
LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR B

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SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B—PASSION SUNDAY OR PALM SUNDAY

Isaiah 50.4–9a; Psalm 31.9–16; Philippians 2.5–11; Mark 14.53–64.

Welcome to the Sixth Sunday in Lent and to the beginning of God’s new future. Surely not you may think; it’s the end of the road, the trek, the journey. We have been winding our way to the cross where death, grief and mourning abound. That sounds like a very emphatic end in which the future looks bleak indeed.

Read through this passage quietly and carefully. Pay attention to phrases, ideas or images that you may have come across before in your Bible reading. Make a note of them and see if you can remember what the connection might be.

Isaiah 50.4–9a

⁴The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught. ⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards.

⁶I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

⁷The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

⁹It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Who is the speaker in this prophecy? It looks like the prophet at first sight but the lectionary choice has left out verse 10 which you can look up and find that it is someone called the servant. That helps us understand better this passage of humiliation and vindication.

This part of Isaiah comes to birth during the Babylonian exile (587–539 BCE). The prophet addresses the devastating loss, humiliation, dislocation and sense of the loss of God with its loss of identity, meaning and purpose. One way he does this is through speaking of a figure, a prophetic servant who would help restore Israel and renew it from within and out of its trauma. Up to this point he has spoken of this servant twice in 42 and 49. He will speak once more, after this passage, of the servant in Isaiah 52.13–53.12. This last is the best known to most Christian people through reading the Gospels (it is often read on Good Friday), but also through music, especially Handel. The mission of the servant is to restore and renew Israel to be God's covenant people once again. The servant poems explain how he will do that. Each one gives a different part of the picture.

Jesus and early Christians used these poems to help them interpret who Jesus was and what he was doing, and what his mission was in God's plan to address the problems of creation. The church sees itself as heir to the servant legacy in pursuing God's plan.

How does this person see his ministry? How does the servant prepare for that ministry? How does the servant pursue that ministry? What effect does the ministry have? What are the opponents trying to do? Where does the servant turn for help?

When I reflect on this passage I get the picture of a teacher, what the Hebrew calls "a well-instructed tongue." Not just a mind filled with information but a well-instructed tongue. That is a tongue that can turn information into knowledge that sustains the weary. This is not knowledge that privileges the elites of power and wealth but penetrates the terrible fogs of humiliation, loss, grief and collapsed meaning. It is not merely an antiseptic acquaintance with ideas but a word of salvation and not judgment, forged in the crucible of struggle in a collapsed life.

The only way to get this is to listen constantly to the God who reveals; each morning in the full light of rationality and personal intimacy. Then the servant must obey the word.

The trouble is folks have no intention of hearing it let alone obeying it. The prophet is humiliated publicly as is the message that exposes their desperate need and their hope.

The message is the very expression of God himself. Humiliating the prophet expresses deep disdain for the character of the God who seeks them out in their distress.

The prophet may be shamed but he is not ashamed. God vindicates against every slight. His opponents will finally wear out, insubstantial as a moth-eaten garment. He has taught what he has heard; listened and obeyed the word of God. He is innocent.

Once again read the Psalm as a response in worship to the reading from Isaiah.

Psalm 31.9–18

⁹Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.

¹⁰For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

¹¹I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbours,
an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee
from me.

¹²I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken
vessel.

¹³For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

¹⁴But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’

¹⁵My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

¹⁷Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD, for I call on you;
let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol.

¹⁸Let the lying lips be stilled
that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt.

Can you picture in your mind what experiences the psalmist is describing?

How are the experiences of the psalmist and the prophet similar?

How does this prayer respond to the experience of the servant? Is there something that stands out for you as you pray this prayer? Nurture the thought. What does the psalm teach you about trust?

Can anyone be that threatened or persecuted? Is the psalmist paranoid? Can we, who have managed to secure our lives around wealth and power, ever appreciate what Psalm 31 is about? Or for that matter the servant in Isaiah? Or for that matter, Jesus?

The faithful psalmist (and the servant) knew in her or his life the kind of opposition that resulted in the cross. The psalmist had learned the happiness that results from

surrendering one's life to God because it means truly claiming one's own life. The psalmist is teaching us to live in trust and faithfulness as a covenant partner with God. "I trust in you, O Lord; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors." (14–15).

The two fundamental characteristics of God that Psalm 31 emphasises are faithfulness and steadfast love. These two empower and energise the people of God, the church, to live out faithfulness and steadfast love. These are the two fundamental characteristics of the Christian life. In our world, full

of isolated selves and "terror all around" (13), a church that witnesses in its life to such a God will fall foul of those whose identity, wealth and power resides in the illusionary idols of our culture.

Wherein does your identity lie?

We live in a world of celebrity wannabe heroes. Often they are white, male macho braggarts. They play football, run governments across the world of every conceivable kind, and front media, business and religious organisations. They often have immense organisational skills that become a foundation for their power based in money, military might, thuggery or adoring worshippers or some combination of all of them.

