

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 52:13-53:12

NRSV

Our reading is the last of four poems found in Isaiah 40-55 which are known as Servant Songs because each speaks of a "servant". They were seen as foretelling the coming of the Messiah in the centuries before Jesus was born; Jesus saw himself as fulfilling these prophecies.

In 52:13-15, God announces a time when "my servant" (possibly the prophet himself) will be raised to "very high" status with him – due to (as the word translated "prosper" implies) his obedience to God's will. As many were stunned into silence ("astonished") at him, disfigured (and so unfit for sacrifice), so will he "startle" people everywhere; they will see the unexpected and "contemplate" ideas strange to them.

The prophet speaks in 53:1-9, beginning with two rhetorical questions: who has believed what Israel has heard? To whom has God's power ("arm") been shown? The victor had humble beginnings (although "root", 53:2, does link him to 11:1: from the stump of Jesse, ... out of his roots", Jesse being David's father). The servant was disowned by his own people; they *hid their faces* from him, as they did from a leper. Illness was seen as God's punishment for waywardness (53:4), but the servant's *punishment* was different: it restored "us" (53:5), rebellious as we were against God ("transgressions"), to total well-being ("whole"). God placed our sins on the servant (53:6). The servant suffered harsh treatment and death silently, despite the agony (53:7). He was wrongfully convicted (53:8); he was completely innocent (53:9). His humiliation was unexpected. It was in God's plan for him to suffer (53:10). Victory, exaltation, will not come in his lifetime but by God's "will" being done in future generations.

In 53:10b, God speaks again. Through the servant's union ("anguish", 53:11) with sinful people, he will bring widespread oneness with God ("righteous") through his "knowledge" (of God). For what he has done, God will make him "great" (53:12).

Psalms 22

NRSV

Jesus quoted the opening words of this psalm on the cross. In his suffering, the psalmist feels deserted by God, despite his cries for help day and night (v. 2). Even so, he convinced that God is "holy" (v. 3). His forebears trusted in God (as he does), and God helped them (v. 4), so may God help him now (v. 5). His misery is aggravated by those who mock him; they see his suffering as a sign of God's ineffectiveness: they jeer and grimace ("make mouths", v. 7) at him. But he is convinced that God has been with him since his infancy (vv. 9-10); only God can help him now. His detractors behave like savage animals, seeking to devour

him (vv. 12-13). (Bulls from "Bashan" were particularly strong.) His suffering (vv. 14-15) may be physical and mortal: his dry "mouth" may be due to fever; it leaves him weak. His detractors are so sure he will die that they have already auctioned off his clothes (v. 18). May God help him soon (v. 19). When God restores him, he will spread the word of God in the community and will praise him in the "congregation" (v. 22), the Temple. God will rescue him, and all "nations" (v. 27), and those who have died (v. 29). "Future generations" (v. 30) too will be told of God's saving deeds, and will proclaim them.

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

NRSV

The author has written that Christ, the sympathetic and trustworthy "high priest" (2:17), took on being human in every way; he was tested by suffering. He came to help humankind (2:16). Through his death he is able to restore us to oneness with God, freeing us from the power of evil forces – unlike those who fear death because they will be judged harshly for unforgiven sins (2:14-18).

Now he says that because our "great high priest" (4:14) has become human and returned to God ("passed through the heavens"), we should "hold fast" to our (baptismal) creed ("confession"). God knows each of us and sees us clearly; we "must render an account" (4:13) of our fidelity to him. Christ can "sympathize with our weaknesses" (4:15), because he has been "tested as we are", but without erring. So let us confidently present ourselves before God ("throne of grace", 4:16), to receive both forgiveness of sins and his gift of love ("grace") to help us "in time of need".

Indeed, Christ is the ideal high priest for two reasons: (1) he is "able to deal gently" (5:2) with those who do not know God ("the ignorant"), and with those who deviate from God's ways (the "wayward"), having been able to sin while he was in human form, and (2) he is divinely appointed ("called by God", 5:4): the author sees Psalm 110:4 as his appointment. He is high priest "for ever", ("Melchisedek" being the prototypical priest), unlike the Temple high priests.

