Dear Friends,

Jesus the suffering servant

Many Jewish scholars struggle with this passage from Isaiah in our first reading because it clearly points to Jesus. Although they have offered other contenders such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, or even the Jewish people as the ‘suffering servant’. After all, throughout their history, Jews have been despised and rejected. However, none of the contenders appear to fit the substitutionary roles the suffering servant plays. None of those contenders can heal us by their wounds and restore us to God. Again, the reference is to a single person. This passage also leaves the Old Testament readers with no excuse. Jesus made it obvious that he was the suffering servant. Even if people never read the New Testament, they can see from the example Jesus gave that no one matches the Suffering Servant quite as well as he does.

In today’s passage, the third of the servant songs, Isaiah depicts a servant-disciple, a prophet and more. As a disciple, the servant’s every day begins with obedient listening; he is in intimate communion with God, sharing God’s own heart. Because he is a prophet, the rest of his day is spent in speaking God’s word to the weary, or as Isaiah says in another place, giving hope to those who walk in the shadow of death.

More than any other prophet, Isaiah’s servant submits to suffering, accepting it without complaint. The difference between Jeremiah, who loudly lamented his suffering, and the one who gave his back to those who beat him demonstrates the distinction between a Jeremiah who, even knowing what it costs, does what the master asks, and the suffering servant whose communion with God is so profound that he understands the rejection he suffers as a rejection of God and believes that God shares that rejection with him. There is no complaint because they are undergoing it together.

The mystery of the Suffering Servant is, indeed, a strange design. Yet, this is what led the apostle Paul to declare that he determined “to know nothing while I was with you but Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). It is in the presence of the Crucified One, God’s Suffering Servant, that we finally begin to see the full contours of God’s great plan. In the gift of God’s Son into the world—One born to suffer and die—we finally come to fully know and comprehend the love of God.

You may have been disappointed in the love you received from your parents, or, if you are married, from your spouse. However, in Jesus Christ the fullness of God’s love is revealed. It is love alone that transforms us. We will never hate our sin enough to leave it. It is God’s love that transforms us and empowers us to change. It is in the arms of His great embrace that we discover what it really means to be a child of God, adopted into His family. There are many wonderful things we can say about God. We can joyfully declare that our Triune God is a great King or our High Priest or the greatest Prophet, but there is no greater declaration than the profound truth that God is love, holy love. Yes, God is love—we know it because Jesus Christ came into the world as the Suffering Servant. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The moment we accept the suffering of Jesus as the expression of great love, we begin to understand in depth the cost of loving—giving without expecting a return. This in turn makes us true lovers who can actively love without counting the cost or expecting anything in return.

Be blessed, Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

September 12, 2021

If you never felt sadness, now would you know that I am a Comforter.
FIRST READING
I gave my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who plucked my beard;
my face I did not shield
from buffets and spitting. (Is 50:8)

PSALM
I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living. (Ps 116) Or Alleluia.

SECOND READING
What good is it, my brothers and sisters,
if someone says he has faith but does not
have works?
Can that faith save him? (Jas 2:14)

GOSPEL
And he asked them,
“But who do you say that I am?”
Peter said to him in reply,
“You are the Christ.” (Mk 8:29)

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

We need to get our bearings straight and properly lay life's cornerstone. Otherwise, the rest of our journey will be skewed, and our judgment clouded. We can recall Jesus' famous rebuke of Peter, “You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” Even he, as one of Jesus' closest friends struggles with understanding things and grasping the big picture. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) a renowned and learned French Jesuit priest often has these words attributed to him: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” Whether they were actually from his lips, they certainly mimic his thought. These wise words orient us and capture the essence of who we really are.

Many people consider spirituality an option. It is no wonder that they come to this conclusion when they predominantly define themselves using human terms and concepts. Immersed in this world view, they struggle finding any semblance of God because God does not work according to human expectations! This is especially true when suffering and death enter life's picture. If we are only human beings having a spiritual experience, then we wrongly expect our spirituality to serve us as we desire. The human expectation is that my spiritual life is something that is useful in avoiding pain, hardship, and death, not something that gives the courage to live through it!

So, when we protest and get upset with God because our journey is becoming difficult, painful, treacherous, disappointing, and even pointing us toward death, Jesus rebukes us as he did Peter and gently reminds us how to see. It is God who inspires and opens hearts to see truth and beauty. In God, the true meaning of things is understood, and we receive a depth of insight and understanding that is not found following purely human paths. It is not our task to understand God, as God is beyond human understanding. Ours is the joyful privilege of simply resting in God's presence simply because God is God and we are who we are. As spiritual beings having an exciting and adventurous human experience, it is in our DNA to do so. Through prayer we can let go and let be. This is how we lose our lives but then save them.
The first reading, Is 50:5-9a;

Isaiah lived in the 7th century before Christ. After Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel was divided into the Northern and Southern kingdoms. Each kingdom had its own leaders and prophets. Isaiah was a prophet in the Southern kingdom living in Jerusalem.

