
LIVING THE CROSS IN A CHANGING
WORLD

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR C

Colin Dundon

“THE COSMOS HOLDS ITS BREATH”, SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C—
PASSION SUNDAY OR PALM SUNDAY

Isaiah 50.4–9a; Psalm 31.9–16; Philippians 2.5–11; Luke 23.1–49

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?

This is one of the servant songs (the third 42.1–4; 49.1–6; 52.13–53.12) in the book of Isaiah of which the best known is the fourth, Isaiah 53. The speaker is the servant and the audience is the Israelites who have fallen away from God. The servant confronts the dispirited Israelites of the exile who see no hope.

Servant prophet 4–5

The servant lives in the trenches with the weary and listens for the word of God to them. He does not separate himself from those who are disheartened or have lost hope. Like other prophets (Jeremiah 1.9–10; Ezekiel 2.8–3.3) he receives the word of the Lord so that he might reveal it to others. He encourages the weary because he is himself nourished by God's Word. God's Word is God's promise and thus God's action. Once again the importance of listening is a key to Christian spirituality.

Servant suffering 6

While the poem describes the servant's suffering and affliction it is deeply infused with confidence that flows from an intimate and personal relationship with God. His tormentors are the deeply dispirited people of God, the church. They want nothing to do with the word of hope that he brings

The Lord helps me 7–9

The poem is not a complaint but a song of confidence in God's call, God's help and God's vindication. God is near to sustain the prophetic voice. The servant is God's answer to the problem of raw evil and the uneven nature of affliction and punishment (the Babylonian exile). The message from God provokes those who do not wish to hear it. The suffering of the servant is the suffering of innocence and God will vindicate even though how that will happen is left confidently to God. Jesus, like this writer, will confidently declare the kingdom, bear the insults and wait for vindication. The injustice of it all is not resolved.

Questions: Why do you think that the word of God, the word of God's covenant love, faithfulness and justice is so provocative? What is it that human beings do not wish to hear? How can the servant be an inspiration to us? Reflect on how Jesus might have read this text and how it might have shaped his ministry.

Psalm 31.9–18 (31.9–16 NRSV, NIV)

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.

Context

This psalm is one in which expressions of trust alternate with cries of agony over the psalmist’s severe plight. It is a psalm in which the psalmist’s chaotic life is played out in the shape of the psalm itself; trust, despair, crying out, trust and terror. Jesus uses Psalm 31.5 as a prayer on the cross (Luke 23.46 and Acts 7.59) to express his powerlessness and trust.

Chaos and despair 9–13

The portion of the psalm we read today reflects all those sides to this prayer for help. The first five verses (9–13 NRSV, NIV) tell of the psalmist’s troubled, chaotic life. The language seems to suggest simultaneously, grief, sickness, depression and persecution, or at least alienation from his or her contemporaries. The image of the broken vessel (12 NRSV) is especially poignant. He has become a complete outsider, like one whose life has ended; he might as well be in the grave. It seems that because of his trust in God the psalmist is experiencing the pain and alienation that is supposed to be reserved for the wicked. This passage is very close to Jeremiah’s suffering because of his prophetic ministry (Jeremiah 20). Like Jeremiah, Jesus’ faithfulness to the proclamation of the reign of the God culminated in the cross.

You are my God 14–16

The psalmist, Isaiah and Jesus, however, all turn over their case to God and trust becomes the dominant motif of their lives. Trust believes the promise of God. It trusts God’s steadfast love, it trusts God’s presence and it trust God’s timing. Trust is quite realistic about pain and alienation but they cannot overcome trust. God’s steadfast love remains the bedrock for living (14–16 NRSV, NIV)

Questions: This psalmist knew the sort of opposition that Jesus, the servant and Jeremiah suffered. How can we entrust our lives to God in such situations? What does it mean to live by trust? Why does surrendering oneself to God in Christ cause so much opposition? Reflect on how Jesus read this psalm and how it shaped his life.

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, he 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.