Vv. 7-8 speak of his time on earth, "the days of his flesh": then he (1) prayed to the Father, (2) showed his supplication to, and reverence for, him, (3) suffered the agony of the Cross, and (4) was obedient to the Father's plan. This discipline completed the Father's making him the great high priest; thereafter he is the source of forgiveness of our sins permanently, for all time.

John 18:1-19:42

NRSV

Jesus has prepared his disciples for his departure; he has prayed to the Father that believers may have both the Father and the Son within them. May they express their unity in love, thus fulfilling the mission of the Church to lead all people to believe.

He and his disciples now leave Jerusalem; they cross "the Kidron valley" to "a garden" on the Mount of Olives. The "police" (18:3) are Temple police, under the control of the high priest. The Jewish and Roman authorities collude. While there was only one high priest, there was a high-priestly family ("chief priests"); "the

chief priests and the Pharisees” is John’s term for the Sanhedrin. It is night-time, so those who are to arrest Jesus carry lights as well as “weapons”. Having foreknowledge, and having chosen his destiny, Jesus takes the initiative (18:4). *Jesus the Nazorean* is a better translation than “Jesus of Nazareth” (18:5, 7; 19:19); in Acts 24:5 an attorney for the Jewish authorities calls Christians *Nazoreans*. “I am he” (18:5) fits the context; it also recalls God’s name in Exodus 3:4,6. Perhaps “they stepped back ...” (18:6) because they saw Jesus as a magician casting a spell using the divine name. Their action also emphasizes Jesus’ divine majesty. In 18:8, Jesus secures the release of his followers; earlier, in 17:12, he has promised safety for those entrusted to him (18:9).

Peter’s action leads Jesus to ask him whether he intends to prevent Jesus from going through with the destiny the Father has for him (18:11). “The cup” is what is allotted by God, whether pleasant or unpleasant. The “officer” in 18:12 is the equivalent of a colonel, and “the soldiers” are a cohort (“detachment”, 18:3), hundreds of men. The number is probably exaggerated – to show that Jesus is in charge of what happens to him. “Annas” (18:13) had been high priest until deposed by the Romans; he has been succeeded by relatives, of whom “Caiaphas” is one. “The Jews” (18:14) are prominent ones; the ordinary people (when not whipped up by the Jewish authorities) are sympathetic to Jesus.

We do not know who “another disciple” (18:15) is. People may have still seen “Annas” (18:24) as the rightful “high priest” (18:15). That the gate/door-keeper is a “woman” (18:16) is surprising; she does appear in all four gospels. Peter’s first denial is in 18:17.

In 18:19-23, Jesus is interrogated by Annas. He tries to indict Jesus for training his disciples as revolutionaries. Jesus replies that he has always taught in public places, for all to hear. Those who heard him “know what ... [he] said” (18:21): ask the crowds about me! He has not conspired (“said nothing in secret”, 18:20). His refusal to answer annoys the hearing. In 18:23, Jesus is not deterred; he deals boldly with his questioners. By sending him to Caiaphas, Annas holds him overnight (18:24).

18:25 contains Peter’s second refusal to identify himself as a follower of Jesus, and 18:26 his third. As in the other gospels, the “cock” (18:27) then crows, announcing dawn. Jesus had predicted that this would happen: see 13:38.

Pilate’s official residence, his “headquarters” (18:28) was the praetorium; it was part office and part living-quarters. It is about 6 a.m. (“early ...”), the time when sessions of Roman courts began. Whether entering the public part of the building would make the Jewish authorities (“they”) ritually unclean (“defilement”) is disputed by scholars.

In 18:29, Pilate begins the hearing with the formula usually used in Roman courts. “They” (some prominent Jews, 18:30) have no charge to bring, so they obfuscate. In 18:31, Pilate tries to get out of his pact with them; their answer reveals that they seek the death penalty. It also reveals the “kind of death” (18:32) that Jesus is to die: the Jewish authorities could stone a person to death (a foreigner found in an

inner court of the Temple), but only a Roman court could order crucifixion. Jesus has predicted this: “lifted up” in 3:14-15; 12:32-33.

