

Tuesday of Holy Week

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; John 12:20-36; I Corinthians 1:18-31.

Isaiah 49:1-7 is the second of the four Servant Songs of Isaiah. In this song, it is the Servant Himself who is the speaker, whereas in the first Servant Song (yesterday's Old Testament lesson), it was God. Today's Servant Song both seeks to identify the Servant and to define more specifically than did the first song, the mission of the Servant.

“Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” But I said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity, yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God” (49:1-4).

The Servant himself speaks for the entirety of this song. He begins by announcing that he is speaking to the world, and not only to Israel. His address is to the “coastlands” and “you peoples from far away” – all the nations of the continent and of the world. And what he has to announce to them is that God has called him to be God's Servant and to explain his mission.

The Servant begins by stating that he is called by God. This call occurred while he was still *in utero*, before he was even born (for a similar perspective of call, see Jeremiah's understanding of his call in Jer. 1:5). This call is unquestionably authentic and beyond debate. To express the call's authenticity, the author of this song does several things. First, he uses the word “call” to indicate God's choice of the Servant and makes it clear that this call occurred even before this person's birth. Second, he said that God “named me while I was in my mother's womb”. The phrase “named me” is better translated “pronounced my name”, which means far more than simply giving a name to a person. It is both a common and a very powerful phrase used to indicate a call to a particular mission (e.g., in regards to Cyrus, king of Persia, in Isa. 45:4).

Third, the author piles up phrase after phrase to indicate the vocation of the Servant (“The Lord called me before I was born, he made my mouth like a sharp sword, he made me a polished arrow, in my mother's womb he named me, in the shadow of his hand he hid me, in his quiver he hid me away”). In Hebrew poetry, this was a device used to emphasize a particular point. For the device to be used in this instance six times indicates that what is being declared here is irrefutably true. Further, these phrases emphasize the unique person and the unique vocation of the Servant. Whereas many people were called by God (e.g., Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah), this passage through its repetition is emphasizing that the Servant's person and vocation is unprecedented. He is particularly chosen by God for a vocation unlike anyone else's, and the writer wants the reader to be particularly clear about that point.

The author then moves to the identification of the Servant. That identification includes who he is and who he is not. He first writes, “And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I am glorified” (vs. 3). On first reading, it seems irrefutable that the Servant identifies himself as Israel itself. But the vast majority of scholars (Catholic, Protestant and Jewish) believe that the word “Israel” is a gloss on the text (that is, was added by a scribe to the text). The evidence for

such seems overwhelming. First, the name “Israel” is absent from the Septuagint, the first translation of the Hebrew text into Greek and the earliest extant document of the Hebrew Bible. Second, the name “Israel” appears in Hebrew texts that are only later than the Septuagint. Third, this is the only place in the Servant Songs where the Servant is identified as Israel itself; all other identifications within these songs are of either a remnant of Israel or of individual people; therefore, to base one’s contention that the Servant is Israel upon a questionable text is not sound. Fourth, this Servant song is clearly a poem, and the placing of the word “Israel” into the meter of the poem disrupts its poetic meter. In essence, the word “overloads” the line metrically (intriguing, this is as true in its English translation as it is in Hebrew; try reading the verse excluding the word “Israel” and note how much more smoothly it reads). Fifth, in this same Servant Song, the author identifies a mission of the Servant being “to bring Jacob back to God, and that Israel might be gathered to him” (vs. 5a). Isn’t it inconsistent to have the Servant be Israel and then state that the mission of the nation Israel is to bring the nation back to God? How can the nation be in mission to itself? The inclusion of the name “Israel” in verse three opposes the intent of the entire passage, which otherwise postulates the Servant as either an individual or a representative person. For all these reasons, even those biblical scholars who are most orthodox in their treatment of scripture in both Jewish and Christian traditions see the word “Israel” as an addition to this text, likely added in the second century BCE.

So who is the Servant, according to this song if it is not Israel? It is either a remnant of Israelites who are dedicated to the return of the world to God’s intentions or it is an unnamed individual.