The ancient world was no different and Paul knew of them from Alexander the Great to the great emperor Augustus. Some were better at it than others but at its heart was one desire expressed in one word; power or power over. Power brought glory and its trappings. It gave the capacity to bring others to heel and to obey the leader; the name does not matter, principal, director, CEO, bishop, priest, political leader, husband, and boyfriend.

This subject, power, has been the underlying current in all our Lenten studies this year. Of all the Gospels Mark's is the one that most forthrightly deals with this question within the ancient world and between the disciples.

The subject has not been absent in Paul's writings either. In this excerpt the apostle has a conflictual situation in Philippi in mind. He is well aware that every situation of conflict is an opportunity for some to exert their power to coerce others to concur with their judgment. He is well aware that self-interest, selfish ambition, or conceit can drive Christian folk. That is what he speaks of in Philippians 2.1–4.

Read on and note what he has to say on the matter.

Philippians 2.5–11

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Given the ancient world's view of heroic leadership and ours how counter-cultural is this little poem or hymn that Paul lays out here? What do you think he is asking the little church in Philippi to do together remembering that this passage is addressed to the whole congregation as something they might do together?

What was the mind of Christ that Paul refers to? What does God do about it? What do you think that means? What does it disclose about God? Does that challenge your understanding?

When I read this passage I am reminded of an encounter Jesus has with some ambitious and power-hungry disciples. It occurs in Mark 10.35–45. Two of the disciples have asked Jesus that he grant them the right to sit at Jesus' right hand when he came in glory. It was a serious play for ultimate power not just a couple of naughty boys being cheeky.

Jesus' response is telling:

“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. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

With this in mind, and thinking of the Old Testament stories, who was it who arrogantly grasped at the chance to be like God? Adam is the culprit and his grasp at power was exploitative and self-serving; this self-interested search and grasping has become the pattern of the human use of power among us ever since.

Israel, the covenant partners of God, suffered from it and their leaders in Jesus' day sought it from the Romans or against the Romans. Whatever, Israel crippled herself as God's covenant partner. And the church has gone on and on not heeding the huge lessons in the little word translated “exploited.” It continues the tradition when it smooches up to big politicians, big economics, big celebratory and longs for power to exploit.

Jesus on the other hand is the countercultural antihero. He has all and he refuses to grasp anything. He shares God's form (a difficult idea, as God has no form in our normal use of the word) and in Colossians 1.15 describes Christ as in the image of God (another difficult idea as God has no image). But it is the best language can do to

describe the fact that Messiah Jesus was not a creation in a pantheon but shared all the glory of God.

In verse 7 we see the decision take to go all the way to the cross and the only way to do that was to take on being human so that he could become truly obedient to the covenant, become the true covenant partner to sort out the problems in creation and restore it. Being human meant taking on particularity; that is, all the limitations of time in history, geography, culture and social mores, language, bodily vulnerability, growing up, joy, pain and suffering, conflict with overweening power and all the consequences of that. That is just a glimpse into what verse 7 might mean.

The difficult little phrase “he emptied himself” has been taken to mean that Jesus gave up being God. I trust a moment’s reflection will help you see that God cannot ever not be God. It makes no sense. So we are stuck with the limitations of language again. Messiah Jesus gives up voluntarily the privileges of eternity to enter into particularity and in doing so tells us what it truly means to be divine (and human too). This is what Godhead is. No grasping at power and privilege, just the one desire to see the ills of the world healed and restored to its one great purpose; human beings living in peace, joy, love, justice and mercy in fellowship with One who loves them.

This is what it means to be equal with God. The Cross is the true meaning of who God is. Is that your God?

The word “therefore” in verse 9 is the fulcrum of the poem. Why is Jesus honoured in the way described in 9–11? Because in the incarnation and the cross Jesus has done what only God can do. This is the very heart of the vision of God; the depths of Jewish monotheism, of creator and covenant maker, now made plain for all to see.

The honour God bestows is the name of God the Lord and to that name every knee shall bend. The words come from Isaiah 45.23 a fiercely monotheistic passage; “To me and me alone, says the LORD, every knee shall bend and every tongue shall swear.”

To people in Paul’s day besotted by power and celebratory and now in our own people were and are shocked beyond belief that the one true God might be known in in the person of a crucified Jew. That does not fit with our views of how power works. This God is best known when he abandons his rights for the sake of us all.

Dare we live together like that and share a gospel that says that? What do you make of the mind of Christ now? Is it ever possible to share together the mind of Christ?

The Gospel reading today is Mark 14.1–15.27. The Passion story could be read in one sitting and just letting the whole story with its conflicting emotions, its terror, ruthlessness, self-interest and deliberate humiliation draw attention to the powerless vulnerability many people feel and experience in their lives. Remember Paul’s poem

that this is the LORD, the creator and covenant maker seeking the welfare of his covenant partners for the sake of the creation.

I have chosen two passages that pick up some of the themes we have studied and prayed over during Lent.

