

“SERVANT SONGS” – Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Vicarious Suffering (53:4-10a)

Having noted in its first section how the servant was not only unremarkable, but actively avoided, the song next presents a lengthy reflection on the meaning of his suffering. The descriptions of physical pain and maltreatment are extensive and vivid, meant to convey the enormity of what the servant endured. Yet the recurring emphasis is not on the nature of the suffering, but on the contrast between the one who suffered and those who benefitted from that suffering. *He* endured all this for *us* – *he* suffered, but *we* deserved it – *he* was punished, *we* were healed. In reading these verses, focus on hearing this contrast, rather than on the graphic details:

- ⁴ *Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured.
We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted,*
⁵ *But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity.
He bore the punishment that makes us whole,
by his wounds we were healed.*

The notion of vicarious suffering – of one person suffering to redeem those who had sinned – was a new concept that Deutero-Isaiah presented to the Israelites. Their experience with suffering was that sinners – whether individuals or the whole community – brought it on themselves as a consequence of their transgressions. Yet here a totally innocent person suffered for the sake of others. This was far beyond the ritual “scapegoat” practice on the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev.16) of laying the sins of the community on a goat and then driving it into the desert. That action did not atone for the people’s sins – another goat was sacrificed for that purpose – but just symbolically removed the sins from the community’s presence. Deutero-Isaiah presented a person, God’s Servant, willingly suffering for the sins of others and gaining salvation for them. It was a concept that permeated the early believers’ understanding of Christ.

Lest one think that some mistake had been made, or that evil had triumphed, the song makes clear that this was part of God’s plan. The servant did not assume the guilt of others on his own initiative; rather, he offered himself in quiet service to God’s will. Because the Lord was his strength, he could silently accept what befell him.

- ⁶ *We had all gone astray like sheep, all following our own way;
But the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all.*
⁷ *Though harshly treated, he submitted and did not open his mouth;
Like a lamb led to slaughter or a sheep silent before shearers,
he did not open his mouth.*

This image may have been behind the Baptist’s acclaim of Jesus as “the Lamb of God” in John’s Gospel. (Another possible image is the paschal lamb in Exodus, whose blood saves the firstborn of the Israelites from death. John’s Gospel places the death of Jesus at the time that the lambs would have been slaughtered for the Passover seder.)

Since the servant is “condemned,” the people presume his guilt and he is considered to be outside the community – even buried with evildoers, despite his true innocence.

⁸ *Seized and condemned, he was taken away.
Who would have thought any more of his destiny?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
struck for the sins of his people.*

⁹ *He was given a grave among the wicked, a burial place with evildoers,
Though he had done no wrong, nor was deceit found in his mouth.*

The final verse of this section reaffirms that all of this was in fulfillment of God’s plan:

¹⁰ *But it was the LORD’s will to crush him with pain.*

This NABRE translation is less disturbing than the earlier NAB translation:

¹⁰ *But the LORD was pleased to crush him in infirmity.*

The difficulty with the word “pleased” is that it sounds like the Lord is happy to have his servant suffer. But the real meaning of “please” here is that this is the will of the Lord, not that the Lord is getting pleasure from it. It’s like the English “If it please you, ...” means, “If it’s your will, ...” or the French “*s’il vous plait*,” which is simply translated “please” but literally is “If it pleases you.” The basic concept is willingness, not pleasure. Similarly, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays to the Father, “not as I will, but as you will.” (Mt 26:39)

One might be tempted to view the servant’s suffering as a “win” for the forces of evil over the Lord. The assertions of the servant’s innocence rebut any presumption that his suffering is because of his own sins. Is it then a sign that God is powerless before Evil? No, this verse reassures the believer that what happened was part of God’s plan. It’s the assertion of faith to the problem of evil, to understanding how bad things can happen to good people. God does not want evil to triumph, and indeed he promises an ultimate victory over evil, but in the meantime he has given humankind free will, which carries with it the consequences of the choices made. While many choose to do good, others opt for evil, giving wickedness more openings into our world. When evil appears to win, it’s a temporary outcome that the Lord will eventually overturn.

The servant responds generously to God’s call to love, but in so doing he exposes himself to the wickedness of those who reject that call. As God allows these opposing forces to play out, the servant’s witness of love is made even stronger by his endurance of the suffering inflicted by evil persons. His perseverance in fulfilling the Lord’s will wins salvation for others. What might have seemed like a loss for the Lord becomes, rather, a sign of His triumph. It was the Lord’s will that his servant would stay true to love’s calling to his very end, and this he did. It was his fidelity, not his suffering, that truly pleased the Lord. Hence the Lord rewards his servant greatly and, through him, all of humankind.