

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Isaiah 50:4-9a

NRSV

The part of Isaiah written in exile (Chapters 40-55) contains four *servant songs*, sections that interrupt the *flow* of the book but have a unity within themselves. The first (42:1-7) begins “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen ...”; in the second (49:1-7) the servant, abused and humiliated, is commissioned anew; in the third (our passage) he is disciplined and strengthened by suffering; and in the fourth (52:17-53:12) even the Gentiles are in awesome contemplation before the suffering and rejected servant. In late Judaism, he was seen as the perfect Israelite, one of supreme holiness, a messiah. In the gospels, Jesus identifies himself as the servant (or slave), the one who frees all people.

In vv. 4-6, God has “opened my ear”; he has commissioned the servant as one who is taught, i.e. like a disciple. God has made him a “teacher” (a prophet) of the “word” of God, to bring God’s comfort to “the weary”, his fellow Israelites – who reject God. He has accepted this command: he is not “rebellious”. They have tortured him (v. 6), as they did prophets before him, but he has accepted their “insult and spitting”. In vv. 7-9a, in courtroom language, the servant says that, because God helps him, he is not disgraced; he confidently accepts the suffering (“set my face like flint”), and will not be put to shame. God will prove him right (“vindicates”, v. 8). He is willing to face his “adversaries”, his accusers – for the godly to “stand up together” with him against the ungodly. He is confident that, with God’s help, none will declare him guilty.

Psalms 31:9-16

NRSV

The psalmist seeks deliverance from personal enemies. He is “in distress”: his troubles have led to ill health; his strength fails him (v. 10); perhaps he is terminally ill. He is “scorned by all my enemies” (v. 11a, Revised English Bible) and even by his neighbours; his friends avoid him. People forget about him, as though he is already dead (v. 12); he feels as useless as “something thrown away” (New English Bible). People are conducting a whispering campaign against him and they scheme to take his life (v. 13); but he accepts God personally; he has confidence in God (v. 14). His destiny (“times”, v. 15) is safe in God’s hands; he trusts that God will deliver him from his adversaries and persecutors. Seeing himself as a “servant” (v. 16), he cries *let me experience you, O God!* May God, in his compassion, save him from all that besets him. In vv. 21-24 (perhaps written later), he gives thanks to God for hearing his call for help. God’s unfailing love for him in his distress was wonderful. May his experience be an example for others.

Philippians 2:5-11

NRSV

In vv. 1-4, Paul has urged the Christians at Philippi, through “encouragement in

Christ”, and moved by God’s love for them, to “be of the same mind[set], having the same love, being in full accord ...”. They are to “regard others as better than ... [themselves]”, freely adopting a lowly, unassertive stance before others, replacing self-interest with concern for others.

Vv. 5-11 are an early Christian hymn to which Paul has added v. 8b. He exhorts his readers to be of the same mindset as Jesus – one that is appropriate for them, given their existence “in Christ” (v. 5). Christ was “in the form of God” (v. 6): he was already like God; he had a God-like way of being, e.g. he was not subject to death. He shared in God’s very nature. Even so, he did not “regard” being like God “as something to be exploited”, i.e. to be grasped and held on to for his own purposes. Rather, he “emptied himself” (v. 7), made himself powerless and ineffective – as a slave is powerless, without rights. He took on the likeness of a human being, with all which that entails (except sin), including “death” (v. 8). As a man, he lowered (“humbled”) himself, and throughout his life in the world, was fully human and totally obedient to God, even to dying. (Paul now adds: even to the most debasing way of dying, crucifixion – reserved for slaves and the worst criminals.)