Context

This famous passage has rightly shaped Christian theology, ethics and spirituality from the time it was written. Paul may be using a pre-existing hymn but that is not entirely clear. It is a passage of singular poetic power that presents Christ's incarnation, cross and vindication as the paradigm for the humble trust and obedience we live before God and as the paradigm for the submission we render to each other. Read 2.1–5 as this is essential to enter into its meaning and import. It was never meant to be the source of speculation about Christ's divine origins and nature. It answered the question; how shall we live before God and each other in the light of Christ's exaltation and kingship.

The practical interest 1–5

Paul wants the Philippian church to share and express in their living the mind of Christ, which Jesus demonstrated in his life and death and now works among them. You will need to read verses 1–4 carefully to get Paul's point; the joy of unity is not easily gained because it requires humility; the willingness to hold and use power for the service of others. Paul reminds us that we are moral agents, we can make choices not to look to selfish ambition or self-interest and we can choose to look at others as Christ sees them, and act accordingly.

The example of Christ

Paul speaks of Jesus' free taking on of our humanity (6–8). This is one of the earliest passages to speak of Jesus' pre-existence. He has the form of and equality with God. It does not tell us what Jesus did except that he refused to grasp or exploit his position of power and privilege. There is an implied comparison with Adam who grasped or exploited his privileged position. Jesus' humility takes the form of a cross, which he chooses. He sets the interests of those who need salvation before his own interests. He subjects himself to God and those he came to save. This is what subjection or submission means in Christianity. It is not disembodied command for one to have power over another; it is the body on the cross. Jesus' humiliation is one of a piece with his vindication. In the third section (9–11) the resurrection is implied and it leads to Jesus receiving the acknowledgement of his status as the one who rules beyond any Caesar (or Pilate or Herod: see the Gospel below). The universality of Jesus' vindication, its implications for the whole world, Paul clearly explains. This is no

tribal God but the ruler of heaven and earth. But that same cosmic ruler joins distressed and alienated humans in the trenches and puts their needs before his rights.

Questions: Paul reminds us that the story of Jesus is the story of using power, status and resources in the service of others. We are beneficiaries of that in our salvation. How can we act redemptively towards others? What is the difference between humility and humiliation?

Luke 23:1–49

²³Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.²They began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.’³Then Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ He answered, ‘You say so.’⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, ‘I find no basis for an accusation against this man.’⁵But they were insistent and said, ‘He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.’

Jesus before Herod

⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.⁷And when he learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.⁸When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.⁹He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.¹¹Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.¹²That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Jesus Sentenced to Death

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people,¹⁴and said to them, ‘You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him.’

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, ‘Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!’¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.)²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again;²¹but they kept shouting, ‘Crucify, crucify him!’²²A third time he said to them, ‘Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.’²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed.²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one

who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, “Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.” ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, “Fall on us”; and to the hills, “Cover us.” ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’³⁸There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ ⁴²Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ ⁴³He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

The Death of Jesus

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’ ⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

In today’s Gospel we read Luke’s account of Jesus’ trial before the secular powers of Rome (Pilate) and the local despot (Herod). The trial before the religious accusers has just concluded (22) and the ‘real’ powers of this world flex their muscles against God and his anointed (Psalm 2). They will not be denied their right to exercise judgment on God. So what does all this mean? Hints are given throughout this text but the

foundation meaning story is found in chapter 22.14– 23; the institution of the Lord's Supper. Read that passage carefully.

The Lord's Supper

When Jesus wanted to teach his disciples the meaning of what was about to happen to him he did not teach them a theory. He gave them something to do. He gave them an act to perform, a meal to share. The meal is set in the context of Passover. Passover celebrated an escape to freedom. It celebrated the reversal of fortune from slavery to liberation. When the powers that enslaved God's people in Egypt were at their worst God acted to judge their captors and set them free. This was Jesus' exodus (9.31) and he had come to do what Moses and Aaron did back then only this time he would take the force of the judgement on himself and this time it would include the whole world. His death would allow his people to escape from the powers of evil. They would find liberation and life through his death and, most startlingly, through his resurrection. Jesus would be accused of being a liar, a deceiver, a false prophet, a rebel and a fake Messiah. That is what the rest of the story is about. The Satan, the accuser, does its worst. Jesus dies. But then...the world explodes. We do not celebrate a theory, we celebrate the experience of life setting us free and being set free among us.

