

The Prophet Isaiah composed several passages known as Servant Songs. Beyond the immediate meaning to the Jewish people living in exile, Isaiah also speaks prophetically to future generations awaiting the coming of the Messiah. In this sense, the Servant Songs tell us much about Jesus. We hear them during Holy Week because they tell us of the passion and glorification of Christ.

- The servant chosen by God has been given a mission to restore the tribes of Israel. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus reaches out to the Jewish people first before branching out to the Gentiles.
- The servant speaks for God to his people. We hear echoes of this in the Gospels especially at the Baptism of Jesus and the Transfiguration. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Mt 17:5).
- The servant proclaims justice and salvation to all nations. “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied” (Mt 5:6).
- Sadly, the servant “also suffers like a prophet by enduring insults and injuries inflicted by those who despise him.”<sup>i</sup> The servant suffers innocently for the sins of others. He does this willingly. Jesus is the suffering servant who surrenders his life for the forgiveness of our sins and the salvation of the world. “I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting” (Isa 50:6).

Holy Week paints a stark contrast between good and evil. In contrast to Jesus who is willing to suffer for others, we see Judas who serves that others may serve him. He asks the chief priests, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” (Mt 26:15).

The sum of 30 pieces of silver derives from the book of the prophet Zechariah. It is a paltry sum. “The service of the good shepherd is contemptuously valued at thirty pieces of silver, the legal indemnity for a gored slave” (Note Mt 26:15, Zec 11:14-17). In Zechariah, this payment of silver is also accompanied by the breaking of one shepherd’s staff symbolizing the Mosaic covenant and a second staff symbolizing the schism of north and south. Judas is not only acting out of a mode of greed, but his actions also symbolize a severing of all ties with Jesus. He wants to have nothing more to do with Jesus.

In more formal terms, Judas is guilty of the sin of avarice. He seeks riches and power and is willing to bring bodily harm to Jesus to satisfy his needs. The tenth commandment teaches us not to covet our neighbor’s goods. “When the Law says, ‘You shall not covet,’ these words mean that we should banish our desires for whatever does not belong to us. Our thirst for another’s goods is immense, infinite, never quenched. Thus, it is written: ‘He who loves money never has money enough’” (CCC 2536).

Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Jewish Feast of Passover. It commemorates the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Originally, the blood of the lamb from the Passover Meal was placed on the doorposts of the Israelites held in captivity. The angel of death claimed the lives of every firstborn Egyptian and Pharaoh responded by expelling all the slaves. They left hastily but soon Pharaoh sent his soldiers after them. With the parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites were free to roam the desert. The waters of the sea closed in on the charioteers bringing a second defeat for Pharaoh. God’s saving actions are remembered and made present in the Passover Feast.

Jesus the suffering servant will take the place of the Paschal Lamb. He is the innocent one whose blood is sacrificed for our sins. As Christians, we commemorate this new Passover with a meal of our own. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper. In place of the parting of the Red Sea, Jesus dies and descends into hell in order to set the captives of death free. With Easter, we celebrate his victory over sin and death. “Hail to you, our King, obedient to the Father; you were led to your crucifixion like a gentle lamb to the slaughter” (Gospel Accl).

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<sup>i</sup> Hahn, Scott. Catholic Bible Dictionary. Servant of the Lord pgs 829-830