

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 53:10-11; Psalm 33 (32); Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve

Mark 10:32 *They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, 33 saying, "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; 34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."*

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?" 39 They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised; 40 but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The teaching of this passage is and al-

ways was something of a challenge to the members of the church who are in leadership positions. As usual, Mark locates the teaching as a response to the prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection and that remains the literary context. At the Markan level, the social context, however, is likely to be the emergence, even in the early church, of styles of leadership at variance with the practice and teaching of Jesus. Mark, in response, makes an explicit link between leadership in the church and the mission and destiny of Jesus.

It is very likely that this scene is substantially historical, for two reasons. First of all, the later version in Matthew "protects" the reputation of James and John by portraying their mother as making the embarrassing request! In other words the early church was uncomfortable with such an unflattering portrait of significant apostles. Secondly, it portrays Jesus as not being able to do something. The tendency of the New Testament as a whole is to increase the power and authority of Jesus. Any story bucking that trend is also likely to be historical.

KIND OF WRITING

As before, this passage has a wider context on Mark 8-10 and a narrow context after the Passion Prediction in 10:32-34 (not included in today's reading, but inserted above for convenience).

The arguments are carefully laid out in the manner of a *chreia* or anecdote, which explores the core values of Jesus. See overleaf for the train of thought.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Servant

O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of

Thought for the day

As such, ambition is not quite neutral. We are called to be ambitious, that is, to use our gifts, to inhabit our strengths, to be of real service. St Paul says, *be ambitious for the higher gifts*. It is not that ambition as such is harmful; however, in the common experience, ambition can be destructively egocentric and based on distorted motivation.

Prayer

Set our hearts free, O Lord, that we may desire what you desire and love what you love. Amen.

the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord! (Psa 116:16-19)

Suffering

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. (Is 53:10-11)

Right hand

I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. (Psa 16:8)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:24-27)

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know

(a) **The desire for greatness**

Narrative	Request for greatness	Manner
Issue	Greatness (35-37)	
Thesis	Lack of understanding (38a)	censure
Rationale	cannot arrive without cup (38b)	sylogism
Rationale	cannot arrive without baptism (39)	sylogism
Thesis	cannot give it in any case (40a)	
Rationale	Allotted [divine passive] (41b)	maxim

1. Whoever asks for glory without suffering does not understand.
2. You ask for glory without suffering
3. Therefore you do not understand.

(b) **What is greatness?**

Argument	What is greatness?	Manner
Issue	greatness (41)	
From the opposite		
Example	Gentile rule (42a)	example
Example	rule of great men (42b)	example
Exhortation	not so! (43a)	a wish
Paradigm		
Comparison	great = servant (43b)	metaphor
Comparison	first = slave (44)	metaphor
Reason	Son of Man (45)	sylogism

1. The Son of Man is your model
2. He came to serve, not to be served
3. You too must serve and not be served.

what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. (John 13:12–17)

ST PAUL

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building. (1 Cor 3:5–9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 35 The demand is extraordinarily “open” and manipulative. They want a “yes” before the specifics, even though James and John belong to the inner circle. In Mark’s narrative, this takes place

after the Transfiguration.

Verse 36 An equally open response.

Verse 37 The language is apocalyptic. However, in Mark “right and left” next occur at the crucifixion, which is surely an intended irony.

Verse 38 None of the disciples really “knows” until after the resurrection. Cup is a metaphor for consequences that must be accepted.

Verse 39 The imagery tells us that the destiny of Jesus is a fulfilment of his baptism by John. Here, Mark looks forward to the time of the church. In later Christian reflection, baptism was used for martyrdom (Tertullian, *On Baptism* 16; Anon, *On Re-Baptism*, 15; Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 16. 6; Cyprian, *Epistle* 53. 4).

Verse 40 They disciples are unabashed; Jesus confesses powerlessness, which sounds historical (see above).

Verse 41 That they are angry is ironic, given their very own misunderstandings.

Verse 42 This would be very obvious from the local and national exercise of power in the Roman Empire.

Verse 43 The gospel reverses the value

system of the world. There is indeed to be leadership in the Church, but it must be exactly the opposite of worldly power and glory.