The author now moves to a statement about the mission of the Servant. “And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength – he says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, “Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you”” (vss. 5-7).

The Servant declares for himself a two-fold mission. First, he declares that he is “to bring Jacob back to (God) and that Israel might be gathered to him” (vs. 5). He is to restore Israel to God’s calling for it – for the nation, its rulers, priests, economic leaders and its people to come into a dynamic and personal relationship with God and each other, to be committed to justice for all but especially for the powerless and marginalized, and to work to equitably distribute wealth so that none are poor or vulnerable.

But the second mission is even more important. The Servant is to be “a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (vs. 6b). Former “servants” of Yahweh like Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah were called to work for the liberation and salvation of Israel (Exod. 4:10-17; Isa. 6:5-7; Jer. 1:6-10). But God’s unique Servant is to become “a light to the nations”. He becomes such a light to the whole world by introducing the world to Yahweh and by working for a society of justice, equity and relationality under God’s covenant of grace-filled love. Thus,

the Servant fulfills, in his actions, the ultimate call to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 22:18) and to Israel (Exod. 19:5,6) of bringing about the transformation of all the nations of the world.

What, then, will be the result of the faithful work and witness of the Servant? The One who humbled himself in order to become the Servant of rulers will Himself receive their homage (4:2; 45:24; 52:15). The One who was “despised” and “abhorred by the nations” (vs. 7a), who would have seemed to “have labored in vain, and spent his strength for nothing and vanity” (vs. 4a), whose work and witness would be rejected or discounted by the world will one day be embraced as political, economic and religious leaders and the people come to the realization that the hard news he offered to them was in reality good news, that the way up is down, that the way to save one’s life is to lose it, and that the way to make one’s life truly worthwhile is to give it away to others! And it will be, as the result of such awareness dawning upon the world’s leaders and the people that they will realize that true life comes “because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you” (vs. 7b).

Psalm 71:1-14 is a prayer for lifelong protection and help. Some of its stanzas are particularly noteworthy.

“In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress” (71:1-3).

This is a moving cry for the support, sustenance and strength of God in the Psalmist’s life. It becomes particularly poignant, however, when he compares his youth and old age.

“Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb. . . . Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent” (vss. 6a, 9).

God was faithful and clearly present in the Psalmist’s birth and earliest years. Yet he feels God’s absence now in his final years, and therefore calls upon God to be present to him now.

But God becomes present to him, even as he prays. Therefore, the psalm ends with a shout of joy and of praise to God.

“My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued. All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help, for those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced” (71:23-24).

John 12:20-36. One could almost call this Gospel lesson, “The Last Temptation of Christ”.

The Pharisees, in John 12:19 say to each other, “You see, we can do nothing! The whole world has gone after him!” That statement of intense frustration by those who would stifle Jesus’ popularity would be literally fulfilled in the Gospel lesson for this lectionary in Holy Week.

This lesson begins with the words, “Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’” (12:20-21).

The Greek word here translated “Greeks” is crucial to the understanding of the import of this story. It is the Greek word that should be best translated “Gentile”. It is *not* the Greek word for Jews who spoke Greek or lived in Gentile countries, nor does the word mean Greeks who were Jewish proselytes. It means “pagans”, “Gentiles” – those outside the influence of the Promised People, and therefore in the eyes of the Judeans of that day, those rejected by God. These “Greeks” presumably have not come to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover festival, but specifically and intentionally to meet with “the Son of Man”. Thus, it is these “non-Jewish Gentiles” who come to Philip and ask to speak with Jesus.

It is intriguing to note that the two disciples to whom they go to gain entry to Jesus have Greek names – Philip and Andrew. Did these Greeks feel they would make more headway by going to apparently Greek-influenced disciples? We do not know. But the very placing of this story at this point in the Johannine narrative serves to illustrate clearly the truth of the Pharisees’ comment, “Look, the whole *world* has gone after him”, for now even non-Jewish Gentiles are seeking out Jesus!

