

“SERVANT SONGS” – Isaiah 50:4-11

Amid repeated reassurances that the Lord has the power to comfort Zion and will do so as he has done in the past (49:8-50:3), Deutero-Isaiah inserts the third “Servant Song.” The speaker suddenly shifts from the Lord comforting the people to the servant talking about his ministry (although the word “servant” does not appear in the song itself, but only in the Lord’s response in verse 10). The servant’s darkness is heavier than in the first two songs and his persecution is more violent.

Verses 4-7 of this song are used as the First Reading at Mass on Palm Sunday every year, a reminder that Christ fulfills the role of the Suffering Servant in his passion.

The servant describes himself as a disciple, one who hears the word of the Lord and learns from it so that he may speak that prophetic word to others who are weary, as he was. He does not refuse this calling.

*⁴ The Lord GOD has given me a well-trained tongue,
That I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.
Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear;
⁵ And I have not rebelled, have not turned back.*

The translation of New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), released March 9, 2011, makes the “disciple” concept more explicit:

*⁴ The Lord GOD has given me a well-trained tongue,
That I might know how to answer the weary a word that will waken them.
Morning after morning he wakens my ear to hear as disciples do;
⁵ The Lord GOD opened my ear; I did not refuse, did not turn away.*

Like the prophets before him, the servant is harshly mistreated, even submitting to the grave and painful insult of having his beard torn off:

*⁶ 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.*

Yet he does not abandon his ministry, relying on the Lord for vindication. The contrast is strong between a face covered with spittle and one set like flint:

*⁷ The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced;
I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.*

He then invites his would-be challengers to appear in an open forum so he can rebut them; this courtroom-like setting recalls the Lord’s challenge to the idols (41:21-29). The servant is confident that, with the Lord’s help, he will win the confrontation:

*⁸ He is near who upholds my right;
if anyone wishes to oppose me, let us appear together.
Who disputes my right? Let him confront me.*

⁹ See, the Lord GOD is my help; who will prove me wrong?

The servant's song ends and the verses following it provide fitting responses from the Lord himself:

- The servant's enemies will be discarded like moth-eaten clothing (clothing is often a metaphor for the person in biblical writings).
- Those who fear the Lord listen to his servant and walk in the darkness, relying on God alone.
- Those who reject the Lord and rely on their own lights instead will receive the Lord's punishment.

Lo, they will all wear out like cloth, the moth will eat them up.

¹⁰ *Who among you fears the LORD, heeds his servant's voice,
And walks in darkness without any light,
Trusting in the name of the LORD and relying on his God?*

¹¹ *All you kindle flames and carry about you fiery darts;
Walk by the light of your own fire and by the flares you have burnt!
This is your fate from my hand: you shall lie down in a place of pain.*

NABRE makes the clothing image of verse 9b more explicit, changes verse 10 from a single, long question to a question answered by the longer exclamation, and ends verse 11 with a stronger term for the fate of the self-reliant:

See, they will all wear out like a garment, consumed by moths.

¹⁰ *Who among you fears the LORD, heeds his servant's voice?
Whoever walk in darkness, without any light,
Yet trust in the name of the LORD and rely upon their God!*

¹¹ *All you who kindle flames and set flares alight,
Walk by the light of your own fire and by the flares you have burnt!
This is your fate from my hand: you shall lie down in a place of torment.*

The original New American Bible translation is currently used for the Palm Sunday reading. It is also the text used above, with the NABRE translation added as noted. In either translation, the third Servant Song is clear that the Servant hears and speaks the Lord's word, is willing to suffer for it, and is confident that the Lord will vindicate him.