Verse 44 This is borne out in the language of early Christianity.

Verse 45 A theological conclusion: discipleship must be based on the destiny of the master. It is important not to read later Western theories of redemption back into the phrase “for many.” A text of the time of Mark, talking of martyrdom, speak like this: *These, then, who have been consecrated for the sake of God, are honoured, not only with this honour, but also by the fact that because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified—they having become, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation.* (4 Mac 17:20–21) In Aramaic, many is in contrast to few not to all (as in English).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus had spent much time teaching his followers that discipleship was a life of service, a life giving oneself for others. In spite of that, James and John were thinking of what they could get out of it. For Jesus, for the apostles, and for each one of us, the glory of God is revealed when we allow God to work through us as we give ourselves for others. When have you found that you reach a fuller life and others benefit when you act in this spirit of service?

2. One of the great problems in a community, a parish or an organisation, is when you have some people jockeying for status and positions of power. The good of the group and the people it serves take second place to personal prestige. You have probably seen this happen. Perhaps you have also witnessed people with a spirit of service that allowed them to value the good of the group over personal rewards. Recall them and give thanks for their witness.

3. Jesus himself is the great model of this spirit of service. Think of the aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry that have inspired you to imitate his giving of his life for others.

PRAYER

Most glorious God, in Jesus you show us that your will is to save. Grant to us your people the boldness to desire a place in your kingdom, the courage to drink the cup of suffering and the grace to find in service the glory of your promise. Amen.

We have a high priest who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin

Heb. 4:14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Steadfastness and holding on our confession of faith are strong themes in Hebrews. Perhaps such sentiments are never out of date but surely today this word is needed as we struggle with holding on to the faith we have received. The letter makes a powerful link between our commitment and the teaching about Jesus' death and resurrection.

Today, when the understanding of salvation is either incredible or absent, the letter does focus the mind on "the events which brought us new life in Christ."

KIND OF WRITING

In terms of the overall layout of Hebrews, v. 14 belongs to the previous exhortation and v.15ff. opens up the next, central reflection on Jesus as our high priest (4:15-10:18). Frequently in Hebrews, there are link words in a conclusion, taking us from one teaching to another. 4:15-16 finds a parallel in 5:1-10.

In this portion of Hebrews, the steps are as follows:

- I. 4:15-5:10 Jesus, merciful and compassionate high priest
- II. 5:11-6:20 Exhortation to maturity, leading to the central teaching
- III. 7:1-28 Jesus, high priest after the order of Melchizedek
- IV. 8:1-10:18 Jesus' sacrifice

ORIGIN OF THE READING

It is clear from Hebrews that we are dealing with a second generation, baptised, fully instructed community of believers. And yet, something has happened and things are not as they were or ought to be. There are contradictory

indications: they are infantile (5:11-14) and yet mature (they can be expected to grasp his argument). Some have fallen away and, even among the committed, attendance at assemblies of the community has fallen. Nothing much new here.

RELATED PASSAGES

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." (Hebrews 2:10-12)

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:1-10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 The writer has not yet explained what kind of priest Jesus is but he does anticipate it here. According to

the writer, the death of Jesus brings with it the abolition of the Levitical priesthood. That creates a problem of continuity (= God's faithfulness). Instead, Jesus fulfils an older and superior priesthood, that of Melchizedek. The Levitical high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, a mere sketch of the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus, by contrast, has passed through the heavens, into the very presence of God on high. *Therefore*, let us hold fast etc.

Verse 15 Holding fast is difficult and so the writer reminds the listeners that our high priest is like us every respect and so can truly sympathise with us in our struggles. Notice the double negative (*litotes*) which is not without power.

This is key teaching of Hebrew. Jesus is not a priest *by separation from the profane* (as in the Levitical high priest); on the contrary, Jesus' mediation is grounded on his *immersion in common humanity and his total identification with us*. The age-old distinction between the sacred and the profane is thus definitively set aside, something the Christian tradition has often not remembered.

Verse 16 Precisely because Jesus is this kind of priest, we may approach him with boldness, that is, confidence. Cf. Heb 3:6; 10:19, 35. Mercy (*eleos*) and grace (*charis*) correspond to the covenant gifts of loving kindness and compassion from the Hebrew Bible. The "timely need" is clearly *now*.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Do you find it a challenge today "to hold fast to our confession"? What are the pressures? Where do you find the inspiration and strength to keep going?

