

Sunday 17 October 2021

St. Margaret's & Holy Trinity – Holy Communion

Trinity 20

Isaiah 53:4-12

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

'His life for ours'.

Three amazing readings this morning, and three readings that hang together completely. Not that the readings don't always hang together, just sometimes maybe, or perhaps it's more that I'm not always sharp enough to see how.

Anyway, let's start this morning with our first reading, chapter 53 of Isaiah.

If at any time you have approached the Old Testament with doubt and suspicion as to its relevance for today, and you want to hang on to those doubts, then this is not the chapter for you. In fact, if that's you, then you should avoid Isaiah at all costs.

This passage is the last of what are known as the four Servant Songs of Isaiah. They describe the service, the suffering, and the ultimate exaltation or glorification, if you like, of the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah who we would all now recognise as Jesus Christ.

If you were to make any kind of theological study of this passage you would be bombarded by the phrase 'substitutionary atonement'. It is hard to avoid but basically, for this morning, we can just content ourselves with this alternative...let's just say, it is about... 'His life for ours'. Jesus died for our sins and this is the amazing prophesy written the best part of 700 years before Jesus was even born.

It is, of course, one of the best known, most familiar passages in the Old Testament, not least because Handel used some of these verses so effectively in his oratorio, The Messiah.

The picture of this suffering servant is both bleak and powerful; it can stop us in our tracks no matter how often we read it. Particularly moving is the phrase..."he was led like a lamb to the slaughter", especially when you remember that John the Baptist quoted those very words at Jesus' baptism. There are hundreds, if not thousands of books that have been written on Isaiah's four Servant Songs and the theology behind them can be deep and controversial at times. But, for our purposes today, there's no need for us to enter any arguments about theories of atonement and the morality, or otherwise, of a substitutionary understanding of phrases such as...

"the punishment that brought us peace was upon him"

or

"the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all".

Similarly, we don't need to join the controversy around whether this puts us in the realm of spiritual poetry with metaphors that carry a huge punch, but which mustn't be tested to destruction, or whether this is a literal prophecy of something to come. Personally, I lean towards a more literal interpretation but, for us this morning, I think it is more important for us just to stop and wonder at these amazing words of prophecy.

This, somehow, is all about love, a love that releases us from the dark tyrannies of moral failure and the fears that can cripple our lives.

I'm happy to leave analysis to the theologians and concentrate on this as an incredible description of Jesus, who he is, and why he came.

All of which goes some way to setting the scene for our Gospel reading.

All the disciples, and especially James and John, would have been more than familiar with Isaiah's writings. They describe what every good Jew was waiting for.

So, what on earth were James and John thinking of when they asked Jesus if they could sit either side of him in his glory.

We can see just how much in the dark the disciples were about what was going on.

Perhaps James and John imagine themselves seated next to Jesus at some great banquet in the new kingdom, maybe sharing a goblet of the finest of wines. Either way, they want something back for the trouble of following this man.

Jesus has asked for total commitment and now James and John want him to reciprocate, to make it all worthwhile. Gently, very gently considering the circumstances, Jesus takes another opportunity to take them all through what following him will all mean. Not at all what James and John had hoped for, just more mysterious stuff that leaves them even more in the dark.

They were confident that they were able to drink the cup that Jesus would drink, and be baptised with the baptism that Jesus would be baptised with. "We are able" they said when Jesus challenged them. Clearly though, they had absolutely no idea what was going to be in said cup. Jesus isn't thinking about the joys of some messianic banquet; his cup doesn't have the best, but the bitterest of contents because that's the cup he drank at Gethsemane.

Where has all this got us?

Well, implicit in these readings is the idea that following Jesus must involve some kind of suffering. Not necessarily the same suffering as Jesus endured, although there are many Christians who have travelled that particular road.

Take that thought home with you by all means but, if that is just too hard for today, let me suggest that you take from this an encouragement to look out for your neighbour who is suffering. It is always enjoyable to raise a glass in the company of friends or family to celebrate an occasion or a piece of good news. But the real test of our love for others is our readiness to share their cup of suffering.

Suffering is a great leveller that few of us will escape. Whether it is the personal pain of illness and disease or, if not that, then the agony of grief that comes to us all at one time

or another. These are bitter pains that may not require our lives but just our love in the sharing.

How then might we respond to these readings?

We could react in exactly the same way as James and John did... push all this hard stuff to one side and concentrate on sharing the spoils of victory.

Or, we could think about the way that we love and serve others every day, even when it costs us something. Perhaps especially when some personal sacrifice is involved.

Or, failing all that, maybe to just go home with Isaiah's words ringing in our ears and a better handle on what it took for Jesus to earn our salvation.

Amen.