God actively responded to this total denial of self, his complete *living and dying for others*, by placing him above all other godly people (“highly exalted him”, v. 9), and bestowing on him the name, title and authority of “Lord” (v. 11) over the whole universe (“heaven”, v. 10, “earth”, “under the earth”). God has given him authority which, in the Old Testament, he reserved for himself. (Isaiah 45:22-25, in the Revised English Bible, says: “From every corner of the earth turn to me and be saved; for I am God ... to me every knee shall bow ... to me every tongue shall swear, saying ‘In the Lord alone are victory and might ... all Israel’s descendants will be victorious and will glory in the LORD’”); everyone shall worship him; confessing that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (v. 11) is equivalent to proclaiming the victory and might of God. The ultimate goal is the “glory of God the Father”, the reclamation of God’s sovereignty, his power over, and presence in, the universe.

Matthew 27:11-54

NRSV

It is the time of Passover. Jesus has shared the Last Supper with his disciples. He has very humanly asked the Father to allow him to simply die, but has decided to be obedient to the Father’s will, God’s plan. Judas has betrayed him to the religious authorities, and Jesus has been arrested, tried by the Sanhedrin, found guilty of a capital offence (blasphemy) and handed over to Pilate, the Roman prefect, for trial under Roman law.

Now Pilate says to Jesus: *You the King of the Jews? You don’t look like a revolutionary!* Some have attempted to connect him with those seeking a political messiah. Jesus’ answer amounts to: *Yes, but not the way you mean it.* Matthew portrays the Jewish authorities as instrumental in raising charges (v. 12); he minimizes Pilate’s guilt. Again Jesus does not answer. Pilate is “amazed” (v. 14) because a simple peasant would protest innocence, and a revolutionary would deliver a political manifesto: Jesus does neither. (Outside the Bible, Pilate is de-

scribed as cruel and obstinate; Matthew shows him differently.) Pilate's verdict is not mentioned, but it must have been treason to warrant crucifixion: Jesus' claims sound like a threat to Caesar's authority.

The custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover ("the festival", v. 15) is unknown outside the Bible, but such amnesties did occur at some Roman festivals. (In v. 16, "they" must be the Romans.) Matthew does not tell us Barabbas' crimes, but Mark implies that he is a revolutionary and probably a murderer; it is his fate, not Jesus', that has attracted the "crowd" (v. 15). Note the contrast between "Jesus Barabbas" (v. 16, meaning *son of the father*) and Jesus Son of the Father. For Pilate, it would be politically wise to release Jesus, not Barabbas (v. 17). He gives the Jewish leaders and people the choice.

While Pilate sits in judgement ("judgement seat", v. 19), his wife urges him to release Jesus – based on a dream she has had about him. This pause in the proceedings gives the Jewish authorities time to stir up the crowd (v. 20). They demand Jesus' crucifixion. Pilate sees no guilt in Jesus (v. 14), but he takes the politically expedient path, to avoid a riot (v. 24). In symbolic gesture and word, Pilate pleads before God that he is innocent (v. 24). (*Washing hands* is a Jewish custom, not a Roman one.) He has Jesus flogged with a leather whip containing pieces of bone or metal. At either Herod's palace or the Fortress Antonia, a detachment of soldiers ("the whole cohort", v. 27) mock Jesus: they dress him in a soldier's cloak, put a crown on his head and a sceptre ("reed", v. 29) in his hand, and salute him. (The "thorns" available would not twist easily so the crown was probably radial, as on the Statute of Liberty, not round; wearing it was not torture.) They hail Jesus as they did the Emperor (*Hail, Caesar*), ironically proclaiming his true identity.

