

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading: (Isaiah 50.5-9)

The Servant of the Lord

As we shall see, the gospel reading is a turning point; it concentrates on two matters, of which this reading from Isaiah relates to the second.

This part of the prophecy of Isaiah contains four interrelated poems of a Servant of the Lord, who willingly undergoes suffering and humiliation for his ministry to the Lord. Jesus' own sayings on service and suffering show that he was aware of these songs, and that he saw himself as this Servant of the Lord: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.'

Many details in the story of the Passion correspond to the songs, in today's reading the flogging, the mockery and the insult, and also Jesus' voluntary failure to resist or to defend himself: at each trial he amazes the 'judge' by his silence.

At the same time these songs are marked by a confidence in the Lord: whatever happens, the Lord will not desert his faithful Servant. Especially in the fourth song, the suffering and humiliation of the Servant lead to his eventual vindication and the triumph of God.

Question:

How is this reading echoed in the story of Jesus' Passion?

Second reading: (James 2.14-18)

Faith and Works

The interconnection between faith and good works has been a puzzle from the beginning of Christianity - and before. At some times people seem to have believed that it was possible to earn salvation. However, you cannot bargain or negotiate with God. As the psalms say: 'No one can buy their own ransom.' All we can do is hang on by our fingertips to God's promises and put our trust in God's limitless forgiveness.

Faith is not a matter of believing first one doctrine and then another. Primarily, it is a matter of where my trust and confidence is lodged.

What, then, is the point of good works? If our faith in God's generosity and forgiveness does not lead us to act with similar generosity and forgiveness, it is a strange slap in the face for God, the demonstration of a strange conception of God! We are made in the image of God, so that, if we recognize this, we will attempt to carry on God's work with at least an echo of the divine generosity and forgiveness. When James says that otherwise our faith is dead, he really means that it is a withered faith that is not faith at all.

Question:

Is a faith that does not show itself in behaviour a real possibility?

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Gospel:

(Mark 8.27-35)

Peter's Declaration of Faith and Jesus' Reply

This is the turning point of Mark's gospel. Up until now the stories we have heard have all shown ever-increasing wonder and amazement at Jesus' personality, his goodness and his authority. But even his closest disciples do not seem to have seen what this implies.

Then suddenly Peter comes to the realization that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed of God, for whom everyone was waiting. However, Peter still does not understand what this implies. Jesus is not a conquering political hero, who will simply wipe out all opposition by overwhelming force, and make every path smooth and gentle.

Jesus begins to show his disciples that the road to fulfilment is through suffering. Three times Jesus repeats this prophecy, and three times the disciples fail to grasp the lesson: first Peter, then the disciples who are arguing about precedence, then the two sons of Zebedee, who want the best places for themselves. So three times Jesus repeats that if you want to follow Jesus you must follow him to the cross.

Neither are we, later followers of Jesus, any quicker than the first disciples to learn this lesson. We greet with indignation and resistance any suffering that comes our way.

Question:

Why does Jesus rebuke Peter so fiercely?