2. At the centre of the Christian proclamation stands the true humanity of Jesus, Son of God. In the words of Bishop Robinson, it can be felt as "the scandalous particularity of the incarnation." Yet, because love is concrete and historical, this arresting conviction is the ground of our hope.

PRAYER

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities

Is. 53:10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. 11 Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This OT reading is familiar to us from its use in Holy Week. It is important to try to read the passage in its own historical and literary context first of all, and only then to go on to the Christian use of the passage.

KIND OF WRITING

There are four poems in Is 40-55 which have been identified and named by scholars as the Suffering Servant songs: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11 and 52:13-53:12 (cf. Jer 10:18-24; 11:19).

Who this figure is has puzzled people for a long time. It might be simply the prophet himself, who suffers for his ministry. It could also be the people as a whole, who through the suffering of Exile became again God's servants. Both dimensions are in the texts, so it may be as well to think of the two readings together. I.e. the prophet, undergoing innocent yet transformative suffering, shows the way forward for the people as a whole.

It is almost impossible for Christian readers not to see Jesus in these readings. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, but the songs did have a meaning in a particular historical context and there is an independent Jewish approach to these mysterious passages.

The songs and indeed Isaiah as a whole were used widely by the New Testament writers to explore the meaning of the death of Jesus. Just as one example, here is St Paul:

Israel's sins have separated her from God (e. g., Isa 59: 7- 8 and Rom 3: 15- 17; Isa 52: 5 and Rom 2: 24),

God has remained faithful, preserving a remnant

(Isa 1: 9 and Rom 9: 29)

God brings eschatological salvation even to the Gentiles (Isa 49: 8 and 2 Cor 6: 2; Isa 65: 1 and Rom 10: 20).

In the end God will redeem Israel (Isa 45: 23 and Rom 14: 11) *and his purpose will prevail* (Isa 40: 13 and Rom 11: 34; 1 Cor 2: 16).

In that sense, the songs remain indispensable when we try to see how the first generation of believers came to understand the place of suffering and salvation in the life of Jesus.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

This poem comes from Second Isaiah. The present book, actually quite unified, reflects different stages of evolution.

1-39 First Isaiah - 8th century BC
40-55 Second Isaiah - Exile, 587-539 BC
56-66 Third Isaiah - just after the Exile

Thus, Is 40-55 comes from the second half of the sixth century BC, some 150 years after Isaiah of Jerusalem. The prophet wrote while still in exile in Babylon (he mentions Cyrus at 45:1; Babylon fell to him in 539 BC).

RELATED PASSAGES

See, I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. Like the hardest stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not fear them or be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. (Ezek 3:8-9)

Listen carefully to my words, and let my declaration be in your ears. I have indeed prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated. Who is there that will contend with me? For then I would be silent and die. Only grant two things to me, then I will not hide myself from your face: withdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me. (Job 13:17-21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 10 The very first phrase will be difficult for people today, as we do not think of God as willing suffering. Nevertheless, suffering is a reality and we can

face it in different ways. The person of faith will try to see pain (somehow, eventually) in relation with God. The second phrase treats the suffering of the Exile, whether personal or communal, as the equivalent of an offering. This means it is seen a purifying. God's response to this acceptance of transformative suffering points to the next generation who will benefit.

Verse 11 Hope comes eventually. If something like resurrection is intended, in the historical context, this can only mean the metaphorical resurrection of the restoration of Israel. In the second part of the verse (God is speaking), the suffering of the Servant as an individual is taken as exemplary for all the people. From him, they will learn how to make sense of the tragedy of the Exile.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. All of us experience suffering. The big question is, how do we face it? Can we become part of our path to God? How has faith sustained me in the past?
2. All Christians are called to witness, to show by our lives that the Gospel makes sense. Who are the people in my life who encourage by their faith? Are there people that I, in my turn, encourage?
3. To be able to see the light, especially in suffering, is really hard. Go back to previous contexts in your life when there seemed to be no way out and yet you came through with the help of God.

