

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.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

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

RELATED READINGS

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.

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-10

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

These 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.

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.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The key text behind all of He-

brews 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)

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.” (1 Corinthians 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 sympathise 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.

John 18:1-19:42

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 fulfil 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.

In the Triduum, we celebrate the great events that gave us new life in Christ and the Fourth Gospel is especially rich, offering six "lenses" through which look at the cross and the resurrection. These perspectives are established early in the Gospel and sustained throughout. The entire narrative is directed towards the events of salvation, so it is no surprise that all six perspectives are registered in John's passion narrative. Here are the lenses:

Healing: John 3:15 (the lifting up)

Love: John 3:16 (God so loved)

New creation: John 1:1 (in the beginning)

Passover: John 1:35-36 (the Lamb of God)

Service: John 13:1-15. (the washing of the feet)

The Holy Spirit, the advocate: John 3:5-6 (born from above)

Sometimes discretely, sometime overtly, the Gospel writer takes up each perspective in the narrative of Jesus' death and resurrection. Let me illustrate this with reference to two of these perspectives.

Passover: Jesus is put to death at the times the passover lambs were slaughtered (John 19:14); that Friday was the start of Passover in

John; the mention of the hyssop (John 19:29 = Exodus 12:22) and the not breaking of the legs (19:33 = Exodus 12:46).

New creation: In the beginning (John 1:1 = Genesis 1:1); it is finished (John 19:30 = Genesis 2:2); be breathed on them (John 22:20 = Genesis 2:7).

Both Passover and New Creation come to climactic expression, as do the other perspectives, in chapters 18-20. In this way, the Fourth Gospel offers a real alternative to the traditional understanding of Jesus' death as punishment and payment.

Briefly put: *The creator God has healed humanity of death by sending his Son in an act of self-emptying and loving service, setting us free from the power of death and sin. God's loving medicine is a new creation, brought to life in us by the Holy Spirit.*

KIND OF WRITING

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

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)

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 un-free? 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?

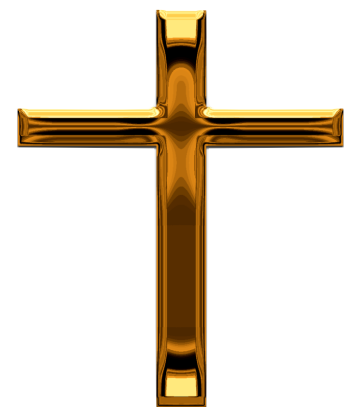
4. There was always God’s Spirit in the world. Yet, after Jesus death and resurrection the role of the Spirit has so changed that we can speak of a new gift of the Spirit. What is my own experience of “before and after” events? What have been the “before and after” events in my life as a believer?

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.



Easter Vigil



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. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, you created all things in wonderful beauty and order. Help us now to perceive how still more wonderful is the new creation by which in the fullness of time you redeemed your people through the sacrifice of our passover, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

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 *par excellence*.

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)

Prayer

God and Father of all who believe in you, you promised Abraham that he would become the father of all nations and through the death and resurrection of Christ you fulfil that promise: everywhere throughout the world you increase your chosen people. May we respond to your call by joyfully accepting your invitation to the new life of grace. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Given the length and variety of the Old Testament Vigil readings, it is not practical to go into the same detail as usual in this volume. Still, the readings are both wonderful and important. In parish setting, it is unusual these days to hear all nine readings. Whichever readings are selected, some kind of historical and spiritual contextualisation is really necessary so that all attending can benefit from the proclamation.

In these notes four elements are provided: (i) a brief introduction, which could possibly be used (or adapted) just before each reading; (ii) an even briefer historical contextualisation, to indicate the time and place of writing; (iii) links with various New Testament passages, to make the connection to the resurrection evident; (iv) a prayer, taken from the Roman Missal, which helps us to pray the passages and to make clear the Christological reception of the readings. In each case, the prescribed Psalm is really well chosen and a good guide to how we may hear each reading today.

The traditional sequence of the Easter Vigil can also help us. The ceremony of the fire and the lighting of the Paschal Candle already proclaim Jesus, risen from the dead. As a consequence, the Old Testament readings are heard on this night in the light of resurrection, listening so to speak “allegorically.” So, for instance, the story of creation from Genesis invites reflection on the still greater wonder of our new creation in Christ.

has inspired people over the centuries, especially the oppressed, because our God desires us to be free.

