

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Isaiah 50:4-9a

NRSV

The part of Isaiah written in exile (Chapters 40-55) contains four *servant songs*, sections that interrupt the *flow* of the book but have a unity within themselves. The first (42:1-7) begins “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen ...”; in the second (49:1-7) the servant, abused and humiliated, is commissioned anew; in the third (our passage) he is disciplined and strengthened by suffering; and in the fourth (52:17-53:12) even the Gentiles are in awesome contemplation before the suffering and rejected servant. In late Judaism, he was seen as the perfect Israelite, one of supreme holiness, a messiah. In the gospels, Jesus identifies himself as the servant (or slave), the one who frees all people.

In vv. 4-6, God has “opened my ear”; he has commissioned the servant as one who is taught, i.e. like a disciple. God has made him a “teacher” (a prophet) of the “word” of God, to bring God’s comfort to “the weary”, his fellow Israelites – who reject God. He has accepted this command: he is not “rebellious”. They have tortured him (v. 6), as they did prophets before him, but he has accepted their “insult and spitting”. In vv. 7-9a, in courtroom language, the servant says that, because God helps him, he is not disgraced; he confidently accepts the suffering (“set my face like flint”), and will not be put to shame. God will prove him right (“vindicates”, v. 8). He is willing to face his “adversaries”, his accusers – for the godly to “stand up together” with him against the ungodly. He is confident that, with God’s help, none will find (“declare”, v. 9) declare him guilty.

Psalms 31:9-16

NRSV

The psalmist seeks deliverance from personal enemies. He is “in distress”: his troubles have led to ill health; his strength fails him (v. 10); perhaps he is terminally ill. He is “scorned by all my enemies” (v. 11a, Revised English Bible) and even by his neighbours; his friends avoid him. People forget about him, as though he is already dead (v. 12); he feels as useless as “something thrown away” (New English Bible). People are conducting a whispering campaign against him and they scheme to take his life (v. 13); but he accepts God personally; he has confidence in God (v. 14). His destiny (“times”, v. 15) is safe in God’s hands; he trusts that God will deliver him from his adversaries and persecutors. Seeing himself as a “servant” (v. 16), he cries *let me experience you, O God!* May God, in his compassion, save him from all that besets him. In vv. 21-24 (perhaps written later), he gives thanks to God for hearing his call for help. God’s unfailing love for him in his distress was wonderful. May his experience be an example for others.

Philippians 2:5-11

NRSV

In vv. 1-4, Paul has urged the Christians at Philippi, through “encouragement in

Christ”, and moved by God’s love for them, to “be of the same mind[set], having the same love, being in full accord ...”. They are to “regard others as better than ... [themselves]”, freely adopting a lowly, unassertive stance before others, replacing self-interest with concern for others.

Vv. 5-11 are an early Christian hymn to which Paul has added v. 8b. He exhorts his readers to be of the same mindset as Jesus – one that is appropriate for them, given their existence “in Christ” (v. 5). Christ was “in the form of God” (v. 6): he was already like God; he had a God-like way of being, e.g. he was not subject to death. He shared in God’s very nature. Even so, he did not “regard” being like God “as something to be exploited”, i.e. to be grasped and held on to for his own purposes. Rather, he “emptied himself” (v. 7), made himself powerless and ineffective – as a slave is powerless, without rights. He took on the likeness of a human being, with all which that entails (except sin), including “death” (v. 8). As a man, he lowered (“humbled”) himself, and throughout his life in the world, was fully human and totally obedient to God, even to dying. (Paul now adds: even to the most debasing way of dying, crucifixion – reserved for slaves and the worst criminals.)

God actively responded to this total denial of self, his complete *living and dying for others*, by placing him above all other godly people (“highly exalted him”, v. 9), and bestowing on him the name, title and authority of “Lord” (v. 11) over the whole universe (“heaven”, v. 10, “earth”, “under the earth”). God has given him authority which, in the Old Testament, he reserved for himself. (Isaiah 45:22-25, in the Revised English Bible, says: “From every corner of the earth turn to me and be saved; for I am God ... to me every knee shall bow ... to me every tongue shall swear, saying ‘In the Lord alone are victory and might ... all Israel’s descendants will be victorious and will glory in the LORD’”); everyone shall worship him; confessing that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (v. 11) is equivalent to proclaiming the victory and might of God. The ultimate goal is the “glory of God the Father”, the reclamation of God’s sovereignty, his power over, and presence in, the universe.

