

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22 (21); Philippians 2:6-11; Luke 22:14-23:56

It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning

Lk. 23:26 As they led Jesus away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. 27 A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. 28 But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ 31 For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 [Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35 And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37 and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” 38 There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your

kingdom.” 43 He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. 47 When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” 48 And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. 49 But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

50 Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, 51 had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. 52 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 53 Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. 54 It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. 55 The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. 56 Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The same basic story of the Passion is recounted in all four Gospels. However, they differ in sequence, in wording and in detail, according to the needs of the audience and the theology of the evangelist. A great deal can be learned from paying attention to the variations on the core account. For our brief notes, only

Thought for the day

Official memorial celebrations are familiar to us, marking great world 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. Amen.

the central story is printed and commented.

KIND OF WRITING

The Passion tells the story of Jesus’ final days. It constitutes the climax of his *bios*, the life-story of Jesus, as interpreted in each gospel.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The first generation of believers used the Hebrew Bible to explore what had happened in Jesus, especially Isaiah and the Psalms. (i) “Daughters of Jerusalem” is an expression found only in the Songs of Songs (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 8:4). This implied symbolism of the bridegroom is found also in John’s gospel, where the expression “aloes and myrrh” also comes from the Song of Songs. Compare Lk 5:34-35; 12:36 and 14:8. (ii) *Numbered among the transgressors* comes from Is 53:12; casting lots comes from Ps 22:18; the sour wine comes from Ps 69:21; scoffing comes from Ps 22:6; “chosen one” comes from the Davidic Ps 89:3 and Jesus’ final prayer comes from Ps 31:5.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Within Luke's gospel, there is a remarkable "foreground" to the Passion.

(i) Women are important in Luke and here he shows the representative women of Jerusalem suffering with Jesus (v. 27).

(ii) Luke underlines strongly the innocence of Jesus: Pilate (23:4, 14, 22), Herod (23:15), the daughters of Jerusalem (27), Jesus himself (31), the good thief (41), the centurion (47) and the crowds who came to watch (49).

(iii) The martyrdom of Stephen is very similar (Acts 7-8: he sees heaven open; is taken outside the city to be killed; prays "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit"; "Lord do not hold this sin against me"; is buried by devout men). Jesus thus dies as a prophet-martyr (cf. Lk 4:16-30, Jesus as prophet).

(iv) This gospel shows Jesus "dispensing" gifts while going to death himself: *reconciliation* (between Pilate and Herod); *consolation* (to the women); *forgiveness* (to his killers); *paradise* (to the good thief); *praise* (the centurion); *repentance* (to the crowds). The gifts unwrap Luke's theology of the cross.

(v) "If you are" takes us back to the temptations in Luke 4:9-10.

(vi) The evangelist uses disreputable people to illustrate the Good News: Zacchaeus, the unjust steward, the shepherd (proverbially unable to keep the Law) and the (mean?) woman of the lost coin, the prodigal son, and finally, in this passage, the good thief.

ST PAUL

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Corinthians 5:19).

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 26 Simon is a historical memory, used here to illustrate true discipleship.

Verse 27 This is a sign of repentance to be repeated in v. 48.

Verses 28-30 Written in light of the later destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Verse 31 That is, if they do this to the innocent, what will happen to the guilty?

Verse 32 The theme is from the Suffering Servant Songs of Second Isaiah.

Verse 33 Both skull here and paradise in v. 43 recall themes of Gen 1-2.

Verse 34 [In brackets, because the text is not in the best and earliest manuscripts.] Casting lots: from Ps 22:18.

Verse 35 This "looking" is really a kind of contemplation. "Chosen one" is found at the Transfiguration only in Luke. Saving himself would contradict the mission of Jesus (I am among you as one who serves [22:27]; was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory? [24:26]). It echoes the temptation narrative from Luke.

Verse 36 Ps 22 is fulfilled to the letter.

Verses 37-38 The religious case against Jesus had to be converted into a political indictment to get the Romans to react.

Verses 39-42 A request of profound faith, echoing the direct conversion of Zacchaeus, earlier in the Gospel.

Verse 43 Matthew, Luke and John "bring forward" symbolically the effects of the resurrection, so we see the link between the death of Jesus and the resurrected life of the believer. "Today" echoes many "todays" in Luke's gospel.

Verse 44 Darkness at noon is an apocalyptic theme, telling us that what is happening has to do with God's ultimate purpose in all creation (Ezek 32:8). It also echoes the three days darkness leading to the first Passover (Ex 10:22-23)

Verse 45 Luke—more favourable to the Temple—brings this detail forward and, instead of being a consequence of the cross, it forms part of the context.

Verse 46 Ps 30 is a night prayer. Compare the last words in the other gospels.

Verse 47 Praise—unique to Luke—echoing a strong theme in this Gospel.

Verse 48 That is, conversion. The tax collector in Lk 18:9-14 beats his breast.

Verse 49 In Luke-Acts, the true disciples are witnesses to *all* these things (24:14; in Acts 1:21 they replace Judas by one of the men *who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us*).

Verses 50-52 Luke provides a fuller picture and protects the reputation of Joseph. He is explicitly described as expecting the Kingdom, just like Simeon.

Verse 53 Not the common grave of all humanity because the outcome of this burial will be absolutely unlike the outcome of all other burials.

Verse 54 In Luke's view, this prepares for Easter morning. Literally, the sabbath was already *dawning*. Now the sabbath begins not at sunrise but at sunset and the dawning of the sabbath must refer to the sabbath lamps piercing the onset of evening darkness. Thus Luke delicately anticipates the light of resurrection.

Verse 55 Unlike in Mark and Matthew, the women are witnesses of *all these things*.

Verse 56 The women are portrayed as pious and observant, like Anna in Luke 2. The Sabbath rest echoes Gen 2.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

When you read the passage, stay with whatever part of it resonates with your own life, but make sure when you pray it that you stay with the passage until you get beyond the violence and the horror to find a good news lesson for you. A few specific points taken at random are:

1. In this scene of great tragedy, there are people helping others, either reluctantly or with compassion: Simon, the women of Jerusalem, the criminal on the cross, and Jesus himself. Note the differences in the manner in which the help given (as a burden, with sympathy, etc). What has been your experience of helping and being helped?

2. Despite the persecution by the leaders Jesus still shows forgiveness. When have you seen that spirit of forgiveness in yourself or in others? In your experience what is the effect of a forgiving spirit ... or the absence of that spirit?

3. Towards the end there is a ray of light. Jesus says "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." His relationship with his Father was one of trust, even at a moment like this. What difference has it made to you in times of difficulty or pain to have a relationship of trust with God, or with someone else?

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. 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.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

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

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

THE LITURGY

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

Luke 22:14-23:56

As we listen again this year, listen out for the compassion of Jesus towards all as he faces his death. Several small incidents illustrate this and serve as a key to the meaning of the whole Passion in Luke.

For Holy Week, a separate set of notes has been prepared.