PRAYER

God of our lives, when suffering comes our way, we are perplexed; teach to accept what comes so that we learn compassion for others and may be drawn closer to you. Let the example of Jesus lead us through the valley of darkness. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.



THE LITURGY

Isaiah 53:10-11; Psalm 33 (32); Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading is essential background for at least the final verse in the Gospel: For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. The key words are serve, ransom, and many.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The Psalm is really a prayer for all of us who benefit from the self-gift of the Servant.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 53:10-11

This short poem explores suffering. As you listen, you may see why this passage was used by the early Christians to understand the cross.

Second Reading

Hebrews 4:14-16

What difference does the death of Jesus make to us today? In this reflection, we learn that he can help us because he is like us in all things, except sin.

Gospel

Mark 10:35-45

What about the exercise of power and leadership in the Church? Just how different should it be, according to the teaching and practice of Jesus?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 18 October

St Luke, evangelist

2 Timothy 4:10-17

The reading is chosen for the feast because it mentions a certain "Luke." This is unlike to be the same as the writer of the Gospel and Acts. However, the reading shows wavering support for the apostle or, in reality, for those sustaining the Pauline tradition in a later context.

Luke 10:1-9

The sending the seventy-two—unique to Luke and anticipating the wider mission in the Acts—portrays a picture of fleet-footed evangelisers, who travel lightly

and without hindrance.

Tuesday 19 October

Saints John de Brébeuf and Isaac Jogues, priests, and their Companions, Martyrs

Romans 5:12, 15, 17-21

In trying to reconcile Gentiles and Jews in the Roman churches, Paul wants to show that every human being, no matter what background etc., stands in need of God's grace in Christ. Symbolically, Adam's story is our story.

Luke 12:36-38

Parables of watchfulness are not uncommon but this one contains a major role reversal: the master *will put on an apron, sit them down at table and wait on his own slaves*. The story of the washing of the feet in John's Gospel comes to mind as does another sentence from Jesus: "*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*" (Mark 10:45).

Wednesday 20 October

Romans 6:12-18

As always, Paul's message is one of freedom. Being set free in Christ, he insists that we continue to be free from whatever keeps us from God.

Luke 12:39-48

The gentle Luke is not always as gentle as we fondly imagine. Today's reading moves smoothly from night-time burglary to keeping watch. The violent and brutal imagery (cut off, strokes of the lash) is indeed arresting: Luke wants to wake up us to action.

Thursday 21 October

Romans 6:19-23

Paul often bring up the contrast between how we used to be and how we are now in Christ. What is the point of persistence? God's gift of eternal life in Christ.

Luke 12:49-53

Fire is a cultural image for judgement. By contrast, baptism can be a metaphor for destiny only in light of Christian tradition. With these contrasting images of judgement and death, Jesus links his own fate with his mission from God.

The second paragraph reflects what happened to people who made (and make) a radical choice for Jesus. The social and familial cost was *and still can be* considerable.

Friday 22 October

St John Paul II, bishop of Rome

Romans 7:18-25

We know a lot about Paul because he himself tells us a great deal. In today's reading, we get really under his skin in some very honest reflections. Our experience is in there somewhere too!

Luke 12:54-59

What has the weather to do with going to court? The two sets of parabolic sayings may seem disparate but in reality are related. The link is time and the good use of time *in the now*. Interpreting the times is the duty of us all; acting on that interpretation is the call of us all.

Saturday 23 October

St John of Capistrano, priest

Romans 8:1-11

How can we ever come to true inner peace? How can we become our true selves as God intended? Paul describes the path, using a language which is his, but based on an experience which is ours.

Luke 13:1-9

Bad things happen to good people, then and now. Coping with the unpredictable invites repentance, but not in the sense of sorrow for sin. Rather, *metanoia* is better rendered "conversion", i.e., a fundamental change of attitude to life, to God and to others, a real turn around.

The fig tree is rich in metaphorical resonance from the book of Genesis onwards. In the Gospels, it often bears the message of judgement, as in the cursing of the fig tree. That prophetic action is not recounted in Luke and instead we have a very different story of yet another chance. Luke is telling us to dig around, get manure, create the conditions for bearing fruit...otherwise!