Matthew 26:14-27:66

NRSV

It is “two days” (26:2) before the combined festivals of Passover (commemorating the time in Egypt when the plague which killed firstborn boys *passed over*, skipped, Jewish homes) and that of Unleavened Bread (remembering the freeing of the Israelites from Egypt). In this particular year, Passover begins on a Thursday evening. Many pilgrims have come to Jerusalem for the celebrations. A woman has anointed Jesus for burial – a rite usually performed after death – but there will be no time then. The religious authorities (“chief priests and the elders”, 26:3) have “conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him” (26:4) Having him killed during the “festival” (26:5) might cause a popular uprising (“riot”). Their intention was probably to wait until the pilgrims had left the city, but “Judas Iscariot” (26:14) gives them a way of killing him before the festival. That he is “one of the twelve” makes his betrayal especially horrifying. They pay him, in advance, “thirty pieces of silver” (26:15, about 4 months wages) – and so fulfils Zechariah 11:12. This is a turning point in Jesus’ life; his “time is near” (26:18); his passion is a milestone in God’s plan of salvation. Space is scarce in the city, so Jesus sends his disciples to

reserve a room.

In 26:17a, Matthew may be speaking of the Roman “day” rather than the Jewish. (The Roman day started at midnight, but the Jewish at sundown.) He implies that the Last Supper was at the time of the Passover meal, but John places it on the evening before. I agree with those scholars who say that the Supper was not a Passover meal. The disciples speak of Jesus as “The Teacher” (26:18), so possibly the house owner is a follower of Jesus. Matthew does not tell us how the disciples are to identify “a certain man”, but Mark does.

Jesus and his disciples gather in a guest room, furnished with rugs, cushions and perhaps a low table. Jesus knows in advance of Judas’ plot (26:21). Each disciple denies involvement to another (26:22). The treachery is enormous (26:23): the traitor is a member of the community. Jesus knows who it is: “the one who has dipped ... into the [common] bowl” (26:23) with him. (This verse may allude to Psalm 41:9: “Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted the heel against me”. It is surprising that, if this is a Passover meal, the contents of the bowl are not mentioned; elsewhere, Matthew is keen to show Jesus as an observant Jew.) The Old Testament does not mention the Son of Man suffering, so 26:24 is probably an imposition of the *Son of Man* on the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Jesus, “the Son of Man”, is willing to submit to God’s plan, but Judas will be condemned at the Last Day. In 26:25, Judas expects a negative answer, but Jesus’ reply is *half-affirmative*; “You have said so” was a common form of assent in Palestine.

26:26-29 describe the institution of the Lord’s Supper. (The name is from 1 Corinthians 11:20.) The meal has begun with a preliminary course (“while they were eating”, 26:21). The “loaf of bread” (26:26) was likely a flat cake of leavened bread. Jews to this day bless the bread and break it, but Jesus says something special: “this is my body.” That his body is to be broken (and “poured”, 26:28) may indicate that he expects to be stoned. (Crucifixion did not necessarily involve breaking bones.) The traditional prayer of “thanks” (26:27, Greek: *eucharistesas*) over the cup is *Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the world, who has created the fruit of the vine*. “All” (including Judas) drink from the cup. The wine is “my blood of the covenant” (26:28): recall Exodus 24:8, spoken by Moses when the Sinai covenant was ratified: “See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you ...” The new relationship between God and humankind is “for many”, not just for the eleven. 26:29 speaks of the past (Jesus has shared meals with many) and of the future, when he will drink the wine “new”, *afresh*: it points to the heavenly banquet at the end of time, the coming of the Kingdom of God.

As they walk to the “Mount of Olives” (26:30), outside the east wall of the city, Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7: a prediction of his death and the temporary desertion of his disciples. All deny that they will leave him: they are willing to die for him (26:35); Peter insists that he will remain loyal (26:33). Jesus predicts that he will “deny” (26:34) him three times (see 26:69-75). In 26:32, Jesus speaks of his post-resurrection appearances (cf. Mark 14:27-31): he will lead them again. “Gethsemane” (26:36, meaning *olive oil press*) is a small garden on the western slope of

the Mount of Olives. Jesus takes with him “Peter and the two sons of Zebedee” (26:37, James and John), the three disciples who have seen his glory in the Transfiguration; now they see his distress and weakness. Even though he knows what is to happen to him, he is apprehensive: a thoroughly human reaction to a great impending event. He asks the three to “stay awake” (26:38), to remain alert, to be with him in this difficult time. In 26:39-40, he struggles (humanly) with his destiny. In a supreme gesture of supplication to the Father, he throws himself on the ground and prays that, if it be the Father’s will, he may avoid the coming ordeal by simply dying. His prayer is a very personal one to “my” Father: *you can do anything: remove this cup of suffering*. (In 20:22, he asks James and John: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?”) But dying on the cross is in God’s plan, and Jesus is obedient to it. Finding Peter asleep, he exhorts him to pray that he not be faced with a struggle between God and the devil (“the time of trial”, 26:41). Jesus prays a “second time” (26:42): if it is your will that I suffer death, may your will be done. In 26:46, Jesus announces that the next step in God’s plan will now happen: “my betrayer is at hand”. Helped by prayer, Jesus can now face his enemies.