The text does not tell us whether or not these Gentiles got to see Jesus! But what did happen was a response by Jesus to their request, brought to him by Andrew and Philip – a response that seems thoroughly inappropriate! To their request that he visit with these Gentiles, Jesus responds:

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor” (12:23b-26).

This is a strange response to a simple request by Gentiles to speak to Jesus! But if one puts this story in the larger context, then one can begin to perceive Jesus’ anxiety and his consequent reaction.

These Gentiles were coming to ask Jesus to leave the dangers of Jerusalem and the coming inevitable final confrontation with the Jerusalem clergy aristocracy. Rather, they wanted Jesus to return with them into Gentile territory beyond Judean influence or authority. There, Jesus could be safe, and would be free and even welcomed to teach and heal as he so obviously felt led. It is intriguing that the synoptic gospels’ report that Jesus spent significant time (some would estimate about one-third of his time) in Gentile territory beyond the borders of Galilee.

Thus, in these Gentiles’ offer lay the way out of the death that would otherwise inevitably await Jesus if he continued his attack on the Judeans – and that, quite soon! Should he accept the offer? Would he accept the offer? Could he not now “save face” while rapidly de-escalating his

conflict with the Jewish clerical aristocracy, doing so by accepting the request of a people who wanted him to teach and heal in their country and were open to having their society shaped into the kingdom of God? It must have been terribly, terribly tempting – especially to a young man who really was dreading the thought of dying (cf. Luke 22:41-46). It was, in reality, the last temptation of Christ!

Jesus rejects their offer of escape. Using the metaphor of wheat, Jesus states that it is only through his dying that humanity will live. It is only through his crucifixion that those committed to him will be birthed into a new community. If he becomes fixated upon preserving his life, Jesus observes, then all will be lost – the kingdom, the world, humanity – and even his own soul. On the other hand, if he is willing to face into his own death, then all humanity will be redeemed. This is Jesus' answer to his last temptation. To take the easy way out would be to be disobedient to that heavenly vision and call that God had given to him, not just at the beginning of his ministry, but at the very beginning of time (John 1:1-14).

It is at this point that Jesus then utters one of the most poignant lines that appear in scripture. “Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this very reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (12:27)

This is one of the few places in John when you truly see into the inner anguish of the man himself. Here you see Jesus in the very raw! He is a young man – 33 years old. He doesn't want to die! He wants to go on living, serving others, building a community, healing the broken, making humanity new again. Here is the opportunity to do so. With all his heart, he wants to cry out, “Father, save me from this hour”!

But he will not utter such a cry. Jesus will stay the course. He will play out the drama that lies before him. HE *MUST* DIE! For unless he dies, there is to be no redemption of humanity.

So Jesus makes the decision to stay in unyielding confrontation with the political, economic and religious powers of both Israel and of Rome until they do their worst and destroy him. To die is his purpose in life. So he calls upon God to sustain him in what he must now do.

The text tells us that God responds verbally to Jesus. Some can't perceive the words. But Jesus can. And Jesus now knows that God reassures him that God will see Jesus through what Jesus must do!

Jesus then turns to the crowd and says something utterly stunning. “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (vss. 30-32).

Jesus' death, he is saying, will drive out “the ruler of this world”. The conventional interpretation today of the phrase “ruler of the world” is that this is a reference to Satan. However, that must be seriously questioned. First, the term “ruler of this world” as a reference to Satan is never used in the rabbinical literature contemporaneous with Jesus, nor would that term ever be used by any first century Jew to refer to Satan – precisely because the Jews believed

with all their being that *Yahweh* was the ruler of the world! Second, it is not used in the Gospel of John as a reference for Satan; indeed, the only other places it occurs (John 3:1, 7:26, 48; 14:30), it is clearly a reference to someone other than Satan. Third, for this to be a reference to Satan would alter the whole meaning and thrust of John 11:1—12:50, which pits the struggle as not between God and Satan, but between Jesus and the Judeans.