The first are the well-known words of the Eucharist. The link is the word covenant which links the great theme we have explored and the cross. The disciples and Jesus celebrate a meal at Passover time under extreme vulnerability and stress. Fear and confusion is in the air.

Celebrating Passover was not just the festival of remembrance of liberation from the great empire Egypt and kicking a bit of sand in their eyes as well (it all happened long ago and what a great tale), it reminded them that despite their circumstances under an oppressive empire (Rome) they were a free people and this was a subversive political act. It encouraged faith and hope and sustained loyalty (and still does).

Mark 14.22–25

²²While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ ²³Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’

In this reimagining of Passover Jesus places himself and his death at the very centre of the liberating story. It is again a subversive act, a political act. Somehow (he has tried to help the disciples understand) at this moment of crisis and death who truly rules the world will be made clear and liberation will be secured. The liberating covenant is secured and the covenant partners join together in a meal of solidarity. Soon they will become liberating actors in this story but the meal remains central to their core. Here they meet the Jesus who binds them together, here he does his freedom-work in their lives, and here he takes them on a liberating journey into their world wherever they might be.

And they know that there is only one Liberator and he is at the head of the meal; One who is crucified. The meal is the ultimate reversal of power and politics as they are known; it is the sign of God’s covenant to restore the world to its beauty and freedom.

Do you commit yourself to your subversive task every Sunday? I remember a very old African pastor who I visited after he had been beaten badly by whips and machetes by military and police telling me what the Eucharist meant. “Every Sunday I pledge myself the Lord who loved and set me free. They can do nothing.” Is that your Eucharistic faith?

Our next text is a contest between the liberation of the cross and the power of political and religious might.

Mark 14.53–65

⁵³They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. ⁵⁴Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. ⁵⁵Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. ⁵⁶For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸“We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.””⁵⁹But even on this point their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, ‘Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?’ ⁶¹But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ ⁶²Jesus said,

‘I am; and “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power”, and “coming with the clouds of heaven.”’ ⁶³Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?’ All of them condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, ‘Prophecy!’ The guards also took him over and beat him.

Take some time to enter into this segment of the story. It is powerful drama, sparingly told. Peter is introduced but sits on the sidelines and is silent. His turn will come and he will betray it all. But for the moment he is an onlooker. You could take the onlooker’s view here and sit with Peter and feel the fear and oppression that the exercise of power has.

Jesus is being tried as a false prophet and thus leading Israel astray. Thus the blindfold and taunts at the end. Questions about the temple and messiahship all lead in the same direction. Jesus is leading Israel away from God and God’s law. That is the charge repeated in later Jewish sources.

More immediate was Jesus attitude to the Temple. We know that Jesus spoke about his authority and acted with authority in the Temple. We know that he warned that the Temple would come to an end. The Temple was central to the life of Israel, both political and religious. It was the sign and seal of God’s presence, his favour and promise of freedom from bondage.

Jesus remains silent about the confused charges relating to the Temple. So when Jesus remains silent about the Temple there is one key question left. Are you the Messiah? Now the charge of being the messiah was not a capital offence under Jewish law. At one level in this set of circumstances it was probably laughable. But Caiaphas knew it wasn’t and pressed on with “the Son of the Blessed One.”

We the readers of St Mark have heard this before in Jesus' baptism and in the transfiguration. It was God's testimony to Jesus' and we know from the beginning of the Gospel that was the testimony of Mark. It is a royal title; God's king acting on God's behalf to carry out God's mission in Israel; to restore Israel as God's covenant partners in God's covenant mission. Now Jesus will give his own testimony and it is dynamite.

This is a highly charged political moment and Jesus takes it with both hands and incriminates himself. This has been the basis of his ministry. He is bringing together two explosive texts, Psalm 110 and Daniel 7.13.

Not only is Jesus acknowledging that he is a rebel king but that they will see him vindicated as both Messiah and Son. Not only that but in that vindication he will share the throne of Israel's God. That is where real Power resides. He is a true prophet; he will replace the Temple in himself.

Jesus stands before the official ruler of Israel and declares that God will put him in the right and the court in the wrong. The cat is out of the bag.

What follows is inevitable. The white noise of the abuse that follows, as nasty and vicious as it is, is the soundtrack to human power and its corruption. Now they can get the real power involved; Rome. This is where the justice of political violence and intimidation can now be fully unleashed. To the Jewish folk the spin doctors would present him as a blasphemer against the precious name and law of the LORD. To Rome he would become a rebel king, a pretender, and Rome had one simple answer to that; death by crucifixion.

So the covenant God submits himself to those who do not want to see the liberating power of the covenant find a foothold in their world of power politics. And one covenant partner sits quietly in a corner hiding, watching weighing up his options.

The trek is nearing its end. Where has it led you? Has anything changed? See if you can bring the themes of the readings of this week together. What have you learnt? What is God's future for you? For us?

Take some time to pray and prepare yourself for the great days of the Easter period.