Historical Note

Behind our 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. (1 Corinthians 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. (1 Corinthians 7:21–22)

Prayer

Father, even today we see the wonders of the miracles you worked long ago. You one saved a single nation from slavery, and now you offer that salvation to all through baptism. May the peoples of the world become true sons and daughter of Abraham and prove worthy of the heritage of Israel. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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)

Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptising, and all are going to him." John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:25–30)

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, glorify your name by increasing your chosen people as you promised long ago. In reward for their trust, may we see in the Church the fulfilment of your promise. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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)

Prayer

Almighty, ever-living God, only hope of the world, by the preaching of the prophets you proclaimed the mysteries we are celebrating tonight. Help us to be your faithful people, for it is by your inspiration alone that we can grow in goodness. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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. (1 Corinthians 1:22–25)

Prayer

Father, you increase your Church by continuing to call all people to salvation. Listen to our prayers and always watch over those you cleanse in baptism. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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.

Prayer

Father, you teach us in both the Old and the New Testament to celebrate this passover mystery. Help us to understand your great love for us. May the goodness you now show us confirm our hope in your future mercy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

EASTER VIGIL NT READINGS

Romans 6:3-11

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 en-

slaved 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.

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.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

No one knows who founded the Roman churches—certainly not Paul. As noted 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.

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.

Mark 16:1-8

Mark 16:1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the

tomb?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." 8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

(i) You may notice in your bibles different endings appended after 16:8. These are all later additions and not part of the original text. The earliest manuscripts show that Mark ended his gospel at v.8, an intriguing kind of "non-ending."

(ii) There are two kinds of Easter stories: (a) Empty Tomb Proclamation Narratives and (b) Resurrection Appearance Accounts. In Mark there are no stories of appearance of the risen Lord.

(iii) Across the Gospels, the Empty Tomb Proclamation Narratives broadly resemble each other, with significant differences. The accounts of appearances of the risen Jesus are unique to Matthew, Luke and John, reflecting concerns at the time of writing and expressed in the language of each gospel writer. As a result, these accounts do not enjoy the same level of historicity as the stories within the ministry.

KIND OF WRITING

The story is technically a kind of theophany, that is, the encounter with the transcendent, mediated by an angel (called a young man in Mark).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Some of the earliest evidence of belief in the resurrection is in the book of Daniel:

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. (Dan 12:1–3)

In later books, this belief was grounded in the mystery of creation:

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." (2 Mac 7:20–23)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) It is good to compare this passage with Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 23:56-24:12 and John 20:1-18. A few examples may help. Women: Matthew: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary; Mark: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome; Luke: Mary Magdalene, Johanna, Mary the mother of James, other women; John: Mary Magdalene, (others? "we" in 20:2) plus the insertion of Peter and the Beloved Disciples. Spices: none in Mt and Jn, prepared on Friday night in Luke. Etc.

(ii) Mark teaches the resurrection: Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34 and in this text: Jesus said to them, "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?" (Mark 12:24–27)

SAINT PAUL

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:20–23) But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 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. (Romans 6:8–11)

Brief commentary

This final scene of the Gospel echoes Mk 1:35-38: Galilee, after the Sabbath, early morning, seeking Jesus, misunderstanding, mission elsewhere. It is a kind of implied call story and very power for that.

Verse 1 That is, Saturday night after sunset, once the shops had re-opened. Anointing a body is a very sacred duty in different faiths.

Verse 2 That is, on Sunday. The timing—the sun had already risen—is surely in some sense symbolic.

Verse 3 This comment is a rather unlikely comment. Rather, it is designed to alert the reader that these women had so expectation regarding the resurrection. The emphasis on the stone symbolises the great barrier of death, which God will break through in Jesus.

Verse 4 To look up has two meanings, as elsewhere in this Gospel. It means as well to regain sight (8:24). As in that earlier story, the recovery is sight is partial. The tense of "had been rolled back" is the perfect tense in Greek. The perfect, in Greek, points to an action in the past which continues to be effective in the present. The rolling back was "once for all".

Verse 5 A word is required to interpret the stone and so an "interpreting angel" is present (cf. Zech 1-6, Dan 7-12 etc.). The "young man" is an angel (cf. 2 Macc 3:26; 5:2). White: the

colour of angels; right: the authoritative side. Alarm is here a reaction to the *mysterium tremendum*.

Verse 6 As always in these encounters, reassurance is given before the message. The angel has special knowledge and does not need to enquire first of the women. A fundamental description of Jesus is given: from Nazareth and crucified. Again, crucified is in the perfect tense: an event or condition of the past which continues into the present. In the resurrection, Jesus did not “shed” the reality of his death. He has been raised: i.e. in Mark’s view, not by himself but by God. In that sense, this story is really a story about God. he is not here: the primary proclamation. This is a double affirmation. Jesus, always “on the way” in this Gospel, does not rest in peace in this tomb. Furthermore, it is okay to acknowledge a sense of absence, even while believing he is risen from the dead. Where is Jesus, then? At the right hand of the Power, in the glory of the Father and his angel (8:38; 14:62). The empty tomb is really the “empirical residue” of the resurrection, not its proof. Jesus is raised and therefore the tomb is empty (not the other way around).