Pilate is suspicious of the motives of the Jewish authorities, so he questions Jesus again (18:33). He cannot believe that the man before him is *kingly material*. He focusses on the political aspect of Jesus’ popularity. Jesus answers Pilate’s question with a question: *did other put you up to this?* (18:34). Jesus offers Pilate the opportunity to follow his own conscience rather than serving as a channel for hatred. Pilate begins his reply by showing his scorn for Jews, and affirms that some of them have put him up to it. Why would the high-priestly family want you gone?

Jesus answers in Pilate’s terms (18:36): my kingship is no threat to Roman authority, because it is not *worldly*. If it were, supporters would be fighting to free me. Pilate recognizes that Jesus is, in some sense, a “king” (18:37), and seeks elucidation. Jesus answers that he and Pilate have different ideas of kingship: Jesus is sovereign over “truth”, and took on human form to explain it and bring people to it.

Pilate is intrigued by the idea of “truth” (18:38), and understands just enough to find Jesus innocent of political insurrection. He would like to release him, but needs a way of doing so that will not foment riots. The “custom” (18:39) of setting a prisoner free at Passover is unknown outside the Bible. The crowd, whipped up by the authorities, choose a “bandit” (18:40), a robber. The Greek word often means one who stirs up rebellion. In 10:1,8, Jesus contrasts himself, the good shepherd from such a person.

Jesus is “flogged” (19:1). Usually part of the punishment, it would significantly hasten the death of a crucified person. The flogging, and the mockery in 19:2-3, assume that sentence has already been passed: a scholar suggests that the verses have been rearranged. The “crown of thorns” was probably made of woven palm fronds, a symbol of kingship, rather than being an instrument of torture. A Roman soldier wore a scarlet tunic; “purple” is mock-scarlet.

Again Pilate declares to the crowd that he finds Jesus innocent (19:4). Coronation of king would include announcement of his throne-name; perhaps, ironically, “the man” (19:5) is Jesus’ throne-name, and slaps across the face replace the usual kisses. In Daniel 7:13, the Aramaic *bar nasha* (son of man) is a circumlocution for “man”. Jesus called himself *son of man*, exemplary human being, because it was apolitical, unlike *messiah*.

Again Pilate finds Jesus innocent, but refuses to act: the Sanhedrin could not order crucifixion (19:6). This time the Jewish authorities state that Jesus is guilty of breaking Mosaic law: he has committed blasphemy by claiming “to be the Son of God” (19:7). (The law is in Leviticus 24:16.) Pilate is “more afraid ...” (19:8) perhaps because he has some inkling of what Jesus is about. In asking “Where are you from?” (19:9) Pilate is asking *what is your origin?* He may have grasped that Jesus’ “kingdom is not from this world” (18:36). Perhaps Jesus does not answer him because understanding about God requires commitment to the truth. Pilate takes Jesus’ silence as a slight against his authority and ingratitude of one whose life he is disposed to spare. 19:10-11 point out that even though Pilate thinks that he has

ultimate, Roman, authority (“power”) he does not: all authority is under God. Caiaphas (“the one”, 19:11) is “more guilty” than Pilate.

In 19:12, the high priests raise the spectre of Pilate being thought disloyal to Caesar. Under Tiberius, any hint of disloyalty could be fatal. One who “sets himself against the emperor” opposed him. They shift away from a religious charge against Jesus to the political one – of being a king opposing Caesar.

Roman courts met in the open air (“outside”, 19:13). The Greek translated as “sat” is ambiguous (probably intentionally); it can mean *seated him* (Jesus): who is on trial? While there is no doubt that Pilate was the judge, the notion that all authority is under God is present. For “Hebrew”, read *Aramaic*, the common language in Palestine. The high priests have placed Pilate in a *no-win* situation, so he takes revenge: in “Here is your King!” (19:14) he speaks contemptuously, and causes them to commit blasphemy: in answering “We have no king but the emperor” (19:15) they deny that God is king.