"Cyrene" (v. 32) was in North Africa, near Bengazi. That "Simon" is named probably indicates that he became a Christian. The custom was for a criminal to carry the crossbar, but Jesus was already too weak to carry it himself. (Flogging was usually at the place of crucifixion.) "Golgotha" (v. 33), a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic word for *skull*, was a small stone hill near an abandoned quarry. Jesus refuses "wine ... mixed with gall" (v. 34), a sedative; he prefers to remain conscious. Matthew's description of the crucifixion is just two words in Greek (v. 35). The executioners divide the victim's clothes among them by lot – to avoid a dispute over who gets the best – but this verse also fulfills Psalm 22:18. A placard placed around Jesus' neck states his crime: they are from v. 2: his claim of messiahship has been twisted into a conviction for treason. Perhaps the "two bandits" (v. 38) are revolutionaries. Three groups mock him: (a) passers-by, who scorn him ("shaking their heads", v. 39, a Middle Eastern gesture) and repeat the first charge made before the Sanhedrin (26:61), (b) the religious authorities, who say: *If you are the Messiah, work a miracle: save yourself* (v. 42), and (c) those crucified with him (v. 44). Crucifixion was a very cruel form of execution; death from suffocation came slowly, often after several days, and resulted from the trauma caused by flogging, thirst, hunger, exhaustion, and exposure. The victim's arms being stretched back, breathing was difficult. While he had the strength, he

periodically lifted himself with his legs to take a breath.

Matthew does not explain the "darkness" (v. 45). Jesus' cry is the first verse of Psalm 22, in Aramaic. This psalm, as a whole, tells of a righteous sufferer who, despite his travails, comes to trust in God. Jesus feels abandoned but not in despair, for his prayer is to the Father. Perhaps "some" (v. 47) misunderstand Jesus' words because they are spoken in pain, leading them to believe that he is "calling for Elijah". (Based on Malachi 4:5, Jews expected Elijah to return at the end of the age). The gift of "sour wine" (v. 48, what a soldier carried) is an act of kindness, but others are curious: maybe Elijah will save him. Jesus dies suddenly, violently, probably in pain (v. 50). The "curtain of the temple" (v. 51) hung before the Holy of Holies; only the high priest passed through it. 1:10 tells of the tearing open of heaven at Jesus' baptism. In ancient cosmology, a giant *pudding bowl* separated earth from heaven: a barrier between God and humanity. So both the ritual and cosmological barriers are torn open – as a result of Jesus' death; it is an act of God, symbolizing the arrival of open access of humankind to God. (See Isaiah 64:1) The point of vv. 52-53 seems to be that Jesus' death brings life. The earthquake cracks the rock, opening the tombs and bringing "saints", honoured dead of Jewish tradition, to new life. But perhaps v. 53 is a correction: they actually rose "after his resurrection". The words of the "centurion" (v. 54), a Gentile and member of the hated Roman army, may show only that he recognizes Jesus as a benefactor of humankind, but they are much more significant for us. Jesus dies in only about six hours, probably because he had been flogged severely. Women are very much followers of Jesus, from the earliest days (vv. 55-56). They are faithful even now – unlike the eleven.

Jesus dies at about 3 p.m. (v. 46) on Friday, the day before the Sabbath (see v. 42). Because the Jewish day begins at sundown, and no work can be done on the Sabbath, there are only a few hours in which to bury his body. Deuteronomy 21:22 stipulates that the corpse of one convicted of a capital crime must be buried on the day of his death, so an effort must be made to bury Jesus before sundown. So "Joseph" (v. 57) of "Arimathea", a man of means, immediately asks the Roman authorities to release Jesus' body. Matthew brings out the dignity and grandeur of the burial, but it is likely that Mark's account is more accurate. Here the burial shroud is a "clean linen cloth" (v. 59), the tomb is "new" (v. 60) and the stone door is "great". Joseph lays the body in a tomb presumably intended for himself. He rolls a disk-shaped rock "to [against] the door" (v. 60); "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" (v. 61) witness this. (A body was normally washed and then anointed with oil before burial, but in Jesus' case, there was no time to do this.)

Vv. 62-66 prepare for the resurrection. The religious authorities wish to ensure that the faithful do not steal Jesus' body and falsely claim that he has risen from the dead. A false rumour of resurrection ("the last deception") would be worse than the "first" (Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.) The tomb is "made secure" (vv. 64, 66) and is guarded by soldiers.