



Parish of Finchampstead and California

Holy Week and Good Friday

LENT WELL SPENT ... in the Name of Jesus: Suffering Servant

Introductory note

The readings from Isaiah 52-53 will be used at Night Prayer on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday as the basis for a reflection. They will also be incorporated in the first three half-hour sessions of the 3-hour service on Good Friday. The reading from Mark 10 will be used in the fourth session.

Monday 30 March at 8pm & Good Friday at 12 noon

Isaiah 52:13-53:3 Despised and rejected

52¹³ 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 ¹Who 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.

Tuesday 31 March at 8pm & Good Friday at 12.30pm

Isaiah 53:4-7 A lamb led to the slaughter

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.

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.

Wednesday 1 April at 8pm & Good Friday at 1pm

Isaiah 53:8-12 A portion with the great

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.

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.

Good Friday at 1.30pm

Mark 10:32-34&42-45 Not to be served but to serve

³² They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was leading the way; the disciples were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴ they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

⁴² Later Jesus called the disciples together and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Context and background

There are four passages in Isaiah which have come to be known as the *Suffering Servant* sections: 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12. The first of these sections starts with God's announcement:

42 ¹ Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ² He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

These verses set the tone for all that follows, emphasising the significance of the *servant* by God's commissioning him to bring justice to the nations and by the servant's docility (v2) in the face of the *suffering* which will be described in later passages. It also becomes clear that the servant will suffer in the place of many others. By doing so the covenant with God will be restored.

Jewish and Christian scholars have long debated whether, in the OT context, the *Servant* refers to Israel as a whole, to part of the nation or to an individual (Jeremiah and Moses have been suggested as well as a future unknown). Also debated is the extent to which, in the Judaism of Jesus' time, connections were made between *Messiah* and *Suffering Servant*. Opinions differ, but there

is only sparse evidence of such a connection in the mainstream of Jewish thought and almost none for *Messiah's* vicarious suffering and atoning death which became important Christian interpretations.

We saw in week 2 of Lent how Jesus reinterpreted *Messiah* to incorporate his coming suffering and death in such a way that Peter was affronted (Mark 8:29-32). This radical reinterpretation which encompassed not just death, but shameful death by crucifixion, became an integral part of the Good News about Jesus - Paul wrote 'we preach Christ (= Messiah) crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles ...' 1 Corinthians 1:23). Neither Jesus nor his followers were prepared to abandon God's will for an easier or more comfortable life. Jesus would not take the easy way - whether tempted by the Devil (Matthew 4:1-11), by Peter (Matthew 16:21-23), or in Gethsemane by his own thoughts (Matthew 26:36-46).

In light of Jesus' unwillingness to compromise his commission from God, of his need to teach the disciples things they did not want to hear (as in Mark 10 above), and of the very clear parallels between parts of the *Suffering Servant* passages and the NT Passion narratives, it is surprising that Jesus quotes directly from these parts of Isaiah only once (Luke 22.37). But there are plenty of allusions.

As an example, all the accounts of Jesus' institution of Holy Communion refer to him shedding his blood *for many* (eg Mark 14.24 cf Isaiah 53:6). Similarly in Mark 10:45, Jesus' status as a *servant* who gives his life echoes much of Isaiah 53 (especially v12).

In addition the words that are heard at Jesus' baptism, 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11) are too close to Isaiah 42:1 to be coincidental. So what is generally taken as God's affirmation of Jesus at the start of his ministry may also be God's call to suffering. In John's Gospel John the Baptist pushes the point home by identifying Jesus as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29 cf Isaiah 53:7, 12).

The early church seems to have taken on the idea of Jesus as *servant* both directly (see Acts 3:13&26; 4:27&30), through citation of Isaiah 53 (1 Peter 2:21-25; Romans 4:25), by allusion to the content of the *Suffering Servant* texts (eg 1 Corinthians 15:3, Philippians 2:7) and by inclusion in ancient liturgies. But while the connection to Isaiah remained, references to Jesus the *servant* were overtaken in popularity by *Christ* and *Lord*.