

Wednesday of Holy Week

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; John 13:21-32; Hebrews 12:1-3

Isaiah 50:4-9a is the third of the four “Servant Songs” in Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). In this song, the speaker fills the role of the servant, and the audience is Israel – and especially those Jews who have fallen away from God.

In this song, the servant’s words reveal him as the prophet who speaks truth to the Israelites, confronting them in their lethargy and depression in the midst of Babylonian exile. He speaks the word of the Lord to them (vss. 4-5), calling them to become as a nation and as people those whom God created them to be. The servant describes himself as the one chosen by God to receive God’s word and then to reveal it to the exiles, so that they might be re-energized and work to form society as God intended it to be.

There will be those among the Israelites who will hold positions of power, and who will oppose both the words of the servant and his ministry, the prophet declares. In their hatred of him and of his proposed reform of their systems, they will attack, persecute and physically harm him. “I give 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” (50:6).

But in spite of the direct opposition of those holding political, economic and religious power, God will sustain the servant and stand by him. That sustenance will enable him to be both single-minded and uncompromising in his commitment to God and Israel’s redemption. Thus, he will be able to accept his suffering with stoicism, and that suffering will become transformative for those who see and respond lovingly to it (vss. 7-9).

One can see how this servant song, as well as the others contained in Isaiah, would have sustained and encouraged Jesus as he faced into the consequences that would inevitably occur because of the action he and his disciples were taking throughout that week that would one day be named “Holy Week”, and that would culminate in Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Psalm 70 is a prayer for deliverance from the Psalmist’s enemies. It opens with those lines that have since come to be the traditional opening prayer of Vespers or evening prayers:

“O God, come to my assistance. Lord, make haste to help me” (70:1).

This prayer has always struck me as the appropriate prayer for one to make at the end of the day. No matter how we’ve tried, we’ve messed up! We’ve sinned. We’ve created hurt of despair in others (even if unintentionally). We’ve disappointed ourselves. Thus, all we can do is come to God in contrition and ask him to assist and help us through his amazing grace to become what he has called us to be. That prayer expresses to me, therefore, the indomitable hope of the Christian in the light of God’s grace and forgiveness.

It is also a most appropriate prayer for Wednesday of Holy Week. As we approach the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday – the last supper of Christ, his agony in the Garden, his

betrayal by one of his closest followers, his arrest in the garden, the flight of all his male disciples, his trial before Israel's high priest and the Sanhedrin, the denial of his strongest follower, his trial before the Roman authority, and his consequent beating, crucifixion and death – this prayer of depression, darkness and disappointment in one's self seems most appropriate.

Thus, after its opening line, the Psalmist writes, “Let those be put to shame and confusion who seek my life. Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire to hurt me. Let those who say “Aha, Aha” turn back because of their shame” (vss. 2-3).

The expression, “Aha, Aha” is an exclamation of mockery in which those who speak it scorn, disrespect and deride a person by ridiculing him. Thus, the Psalmist is suggesting that his enemies are being highly proactive in both working for his punishment and seeking to bring him into public disgrace. They are absolutely merciless in their effort to make of the Psalmist an utter fool.

This, of course, is what the Jerusalem clergy aristocracy sought to do toward Jesus. They were not content to defeat him, or to even arrange for his execution. They had to mock him, as well, seeking to make a fool of him in front of all the people who had once supported him and to whom he gave hope and meaning for their lives.

But then the psalm makes a significant shift. Rather than centering his gaze upon the disrespect he, the people or even the Messiah might be receiving at the hands of the wealthy and powerful, the author shifts his gaze to God. And in that shift, he writes of hope for all who have ever suffered.

“Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. Let those who love your salvation say evermore, “God is great!” But I am poor and needy; hasten to me O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay” (vss. 4-5).

Even if we have fallen short, God is not one to dwell on such shortcomings! Even if we have been treated in unjust and even exploitive ways, God will free us from the pain and rejection we may feel. We may be “poor and needy”, either physically or spiritually, but God respects our humility and works to redeem, liberate and succor us. So we can rejoice in the knowledge that God “is our help and my deliverer” who will not delay in working to set us free!

John 13:21-32. Tomorrow – Maundy Thursday – we will examine the events in the Gospel of John that immediately precede (13:1-17) and follow (13:31b-35) today's Gospel lesson. Today's lesson, therefore, must be read in the context of that larger lesson that is thoroughly developed in the commentary for John 13:1-17 and 31-35. Consequently, I would refer the reader to that lesson for its full (and strategic) background.

Suffice it to say for this lesson that the larger context deals with the beginning of the crucial events surrounding Jesus' passion, John's story of the washing of the disciples' feet. This is a liturgical act of equal importance to John as is the institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion to Matthew, Mark and Luke. Like the Eucharist, the act of foot washing was meant

to symbolize the redemptive nature of Christ's death (not humility – see the Maundy Thursday exegesis) and was, consequently, of equal importance in declaring that the Christ's community was a community in which the disciples had not chosen Jesus, but Jesus had chosen them (John 15:16).

What Jesus is doing and saying in inaugurating the sacramental act of foot washing is to teach that not just he, but all who faithfully follow him will face rejection, suffering, persecution and death at the hands of the political, economic and religious powers of their day. Therefore, he is teaching them through word and sign that they are to support and encourage each other as a faith community in each disciple's effort to live faithful to Jesus' calling. They are to "wash" and to keep on washing "each other's feet". And if they are not both willing to "die" and to support each other in being faithful to this heavenly vision (no matter how the powers oppress, exploit, control or seduce them), then "you have no share in me".