So who is the “ruler of this world”? It is the Jewish religious aristocracy – the consistent usage of the word “ruler” throughout the Gospel of John (3:1; 7:26, 48; 14:30). It is the Sanhedrin – the Jewish “congress” of priests, Pharisees and Sadducees – who have done everything possible to “drive out” Jesus and his community of faith. So they will be judged by the Lord of history, and will therefore discover that it is, instead, they would who will be “driven out”. Jesus, on the other hand, will be “lifted up from the earth” (i.e., will be crucified), and thus, by dying on behalf of the world, “will draw all people to myself”!

Consequently, it comes down to an eternal choice, Jesus says. The choice is not simply between whether Jesus will take the “easy way out” or to act out his obedience to a God who calls him to a cross. The choice is ours, as well. Jesus says, “If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light” (12:35b-36).

Each person can choose darkness or light, the ruler of this world or Jesus. The choice is before you – to continue to be a part of the present division of power which will oppress, exploit and seek to control you (but, because you are use to it, seems most secure and stable) or to become a part of the “beloved community” of the Crucified One who is in society to return it to God’s intentions for society? The choice is now before Israel, just as it was placed before them by Moses in the book of the Hebrew Bible which best presented that vision of God’s intentions for human society: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. . . . Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him” (Deut. 30:15, 19b-20a).

And the choice is before each of us this Holy Week, as well. Do we follow the “ruler of this world”? Do we embrace their political, economic and ethical values of lust for control, oppression, greed and exploitation, of domination and of control? Do we embrace the temptation to “take the easy way out” in order to live in security, stability and apparent peace, in order to do the teaching and healing we so love to do? Or do we choose to join with the Christ and his beloved community to obediently work for God’s intentions for humanity, even if that means receiving the wrath of those “rulers of the world”? You see, it is our Holy Week, as well!

I Corinthians 1:18-31. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”, the Apostle Paul writes (I Cor. 1:18). In the Epistle Lesson for today, Paul compares the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God.

There are two ways that one can respond to the good news of the Gospel, the apostle suggests. One way is to reject it – and the result of such rejection is to be rejected by God. The second

way to respond is to embrace the gospel – and the result of such an embrace is that you will continue in “being saved” (Isa. 6:9-10; Luke 2:34; Rom. 9:10-12; II Cor. 2:15-16). Those who are “being saved” are “those who are called” by God (v. 24; Rom. 9:16).

Before everyone, Paul states, there is a choice. It stood before the Israelites when God met with them at Mount Sinai and gave them the Ten Commandments. It stood before the Jewish priests of Jesus’ day who held control over the religious, political and economic apparatus that governed Israel. It stood before Jesus’ followers and the people. And it stands before us. Which will we choose? Will we choose for a golden calf or for Yahweh, for political domination and economic wealth or for Jesus, for allegiance to Rome’s Caesar or allegiance to God’s Caesar – Jesus? What will be the priorities of our lives? Choosing those priorities will choose the one (or One) we will serve.

There is, Paul states, the world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom. There are those who see the gospel of justice, equitability, elimination of poverty and relationship with God as scandal and folly. But there are also those who see it as God’s power at work shaping society into God’s intentions for it. There are those who are awed by the systems of apparent strength of a Rome or of a Jewish clergy aristocracy. And there are those who recognize that God’s power is revealed in our weakness (vss. 20-22). To be among “those who are called” (vs. 24) is to be among the foolish, the weak, the marginalized of the world. But, because “we proclaim Christ crucified” (vs. 23) as a symbol of weakness and defeat, we actually belong to those who will transform the world. For our gospel of cross is also the gospel of resurrection.

“God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness stronger than human strength” (vs. 25). Working both in and through us as the followers of the One who exorcised the Temple and returned the true Israel to God’s intentions for society as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, God has demonstrated that real foolishness belongs – not to those who embrace Christ and His Kingdom, but those who choose to oppose Him (vs. 27).

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