He was an educated man and came from a leading family and so he served the king’s court as minister. Prophets served as religious and political advisors since their leaders sought the will of God in what they did as kings. This was often a source of conflict because many of the kings didn’t want to follow the word of the prophets when they received it. His book contains many predictions of the future, but most puzzling is the one about a ‘suffering servant’ in chapters 40-55, there are four short passages which scholars have called the Songs of the Suffering Servant. In the original author’s mind, the servant was probably a figure for the people of Israel, or for a faithful remnant within the people. In their original context, the songs were probably composed to help Israel see itself in the role of the servant. Through degradation and suffering, Israel could become for the rest of the world God’s message of liberation and salvation. But Jesus saw aspects of His own life and Messianic mission foreshadowed in the Servant Songs. Hence, this section of the third song is presented as the first reading today, while in the Gospel, Jesus foretells for the first time His passion, death and Resurrection, after Peter has professed his Faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior. Jesus identifies Himself and mission with the sorrowful figure of humiliation and suffering, the Lord’s suffering servant. Like that servant, Jesus’ life is one of radical obedience and conformity to God’s will. Thus, the Servant passage provides background for the revelation of Jesus as the suffering Messiah.

The second reading, James 2:14-18

Today’s reading, taken from the Letter of James to the Church, reminds us that suffering is not only something to be accepted but also something to be alleviated. James tells us that our Faith in Jesus the Messiah should be expressed in alleviating others’ suffering through works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual. In other words, professing Faith in the Divinity of Christ as our Redeemer is useless, unless we practice that Faith in genuine deeds of the love, mercy, forgiveness and humble service Jesus lived and demonstrated. As Christians, we are obliged to meet the material needs of poor persons and to alleviate their sufferings. We should respond concretely to the needs and sufferings of our fellow humans. Otherwise, our Faith is all talk and no action. “Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” James is not refuting the Pauline doctrine of salvation by Faith but warning us that a lifeless or an unlived Faith has no power to save (v. 14) us from judgment.

GOSPEL INSIGHTS

Two pertinent questions in a pagan pilgrimage center: In Matthew and Mark, Jesus asked two questions about His identity. The incident occurred at Caesarea Philippi, presently called Banias, twenty-five miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. This city was founded by King Philip, the son of Herod the Great, to perpetuate his own memory and to honor the Roman emperor Caesar. It was situated on a beautiful terrace about 1150 feet above sea level on the southwest slope of Mount Hermon overlooking the Jordan valley. The city was a great pilgrimage center for pagans because it held temples for the Syrian gods Baal and Pan, the Roman God Zeus, and a marble temple for the emperor Caesar. Jesus realized that if the apostles did not know who He really was, then the entire Messianic Mission of ministry, suffering and death would be useless. Hence, Jesus decided to ask a question in two parts.

The first question: “What is the public opinion?” Their answer was, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” John the Baptist was so great a figure that many Jews, and Herod their king, thought that John’s spirit had entered the body of Jesus. Elijah, the greatest of the prophets was believed to be the forerunner of the Messiah. It was believed that, before the people went into exile, Jeremiah had taken the Ark of the Covenant and the altar of incense out of the Temple, and hidden them away in a lonely cave on Mount Nebo; before the coming of the Messiah, he would return and produce them, and the glory of God would come to the people again.

The second question: “What is your personal opinion?” For the first time in their relationship, Peter, speaking for the other disciples, declared publicly: “You are the Christ (Messiah) the Son of the living God.” Peter was the first apostle to recognize Jesus publicly as the Anointed One (also translated Messiah or Christ). Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew word Messiah. To say that Jesus was the Christ, the anointed one of God was to say that He was the Immanuel, the Salvation of God — God who became Man to save sinners! However, Jesus was quick to explain to the disciples that, instead of being a political Messiah who would reestablish the Davidic kingdom after ousting the Romans, He was the suffering Messiah who would redeem mankind by death and Resurrection.
In chapters 52-53, Isaiah talks about the servant as a person and what is amazing is that through his description of the Suffering Servant he gives a perfect account of Jesus' life and ministry here on earth.

One of the reasons why the Bible is reliable is because it contains fulfilled prophecy – predictions of the future accurately described and historically completed. Isaiah 52-53 contains one of the clearest examples of fulfilled prophecy. Not simply the predictions of political events in the next 50-100 years, but an accurate description of the Christ 700 years before He arrived, accurate in every way:

His personality – Isaiah's description of His attitude, how He was perceived and treated and how He reacted could not fit any Jewish character or any other religious leader throughout history. No one else fits this profile, except Jesus.

His purpose – The doctrine of salvation by substitutionary atonement is perfectly explained here. He clarifies why God is doing this 700 years before He does it! Not animal sacrifice, but the willing sacrifice of God's own chosen servant on behalf of sinners, this is the basis of Christianity; no other religion has this as a central feature.

His promise – The prophecy even goes beyond the time that the actual events are going to take place. In the passage, Isaiah describes the promise that God makes to the Messiah and to those who will benefit from His appearance.

To the Messiah the promise is that death will not be able to hold Him because He is sinless. The empty grave and witness of the Apostles confirmed this – the angels are witnesses that He is at the right hand of God.

To those who accept Him, the promise that their sins will be forgiven, and that the punishment that they would have to endure forever has fallen on Him.

As marvelous as it is, Isaiah's prophecy could at best describe what a person could look forward to, could hope for in the future. While he lived, they had only the sacrifice of animals to appease their consciences for sin (and this only reminded them of sin, it didn't cleanse their guilty consciences).

We, on the other hand, have the blessing of having seen his prophecy fulfilled and have, today, access to the sacrifice of the Messiah to wash away our sins, to guarantee our salvation and to protect us against the judgment to come. What he through the miracle of prophecy saw, we through the word of God have access to now – the opportunity to be saved through Jesus Christ.

Jesus said it Himself in Mark 16:16, "Those who believe and are baptized will be saved."

1. Who or what has the highest authority in your life?
2. Who or what do you submit to?
3. What gives you unwavering hope? Share your answer with the group.