It is in the face of such a spoken and acted-out declaration by Jesus that today's Gospel Lesson takes place.

"After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly I tell you, one of you will betray me". The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples – the one whom Jesus loved – was reclining next to him. Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish". So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night" (John 13:21-30).

There are several striking points made in this story. First, the betrayer was part of Jesus' countercultural community! John does not intend his readers to take this too lightly. The whole emphasis of the book of John was that Jesus' ministry was about creating God's alternative society, a "new" Israel that would replace the Israel too deeply corrupted by the Judeans' economic greed, political lust for power and their use of the piety of the people to dominate and control them. Over against such corruption that has driven so deeply into the warp-and-woof of both Roman and Judean life (and therefore of all society), Jesus is building a counter-cultural effort that is seeking to capture for his day the social structure God has always desired for humanity. That new society, Jesus will say in just a few more minutes, is built on the premise that "as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

Now, that very society, that "new Israel" is being attacked at its very core! "One of you will betray me!" Jesus will not die simply because the systems have decided to "take him out"! Jesus will die because "one of you will betray me". Even Jesus' counter-cultural society will exhibit itself as having the deepest and most perfidious rot at its core! "One of you will betray me!" Even into the midst of the best-intentioned and most sincere people, evil creeps!

Second, the way Jesus identifies the betrayer is particularly poignant. “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish”, Jesus tells the disciple whom he loves. There was nothing more important in ancient society than hospitality (for an extreme indication of that principle, see Gen. 19:1-11). To break bread with a person implied the deepest of commitment to him. You didn’t eat with someone for whom you would not be willing to give your life. And the thought of betraying one with whom you had eaten a meal was simply unthinkable! Then, beside that cultural implication, add John’s emphasis that Jesus was building a counter-cultural community that housed a potential betrayer would, in essence, invalidate that community. There was no worse way for the betrayer to be indicated.

Third, this battle even for the “beloved community” is not only a battle between human evil and good. “Satan entered into Judas” (vs. 27). John wants the reader to grasp the full extent of evil. It is not only social as well as personal, corporate as well as individual. It is not only the evil that political, economic and religious systems can do, as well as individuals who operate those systems (the high priest, Pilate) or are seduced by those systems (Judas). The biblical writers assert not only that the individuals in the city or nation are capable of great evil and that the city contains evil systems corrupted by the “principalities and powers” (or the spirituality of that city’s or nation’s political, economic and religious systems). It is also true that each city, each political movement (in this case, either Judean or Roman), each business venture, even the Temple itself, in fact the nation itself has its own spirituality, a spiritual force that invades and shapes every facet of that nation’s life. And now that incarnate spirituality – the Satan – had gained control over one of Jesus’ disciples – and the beloved community would never be the same again.

Therefore, John ends the story with startling words, “And it was night” (vs. 30)! Fourth, it was not simply that the sun had set and it was now nighttime. John means far more than that with that closing line. It was night! It was obviously night for both Jesus and Judas, as the betrayer set out to “do quickly what you are going to do”. It was also night for the now-ruptured disciple band. It was now night for the entire enterprise in which Jesus was involved. For “my friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me” (Psalm 41:9). And now the inevitable had been set into motion that would bring to fulfillment Jesus’ words, “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

This does not conclude the Gospel lesson for this day, however. It continues, “When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once”” (John 13:31-32). The Greek word “glorify” (*doxazo*) means “to honor or make visible the presence of God”. It is the Greek word from which the English word, “doxology” is built. By these words, Jesus is changing the whole tenor of the conversation and action in which the disciple had been previously involved.

If the story would have ended with Judas rushing from the disciples’ apparently-last meal with Jesus to “do quickly what you are going to do”, then the event would have surely ended in darkness. But it did not. Instead, it ended with Jesus’ words that God would be glorified (and

Jesus would be glorified, also) by the events that had been set in motion that night. Jesus would indeed be tried, found guilty of treason, beaten and executed. But that crucifixion would be triumph rather than defeat with God being glorified, humanity redeemed, society liberated and the world made whole again. Good Friday was coming. But Easter was not far behind! So it would be that even what appeared to be the darkest of all events would, in reality, become doxology for God and for humanity as God would initiate this redemptive work upon the earth. Thus, “God has been glorified” in the coming glorification of “the Son of Man”!

Hebrews 12:1-3 presents the essence of the hope tapped by Jesus in his reminder that the evil that would soon happen in his Passion would actually redound to both his and God’s glorification. The author of Hebrews concludes his long list of those who suffered for their faith in Yahweh throughout Old Testament times, with these words:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart” (Heb. 12:1-3).

The author envisions an athletic stadium, and those who are presently running the race of faithful service to God entering the stadium after a grueling, many-miled marathon. The stands are filled with those saints of the Old Testament, cheering them on. As they run into the stadium, each one completing his life’s run, he spies the *Caesar* of the race, sitting on a throne at the other end of the stadium, waiting to present the crown – the victory wreath – to the winner. But that *Caesar* of the race is none other than Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who, for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the throne of God”.

So you run toward the *Caesar* of the race, young lungs gasping for air, your body tortured by the run, your legs wobbling in exhaustion over your life’s run. You run before all those witnesses who once were where you now are and who also entered exhausted into this arena – all those witnesses now cheering you on! You run, considering the one seated on the victory throne and toward whom you are running, who “endured such hostility against himself from sinners”. And therefore, you run for the prize awaiting all those who have been chosen by Christ and who, in turn, place their faith in Christ, ignoring your weariness or your losing of heart. For you are running toward Christ the King. And you run for Christ and His Kingdom! That is the Christian context for the latter days of Holy Week!

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