

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 ... [his] 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.

Luke 23:1-49

NRSV

Jesus and his disciples have met in a room on the second floor of a house in Jerusalem for the Last Supper (the name comes from 1 Corinthians 11:20, “the Lord’s supper”). He has given his farewell address to those present (and, it seems, to other followers) preparing them for their role in his mission. He has taught them the meaning of leadership, and has told them that they will face hostility in spreading the Good News.

In the Garden of Gethsemane he has resisted the temptation to avoid his destiny. In an act of infidelity, Judas has betrayed him to the authorities. Before the high priest, we have seen the contrast between Peter’s infidelity and Jesus’ faithfulness. Jesus has been mocked: he is the rejected prophet.

Next morning, he has been brought before the “council” (22:66), the Sanhedrin. He does not answer the members when they ask whether he is the Messiah, be-

cause they would misunderstand his answer. Apparently powerless, he foretells that God will prove right both him and his ministry: he “will be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (22:69). He does not deny that he is the Son of God. The Sanhedrin considers that they have sufficient evidence to bring him before the Roman authorities.

Jesus is now brought before “Pilate” (v. 1) on charges that he has violated Roman law: the charges are made to sound like treason, but neither did he forbid payment of taxes (see 20:20-25) nor is his kingship political (v. 2). (Pilate, Prefect of Judea 26-36 AD, had the authority to impose a sentence of death by crucifixion.) Refusing to take religious ideas in a political way, Pilate announces Jesus’ acquittal (v. 4), but then he yields to popular opinion in sending him to Herod Antipas, tetrarch of a territory which includes Galilee, Jesus’ home district (vv. 6-7).

Herod is curious to “see” (v. 8) Jesus: he hopes for a miracle – but his kind of *seeing* is not that required for faith. Jesus remains silent: he is the innocently suffering righteous one. Again he is mocked (v. 11). Herod *passes the buck* back to Pilate. Even when seemingly powerless, Jesus is able to bring about reconciliation: between Herod and Pilate (v. 12).

In vv. 13-25, Jesus is tried in full compliance with Roman law: he has been arrested (v. 14a); he is charged (“perverting ...”); he is examined; Herod’s verdict supports Pilate’s findings (v. 15a); Jesus is acquitted; he receives a judicial warning (v. 16). Three times the authorities and the people demand Jesus’ death (vv. 18, 21, 23); however in vv. 35, 48 the people (but not their leaders) repent.

Ironically, “Barabbas” (v. 18) means *son of the father*, but they reject the one who is God’s Son! Vv. 19, 25 tell us that Barabbas is a nefarious character. Jesus will die for even such as him. Pilate gives in to the mob, who have been *whipped up* by the religious authorities (v. 25). (Matthew and Mark tell us of the custom of pardoning a criminal at Passover; v. 17, which scholars say is probably not original, mentions this custom.)

It was customary for a criminal to carry the crossbar, the rest of the cross being permanently installed on a hill outside the city. The religious authorities and the mob cause “Simon of Cyrene” (v. 26) to help Jesus by carrying the crossbar. (The Greek translated as “made him carry”, *laid on him*, elsewhere clearly means *laid friendly hands on him* – for healing.) The procession includes two other prisoners (v. 32) and a few soldiers.

There are others in the crowd who are for Jesus, and repent (“beating their breasts ...”, v. 27), but in vv. 28-31, Jesus warns the residents of the city to repent of their rejection of him, God’s prophet, otherwise God will punish them. People considered child-bearing a special blessing, and barrenness a particular curse, so v. 29 would *hit home*. V. 31 is a proverbial saying, probably meaning here: if the innocent Jesus (who is life-giving, “green”) meets such a fate as crucifixion, what will the fate of the guilty city dwellers (who are dead, “dry”) be?

Jesus continues his ministry of giving forgiveness to those who have not heard

the Good News (v. 34). The division of his clothing fulfills Psalm 22:18; to be deprived of one’s clothing was to lose one’s identity. (Biblical examples are prisoners, slaves, prostitutes and damned people.) The mob contemplates what is happening, but the “leaders” (v. 35) taunt Jesus: they blaspheme against God.

In accord with Psalm 69:21, a psalm of the innocently suffering godly one, Jesus is offered “sour wine” (v. 36) – to revive him, and to prolong his ordeal. Ironically, “Messiah of God” (v. 35), “his chosen one” and “King of the Jews” (v. 37) are all true. Jesus refuses to subvert God’s plan by saving himself from a horrible death. A placard was placed around the criminal’s neck, bearing an “inscription” (v. 38), stating his crime.

One criminal joins with the mob (v. 39) but the other responds positively to Jesus (v. 43). Despite his criminal past, for the latter there is salvation; Jesus pronounces him free of sin. Only a king can give pardon. (“Paradise” was the Jewish name for the temporary resting place of the godly dead.) The earth (God’s creation) and the Temple also respond positively to Jesus death: the “darkness” (v. 44) may have been a solar eclipse; the torn “curtain” (v. 45) symbolizes the end of the separation between the priests and the people: open access of humankind to God has arrived.

Jesus’ words in v. 46 are based on Psalm 31:5, another psalm of the innocently suffering righteous one; he shows his profound trust in the Father. Jesus concludes his life of obedience to God’s will. With God’s free gift of faith, a Gentile (“centurion”, v. 47) sees, understands, the deep significance of Jesus’ forgiveness of the criminal: Jesus’ death has meaning way beyond Israel. The mob repents (“beating their breasts”, v. 48). Jesus’ “acquaintances” (v. 49) – apostles and other followers, both men and women – see (or at least, seek) the meaning of what has happened: they are “watching these things”.

The following verses tell us about Jesus’ kingly burial, a great contrast to the way he has been treated at the end of his life. The decision of the “council” (v. 50 and 22:70-23:1) may not have been unanimous, for “Joseph” of “Arimathea” (v. 51) now asks the Roman authorities for Jesus’ body (v. 52). Joseph “was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God” (v. 51), so he is either a God-fearing Jew or a Christian.

Tombs were cut into the face of an outcrop of soft rock, a geological feature rare in the area, so they were reused (after a year or so), the bones being moved to an *ossuary* or bone-box. This tomb is special, fit for royalty, for it has never been used (“where no one had ever been laid”, v. 53). Joseph takes Jesus’ body down from the cross and wraps it in a “linen cloth”. Jesus is given a burial fit for one who is God’s Messiah (Greek: *Christos*), the Chosen One. Time for burial is short, for the Sabbath (when almost all activity ceased) begins at sundown (v. 54) and it is already afternoon. As Luke often tells us, women have an important role: they see inside the tomb and “how his body was laid” (v. 55) and prepare “spices and ointments” (v. 56) for anointing Jesus’ body later, there being no time now for doing it properly.