The antecedent of “them” in 19:16 is logically “the chief priests” (19:15), but this doesn’t make sense. A scholar suggests that this verse originally followed 19:2, making “them” refer to “the soldiers”. John is keen to show that Jesus is fully in control of the situation, so he does not mention that Simon of Cyrene relieves Jesus of the weight of the cross part-way to “The Place of the Skull” (19:17), a location with skull-like appearance outside the city (“near ...”, 19:20).

In his “inscription” (19:19) Pilate unwittingly affirms the truth that Jesus’ opponents have rejected. Being tri-lingual, it can be read by most people in the Empire. Caiaphas and Annas object (19:21): they will not have Jesus thought to their king. Perhaps Pilate did understand something about Jesus.

It was a Roman custom to divide the clothes of a crucified person (19:23). There were five items of clothing and four soldiers. The “tunic” (inner garment) being “seamless, woven in one piece ...” was like the one a high priest wore. The soldiers toss dice (“cast lots”, 19:24) to decide whose it will be. Even they fulfill Old Testament prophecies.

Note the dramatic contrast between the soldiers and the women close to Jesus (19:25). There are various conjectures as to “the disciple whom he loved” is in 19:26. “Here is” can be rendered as *see* or *behold*. Today Jesus would probably say *Mother* rather than “Woman”; he speaks to her affectionately and respectfully. Jesus is really human, and cares. “Hour” (19:27) means *from that time on*. He provides a guardian for his mother.

Jesus knows that he has accomplished all that he set out to do for the restoration of humankind (19:28), and in saying “I am thirsty” shows genuine human weakness. The “sour wine” (19:29) is what soldiers drank. We do not know who raised the sponge to Jesus’ lips, nor how. “Hyssop” grows at most waist-high, so probably the “branch” was attached to a staff (or javelin). Hyssop was used to sprinkle the blood of the Passover lamb on doorposts (Exodus 12:22). Jesus confirms completion of the task the Father has given him (“It is finished”, 19:30). No one has

taken his life; he gives it up himself (“gave up his spirit”).

For “cross” (19:31), read *crosses*. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 requires that the body of a person hung on a tree be removed before dark. That year, the first day of Passover was a Sabbath. So “that sabbath” is especially holy (“a day of great solemnity”), and there was a special need to remove the bodies from the crosses. This work could not be done on the Sabbath. Breaking the men’s legs would hasten the onset of suffocation, and death.

That “blood and water came out” (19:34) of Jesus’ side did really happen (19:35), and also has symbolic significance: (1) the “blood” symbolizes life flowing from the crucified Jesus, and made available to us in the Eucharist (see 6:53-56); and (2) the “water” symbolizes the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. 19:35 is John’s comment: he was an eye-witness to Jesus’ death. It really did happen the way he describes. He has written it down so that his readers “also may believe”. The quotation in 19:36 refers to the Pascal lamb; Jesus is the new Pascal lamb, whose life is given that others may live.

The quotation in 19:37 is Zechariah 12:10, part of a passage that refers to the end-times. The soldiers have “pierced” Jesus on behalf of those who have opposed Jesus; when Christ returns, his opponents will see Jesus vindicated, and them in the wrong.

12:42 tells us “many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue”. “Joseph of Arimathea” (19:38) was one of Jesus’ “secret” followers and Luke 23:30 says that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. “Nicodemus” (19:39), also a member of the Sanhedrin, has earlier “come to Jesus” secretly; he now comes openly, in the day-time.

These brave men give Jesus a proper burial. (The bodies of men who had been crucified were usually left for the vultures to devour. Perhaps this is why the site of the crucifixion was called The Place of the Skull.)

“Myrrh”, a resinous gum, mixed with crushed “aloes”, a fragrant wood, was used as an embalming paste. They wrap Jesus’ body in strips of linen (“linen cloths”, 19:40), as had been done earlier for Lazarus: see 11:43-44. “A hundred pounds” (19:39, 30 kg or 75 lb) may not be meant literally; perhaps the weight is exaggerated to be a sign of the great honour due to Jesus. The embalming paste was inserted between the layers of the “cloths”. Both Jesus’ death makes Joseph and Nicodemus active followers.

Only John tells us that the tomb is in a “garden” (19:41) near the place where Jesus had been crucified. The Greek word suggests the private garden of a friend.