

Palm Sunday
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
25 March 2018

Isaiah 50:4-9a

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 wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 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. 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; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Today in the Old Testament reading we are given the words of the prophet Isaiah. This is the beginning of the third song of the Suffering Servant. This Suffering Servant is an enigmatic person who willingly accepts the suffering imposed on him for the sake of others, perhaps the nation. Isaiah never tells us who this suffering servant is. We don't know if this is a prince or king who accepts punishment himself to prevent catastrophe on the nation after a war defeat, if this is a prophet who is maligned and killed for the sake of his message, or if he is another figure altogether. What we do know, is that Jesus himself applies these words of Isaiah to himself when he tells his disciples, "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; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." (Mark 10:33-34). It is very apparent then that we must read Isaiah's prophesy from the vantage point of Jesus of Nazareth. Such a remarkable prophesy about spitting, insults, whipping, and suffering must refer to Jesus himself. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah. God's own son put to death by hatred and evil.

I just told my Lectionary Bible Study this last Friday that in all the thousands of years of biblical interpretation, no scientist or theologian has found any person in Scripture or in the history of Israel who so fulfills this prophesy as Jesus of Nazareth does. "We have before us the language of prophecy, but it is as accurate as though it had been written at the moment of the event. Isaiah might have been one of the Evangelists, so exactly does he describe what our Savior endured" (Spurgeon, Sermon 1486). Before his own people, the Israelites, Jesus is

falsely accused and abused as Mark tells us today, “They clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him.” (Mark 15:17-19). After mocking him they led him out to a hill and crucified him. By then Pilate had already put Jesus through the cruel process of scourging. This was such a brutal practice that many of the victims died in the process. The lashes of the whips were encrusted with pieces of bone to tear skin and damage muscle. Then the soldiers further ridiculed him and spat on him, slapped him on the face, and violently pushed a crown of thorns down his forehead, causing excruciating pain. What great inhumanity we are capable of committing! What heartlessness can be found in the human heart! What ability we have to degenerate into barbaric behaviors when hatred and evil fill our hearts! Today, the innocent son of God is broken, held to no account, marked with our sin, nailed to a cross, and left to die on a garbage hill outside of Jerusalem. And many of those who welcomed him with palms and songs of adoration, were there in that market place shouting, “Crucify him, crucify him!” What injustice, what depravity, what disregard for life and truth!

Yet, Jesus today speaks to us through the words of Isaiah, “I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who plucked off the hair: I did not hid my face from shame and spitting.” Pilate today looks at us and tell us, “Ecce Homo.” “Look at the man!” Look at him covered in blood, filled with pain, rejected by all, betrayed by all, hated by all. Look at him who willingly chose the cross and the inhumanity. This sight deserves our tears of gratitude. Jesus came as our substitute. It should have been us upon the cross, for all of us stand guilty of sin, all of us stand guilty of inhumanity, all of us stand guilty of treason against our Holy God, our King. It should be us broken and defeated, insulted and abused, dejected and alone. Yet, today, we see God’s son in our place. Willingly and lovingly in our place. Today he takes the abuse that we may be released from our debts against God. Today he pays the ransom that sets us free. Today, he puts guilt, shame and condemnation to death and allows us to stand before God, not as accused sinners awaiting his sentence, but as forgiven children, safe within God’s loving embrace. Today, he walks voluntarily to the place of torture and death, that we may walk freely to the place of restoration and life. Today, he dies on our behalf. Look at him broken and ask yourself a question, “Have I ever been loved this much? Have I even been so forgiven?”

In the person of Christ, God has visited his people, coming very near to us. He came searching for us his wayward children. God had other choices to deal with the problem of sin and evil. He could have done to us what he did to Noah’s

generation, he could have sent the plagues of Egypt, he could have done a number of things. But the fulness of God chose to come to us in the person of Jesus. He came to us and many of us rejected him. He searched for us and many of us refused to be found. He stretched his arms on the hardwood of the cross and many of us still refuse to accept his act of love. Many of us still act with great disregard for him and have no use for him. The blood-stained Messiah looks at us from the cross and many of us look the other way, many of us refuse to be saved, many of us choose to walk into the darkness of self-sufficiency and apathy. Today, he invites us from the cross to come and see him die. Come and see his agony. Come and see his pain and then realize that salvation is free to us, but it was very costly to him. Salvation is a gift to us, but it came at a price. Do not despise a gift that caused an innocent man his life! Do not despise a blessing that came at the expense of a thousand curses. Do not despise life that came at the cost of death!

Christ is the Servant of God who offered himself to the service of God. He is also an empathic Messiah who knows what is like to suffer pain and anguish, betrayal and abandonment, cruelty and death. And because he is empathic, I am here to tell you that he sees you and hears you. He knows your struggles and your doubts. He knows your fears and your pain, he knows your dreams and your fantasies, he knows you intimately and profoundly and yet, he is not repelled by you. He is not ashamed of you. He does not stand in condemnation of you. He stands as your Savior and your friend. He loves you to the point of death. He willingly gave his back to those who struck him and his face to those who slapped him and spat on him. And he did this for you, out of love. Come to him in your thirst and in your hunger. Come to him broken and repentant. Come to him with open arms and he will satisfy you, he will restore you, he will heal you.

Look at him broken and watch him die and then ask yourself a question, "What further proof do I need of God's love for me?"