Verse 7 A message is given to the disciples and Peter, i.e. an implied forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus always “goes ahead” in this Gospel (6:45, 10:32; 14:28). Galilee evokes the original mission. In the context, Galilee is not Jerusalem and the church is no longer linked with the city and its temple. Galilee represents the openness of the mission to the Gentile church, beyond the religious and ethnic confines of Judaism. At the same time, Galilee

evokes Jesus who proclaimed there the good news and who performed there mighty deeds of power. In the light of the resurrection, we are to read again Mark 1-9.

Verse 8 This constitutes an extraordinary ending. It is to be expected that the women would experience awe before the transcendent, but not that they would flee and say nothing to anyone. In any case, we know they did not keep silent always but eventually did proclaim their experience. The final affirmation is finally not quite true! The gospel also ends, famously, on a conjunction which, while not unprecedented, is rare and odd, almost trailing off in midsentence. There are different interpretations of this. Quite early on, scribes were unhappy and the provided endings. The longest of these is really a mishmash of NT traditions. None of the endings is originally and the earliest complete manuscripts (*Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*) have nothing after v.8. One fruitful line of interpretation takes it that the evangelist sees the story continuing in the lives and discipleship of the first readers and of all readers ever since. In a way, we the readers have enjoyed a privileged view throughout the Gospel. We have witnessed and heard what other people in the story missed; we have been with Jesus throughout, even when the disciples abandoned him; we, the readers, were alert when the disciples slept in the garden and so forth. It is up to us now, with our more extensive “knowledge” and with the encouragement of Easter faith, to take the proclamation into our present and into the future of humanity.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The reversal of expectation may give us a way into the story. When was I really taken aback by unexpected transformation, perhaps also change in my faith?

2. The hearing of the message brings with it the call to proclaim. When have I been “evangelised” and when have I proclaimed?

3. The continuation of the Gospel today is a thrilling invitation: how do I experience that myself?

PRAYER

O God, your saving plan has brought us to the glory of Easter. 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 with you now and always in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THEMES ACROSS THE READINGS

A golden thread sparkles in the tapestry of all our readings: Christ, our light, is risen from the dead, alleluia! On this night of night, we proclaim Christ, the one who creates us anew, who saves us, who sets us free, who loves us, who binds us to himself, who is our wisdom and who gives us new a new heart. This new reality comes our through faith in Christ risen, as Mark proclaims, and by means of baptism, as St Paul explains. This proclamation is so good it has to be true and we should be afraid to feel the joy of

this night. In the words of a contemporary creed,

We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, the gift of the Father's unfailing grace, the ground of our hope, and the promise of our deliverance from sin and death.

To which one can only say, Amen! Alleluia!

Here is the full text of the contemporary creed, offered by the Methodist tradition.

Presider

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the one true Church, apostolic and universal, whose holy faith let us now declare:

All of us

We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, power and love, whose mercy is over all his works, and whose will is ever directed to his children's good.

We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, the gift of the Father's unfailing grace, the ground of our hope, and the promise of our deliverance from sin and death.

We believe in the Holy Spirit as the divine presence in our lives, whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ, and find strength and help in time of need.

We believe that this faith should manifest itself in the service of love as set forth in the example of our blessed Lord, to the end that the kingdom of God may come upon the earth. Amen.

THE ANASTASIS ST SAVIOUR IN CHORA



This quite remarkable fresco is to be found of the former Church of St Saviour in Chora in Constantinople (Istanbul).

Hē Anastasis

The writing on top in Greek reads, **Η ΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΙΣ**, literally the resurrection. The Orthodox iconography is very close to biblical and early Jewish ideas of the resurrection and in particular to 1 Corinthians 15.

Unlike western representations, it is not an individual rising nor it is a resuscitation or mere restoration to life.

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.

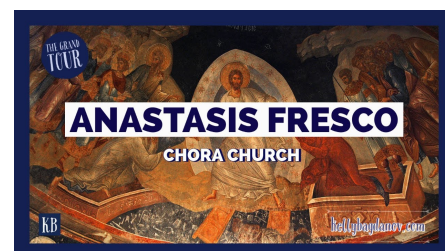
Adam and Eve

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.



You can click on this link to a video on the fresco.