

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading: (Isaiah 53, 10-11)

The Suffering Servant of the Lord

The whole of the Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant is read at the liturgy of Good Friday. Today we have only a part, but enough to show that the Servant's suffering somehow fulfils God's purposes, brings glory to the Servant and salvation to others. We do not know who the servant originally envisaged by the author was, perhaps the prophet himself, perhaps the people of Israel, suffering in exile in Babylon. But the Word of God also has a fuller meaning. We know from Jesus' own sayings that he saw himself as the complete fulfilment of these poems: 'The Son of man can not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.' He saw his life as one of service and of perfect obedience to the Lord, his Father. He saw his task to be the establishment of the Kingship of God on earth, which would bring salvation to all, and that the opposition to this Kingship would bring him suffering and eventually death. This selfless obedience of Jesus would undo the stubborn disobedience of all humanity, featured in the sin of Adam. It would bring to completion the Lord's designs for the world and for all creation.

Question:

Whom did the prophet mean by the Suffering Servant?

Second reading: (Hebrews 4.14-16)

The Supreme High Priest

The Letter to the Hebrews contrasts the supreme High Priest with the transient high priests of Judaism. In order to bring humanity to perfection, Jesus had to share completely in our humanity. He was 'tempted in every way that we are', sexual temptations, temptations to anger, to intolerance, to cut people down to size. He was 'capable of feeling our weaknesses', fear, frustration, laziness, boredom. In the gospels, few of these are mentioned: his exhaustion at the well in Samaria, his grief at the death of his friend Lazarus. But, as he had a very human personality, he must have suffered the fears and incomprehension of childhood, the frustrations of adolescence, as well as the more complex troubles and sorrows of adulthood, not to mention the unremitting opposition of those who rejected him - all under the over-arching passion for his Father and his Kingship. All this would have enriched his personality still further, until he offered the whole of his humanity in obedience to his Father's designs. Just as martyrdom is the crown of a life of Christian fidelity, so Jesus' final sacrifice was the crown of a life of love, obedience and generosity.

Question:

Do you know anyone who has been enriched or made a deeper personality by suffering?

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Gospel:

(Mark 10.35-45)

A Life of Service

Three times in Mark's gospel Jesus formally tells his disciples about his coming Passion, and each time they seem entirely deaf to it. So each time Jesus counters their misunderstanding by repeating the need of a disciple to follow him in suffering.

Today's reading begins just after the third prophecy, and - true to form - the sons of Zebedee reply with a request for the best seats at the banquet of the Kingdom! Matthew spares the two disciples by putting the request in their poor mother's mouth. Only in a second exchange with Jesus do they woodenly accept to share Jesus' 'cup' and 'baptism'. Do they really know what they are accepting, or do they just blithely agree? The indignation of the other disciples prompts Jesus to his clearest statement in words that authority in the Church is a service. His clearest statement in action is the smelly business of washing their travel-gnarled feet at his last meal with them.

The lesson is difficult to assimilate, for authority corrupts even at this level. At the ordination of a priest the Church still speaks of 'the dignity of the priesthood' rather than 'the service of the priesthood'.

Question:

s ministry in the Church treated too much as a dignity rather than a service?
