

“SERVANT SONGS” – Isaiah 52:13-53:12

The Ultimate Victory (53:10b-12)

Having detailed the servant’s suffering and the realization that it was all vicarious – that is, not for his own transgressions, but on behalf of the community – the song returns to the exaltation of the faithful servant. What might have seemed like a tragic end gives way to the promise of future reward and success. The servant’s glory is not merely that he has done something for others, but that his actions accomplish the Lord’s own will.

*^{10b} By making his life as a reparation offering,
he shall see his offspring, shall lengthen his days,
and the LORD’s will shall be accomplished through him.*

*¹¹ Because of his anguish he shall see the light;
because of his knowledge he shall be content;*

It is not clear who the speaker is in the above verses. It could be a summation by the speaker of the preceding verses of Chapter 53, which would fit with the reference to “the Lord’s will.” Had the phrase been “my will,” it would clearly indicate the Lord as the speaker. The clauses “he shall see his offspring, shall lengthen his days” (v. 10) and “he shall see the light . . . , shall be content” (v. 11) could be seen as promises for the future that could only be spoken by the Lord. Or they could be the prophet’s recognition that the Lord will reward the servant. Regardless of the speaker, it is clear that this marks a transition from the reflection on vicarious suffering to the servant’s victory and the rewards for his actions.

The speaker in the remainder of the song is undoubtedly the Lord, since He refers to “my servant” (v. 11b) and says “I will give him” (v. 12). Thus the whole song ends as it began, with the Lord proclaiming the exaltation of His innocent servant, whose self-giving actions have brought salvation to sinners.

*^{11b} My servant, the just one, shall justify the many,
their iniquity he shall bear.*

*¹² Therefore I will give him his portion among the many,
and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty,
Because he surrendered himself to death,
was counted among the transgressors,
Bore the sins of many,
and interceded for the transgressors.*

“Many” refers to an indefinite number, too large to count. It is the same sense that “many were amazed” (52:14) and “startle many nations” (52:15) had in the first part of the song. That same sense is reflected in our Eucharistic liturgy, when we recall Christ saying that his blood “will be poured out for you and for many.” When the translation of the Mass into English was revised a few years ago, the Latin “pro multis,” which had been rendered as “for all,” was more accurately translated as “for many,” reflecting this biblical usage.