All of this finds its source in the covenant action of God. The covenant is the promise of God in Jesus to bless the whole world. Everything depends on the promise of God. The terrifying events that are about to unfold might cripple the hearts and the minds of the disciples. So God renews the covenant again, a covenant renewal long hoped for in Jeremiah 31–31–34 and come to pass. Whatever happens on the surface of things, no matter how terrifying, God's promise is the only sure foundation upon which to trust. The disciples were familiar with covenants and knew what they meant. God's word of promise in Jesus would find fulfilment in the action of sharing together in the Lord's Supper.

Before Pilate and Herod 1–12

What follows in 23 as the secular powers do their worst at the behest of the religious authorities is devastating to the infant church but the promise of the Lord's Supper must be trusted. On this basis Jesus makes no defence of his actions or his philosophy; he is not contemptuous of his judges as would be required of Hellenistic hero. He is mostly silent, following the pattern of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53.7). Both Pilate and Herod in this account are both reluctant and certainly blame shifting but the political pressure the religious authorities put on them through deceit and downright malice is too much. Neither man has high principles so pragmatism will rule the day and the powerful insistence of the religious elite overwhelms any small sense of justice that may still circulate in the minds of Pilate and Herod. Like the religious leaders they too have a place in the infamy that follows; political cowardice and pragmatism is always destructive of justice and peace.

Pilate and the mob 13–25

Pilate does not believe that Jesus is a common rebel with murderous political intent. He is innocent but deserves a flogging to keep everybody onside. That is political theatre but the crowd does not want theatre.

The crowd demands the release of a Barabbas someone already convicted of crimes associated with a political uprising and murder. Set free the violent revolutionary, kill the peace of the world. The populist will rule.

The prophet crucified 26–43

Even as he goes to his death Jesus is the prophet (26–43) turning to the women and delivering a sobering prediction: the violence done to the messenger of peace and justice and love will have consequences in continued violence in the world so that even innocent bystanders will suffer.

In his death, leaders, soldiers and one thief deride and mock him. The people stand quietly by, watching. Jesus forgives his tormentors but they show themselves incapable of hearing what is said. Jesus has brought salvation which is the restoration of God's people through the forgiveness of their sins. That salvation is at this moment rejected. But Jesus is still in control; he forgives, he promises a new beginning for a thief, he entrusts his spirit to his father in prayer and he dies. His death is consistent with his life. He brings the kingdom as the Lord of the kingdom, he finishes with prayer, he longs for the forgiveness of all to the end, and he holds out renewal and joy to those who will trust his promise. The world seeks to humiliate the Son of God only to find saving humility.

Truly dead 44–49

Innocent he may be but he is truly dead. The coercive powers of religion and politics have exhausted their treasure chest of violence he is dead. Darkness has enveloped him in its diabolical purpose. The innocent One leaves his vindication to God. Breast-beating and silence greet the power of the darkness as centurion, bystanders and disciples are lost in helplessness. Darkness humiliates the prophet and all he stands for. Only God can save.

Questions: Choose a scene in the story or a word of Jesus and let it be your guide for this coming week. What is God saying to me in this scene or word? What is he promising me? How can I act on that promise?

Choose a minor character like Barabbas or Simon of Cyrene or a thief, a silent watcher or a member of the crowd and look at the story through that lens. What does it reveal?

An endword

We have followed the way of the cross through the readings for Lent. We have reflected on our own journey, our journey together in our church and in our society. Where has that left you? Where do you want to go from here?

Compose a prayer for your own use that brings together your thoughts, questions and hopes.