

Reflection: The Suffering Servant

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The Suffering Servant is an enigmatic figure described in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. One cannot say enough about the importance of this inspired book. Indeed, its direct and indirect use by Our Lord Jesus Christ and its vast role in the life of the Church had led the Fathers to refer to it as the "Fifth Gospel." It still plays a prominent role in the sacred liturgy, being read throughout the Sundays of Advent, each Christmas Mass, on several Sundays during Ordinary Time, Palm Sunday, the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. Whether by attribution or by allusion, this book stands behind much of the New Testament. Moreover, it is particularly the image of the Suffering Servant, as described by the four Songs of the Suffering Servant of the Lord, (Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53) that Jesus combines with the Son of Man prophecy from Daniel 7 to explain the kind of Messiah He is.

Who is the Suffering Servant? This question is never directly answered in Isaiah. However, each of the oracles contributes details by which can be discovered. While some have claimed him to be Isaiah himself or another Old Testament persons or even Israel itself, only Jesus make sense since He alone fits all that is said about the Servant of the Lord. The first oracle presents the mission of this mysterious figure. He is the one whom the Lord has chosen, in whom He is well pleased and upon whom His spirit rests. This is reminiscent of the baptism of Jesus when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove and the Father said to Jesus "You are my beloved Son. On you my favor rests" (Mk. 1:10-11).

The mission of Suffering Servant is to bring justice to the nations through the instruction for which the entire world is waiting. Biblical justice is a matter of right relationships. God chooses the Servant to bring about the transformation of the human race from the ways of sin to the ways of justice. He comes to make right man's relationships to God, himself, his neighbor and the world, all of which have been disrupted by the first sin of Adam and Eve. The Suffering Servant establishes justice through instruction, a word that refers, above all, to the Ten Commandments. As the nations live in right relationships, they will live in a world envisioned by the Ten Commandments. The Suffering Servant speaks his response to his mission in the Second oracle. He acknowledges the call God has given to him from his birth and announces that the salvation of Israel is ordered not only to their own redemption, but indeed the deliverance of all nations.

The Servant's struggle to complete his mission first appears vain and his striving fruitless, but he come to recognize that all depends on God that salvation is God's work, not his alone and that his faithfulness to his call will result in his glorification. As the second oracles relates, the mission of the Servant is one of suffering because the people will not listen to what he reveals. He laments the cruelty inflicted upon him and yet confesses his faith in God, despite the appearance that he has been abandoned to his enemies. He trusts in the Lord's help, but the

people neither trust in him nor in the Lord. As a result, they walk in darkness and the ways of death.

The final oracle describes the entire purpose of the Servant that a sinless man should die for the redemption of sinners. Through the sacrificial offering of his life for the ransom of the many, God exalts him and pardons all those for whom he has died. This oracle may indeed be the most important prophecy regarding Jesus in the entire Old Testament. Turning to the Gospels, we learn of Jesus' appreciation for His identity as the Suffering Servant. This is seen in the way Jesus treats the question of his identity as the Messiah. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is reluctant to reveal Himself as the Messiah because of His credible fear that the crowd would want to make Him their king. But their messianic expectations for a new King David or King Solomon, who would restore Israel to its proper place in the world, full of power, glory and wealth, was not His mission. Rather, Christ came to proclaim a kingdom not of this world whose marks were not power, glory and wealth, but of God whose marks are "justice, peace and joy that is given by the Holy Spirit (Rm. 14:17)." Therefore, the Suffering Servant stands in marked contrast to the human expectations of Jesus' contemporaries, whether they be His disciples or His enemies. For instance, when Jesus reveals that the Son of Man will suffer much, be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, be put to death and rise on the third day, it is Peter who remonstrates with Him, presumably expressing not only his wishes, but that of the entire group. This was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting. Jesus rebukes him "Get behind me Satan, for you are not judging as God, but as men do" (Mk. 8:31-33)." A little later, Jesus will repeat the same prophecy to them, but they will still refuse to hear what He is saying because they are too busy deciding who will be most important in the Kingdom (Mk. 9:30-37). Only in the light of the Resurrection and after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, whom during the Last Supper Jesus promised would instruct them in everything and remind them of all He had told them (Jn. 14:26), did the Apostles clearly understand what Jesus was trying to say about being both the Suffering Servant and the Son of Man.

This understanding of Jesus Christ is found in one of the oldest writings contained in the New Testament, St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where in 15:3 he quotes a creedal formula which he himself had already received: For I deliver to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. As Professor William Farmer notes in his book *The Gospel of Jesus*, "this little passage is of the greatest importance because it defines the essence of the gospel in terms of salvation through forgiveness of sins according to the scripture." It is to Isaiah specifically that this phrase "according to the scriptures" refers; after all the gospels were not yet written. Jesus Himself identifies His mission with Suffering Servant by conforming Himself to what is described in the fourth oracle, Is. 53:5-12, : He was wounded for our transgressions tortured for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole and by his blood drawn by the we whip we are healed... He poured out his soul to death and he was counted among the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Is. 53 sounds like an eyewitness account of Jesus' passion, but it was written hundreds of years before He was born. Since the creedal statement of 1 Cor. 15:3 highlights the

shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sins and Is. 53 speaks of the Servant's death for the sins of others, it is all the more vital to remember what Jesus did at the Last Supper.

In the Mass we hear the priest quoting Jesus directly, when taking the cup filled with wine, He instituted the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist in anticipation of His sacrifice on Calvary: This is my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant, it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven; Do this in memory of me. These words from the institution narrative in the Eucharistic Prayer go back to the most ancient account, the Gospel according to Matthew (Mt. 26:26-29), whose subtext is none other than Is. 53. Regarding the importance of a subtext, Farmer writes in literary criticism, a subtext is one so well known that it is banal to cite it explicitly. In a world of discourse where the subtext is taken for granted, it can be presupposed and is most powerfully present when it is only alluded to, providing the allusions are appropriate. Such is the case here. Christ did not need to say that He was the Suffering Servant because what He did and said made that clear. He was the Servant who was prophesied to come who would bear the sins of others for their redemption. Indeed, from the beginning of His public ministry, when He proclaimed a reading from Isaiah ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,... Is. 61:1ff.) at the Synagogue in Nazareth (Lk. 4), it is clear that Jesus understood Himself and His mission in the light of the prophecies in Isaiah and in particular the Suffering Servant. At the conclusion of his public ministry, He gathers the disciples in the upper room for the Last Supper at which point He established the Holy Eucharist whereby His disciples would henceforth be able to understand the meaning of His entire life: that is on Good Friday, when He was to be crucified, God would speak his final and complete word about the meaning of love and the mystery of God to the human race.

Jesus love incarnate did what love does: suffers for others and pours out His entire life sacrifices all without reservation or condition for the good of another, indeed for the good every other, so that they might have life. But the story does not end there, as if Christ's sacrifice, was the end of the story for Good Friday makes no sense unless it is considered in the resplendent light of Easter. The glorification in the first oracle and the exaltation in the fourth oracle find their fulfillment in Christ's resurrection. The Suffering Servant sheds his blood for the forgiveness of sin so that we might live with Him in glory.

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