The “large crowd” (26:47), a *mob*, which includes the high priest’s slave (26:51), has been stirred up by the religious authorities. The crowd would not know Jesus by sight, so Judas has “given ... [the authorities] a sign” (26:48): a kiss was the traditional greeting of friendship to a teacher; Judas perverts it. He calls Jesus “Rabbi” (26:49), *my master*, a form of address used to honour teachers of the Law. Cutting off the slave’s “ear” (26:51) – or part of it, as the Greek implies – is an act of revenge for the indignity done to Jesus. Jesus’ preference is for non-violence; God’s power is greater than any force of arms (26:53). Then he adds: aren’t all of these events he is enduring foretold in the Old Testament as being part of God’s plan? 26:55 suggests that he taught in the Temple more than is recorded in the gospels. As Jesus predicted in 26:31, a quotation from “the scriptures” (26:56), the eleven (“all”) flee.

In 26:57-68, Matthew conflates (combines) the preliminary hearing before a committee of the “high priest” and the meeting of the whole Sanhedrin (“chief priests ... scribes”), but in 27:1 the Sanhedrin “conferred together”. (Luke says there were two meetings: one of the committee and one of the Sanhedrin.) Peter follows the procession “at a distance” (26:58) to the “courtyard” of the high priests’ house to hear the outcome of the meeting. Per Deuteronomy 19:15, for a charge to be valid, at least two witnesses had to bring the same “testimony” (26:59); witnesses were questioned separately. Jesus never (to our knowledge) said that he was “able to destroy the temple of God” (26:61), but he did say that it would be destroyed. Had he said that he would destroy it, he would have been guilty of blasphemy (against the Temple). The high priest puts him under legal “oath” (26:63) in the hope that he will say that he will destroy it – thus giving the authorities grounds for a charge. In a *kangaroo court*, would you answer? (Note Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed, and ... yet he did not open his mouth”.) So the chief priests ask him: do you have royal pretensions? (“Son of God”, 26:63, is another title for the Messiah: see 16:16.) Jesus now answers: the time has come to make his claim clear to the people. Yes, I am the Messiah, but not in the way you understand the title: he does not

plan a revolt against the state. He tells of his messiahship in terms that Jews will understand (26:64) (“Power”, 26:64, is a Jewish way of referring to God.) Jesus asserts that he is the Son of Man insofar that he is transcendent, will be enthroned in heaven, and will judge. Jesus is found guilty of blasphemy, although his *offence* does not properly fit the definition of the crime in Leviticus 24:10-23. Jesus is sentenced as deserving death, for which the penalty should be stoning (but at the time the Sanhedrin may have lacked the power to give the death penalty.) The high priest was required to tear “his clothes” (26:65) in a case of blasphemy. Some mock him (26:67): the Messiah was expected to be a prophet (26:68). (26:67 fulfills the prophecy in Isaiah 50:4-6, part of today’s Old Testament reading.) As Mark tells us, Jesus was blindfolded at this point; hence the question “Who is it that struck you?” The Jewish authorities now have a charge they can bring to the Romans.

26:69-75 present Peter’s faithlessness in contrast to Jesus’ faith. Peter denies association with Jesus three times before the cock crows, fulfilling Jesus’ prediction of 26:34. The first denial is in private (26:70), the second (26:72) and third (26:74) in public. (Peter’s dialect, his “accent”, 26:73, shows him to be Galilean.) The Sanhedrin, the supreme court, (“all the chief priests and the elders of the people”, 27:1) meet formally to decide on Jesus’ fate. Matthew implies the complicity of the Jewish authorities (“They bound him ...”, 27:2). “Pilate” was Prefect of Judea 26-36 AD.

We now hear the story of Judas’ death. Matthew implies that he “saw” (27:3) Jesus condemned. Judas repents (changes his mind) and returns the money to the religious authorities. They deny any involvement in the plot; the offence, they say, is on Judas’ head alone. Judas now sees Jesus’ death as undeserved (“innocent blood”, 27:4). Having lost his moral bearings, he commits suicide (27:5). Perhaps it is because of Deuteronomy 23:18 (which forbids ill-gotten gains being used for sacred purposes) that the “chief priests” (27:6) consider returning the money to the temple treasury to be unlawful. Their scrupulosity now contrasts with their plot against Jesus! The “potter’s field” (27:7) was known, by Matthew’s time, as the “Field of Blood” (27:8). He attributes its name to its being bought with “blood money” (27:6). He is keen to show the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies (27:9-10). We now return to the story of Jesus.

In 27:11, Pilate says to Jesus: *You the King of the Jews? You don’t look like a revolutionary!* Some have attempted to connect him with those seeking a political messiah. Jesus’ answer amounts to: *Yes, but not the way you mean it.* Matthew portrays the Jewish authorities as instrumental in raising charges (27:12); he minimizes Pilate’s guilt. Again Jesus does not answer. Pilate is “amazed” (27:14) because a simple peasant would protest innocence, and a revolutionary would deliver a political manifesto: Jesus does neither. (Outside the Bible, Pilate is described as cruel and obstinate; Matthew shows him differently.) Pilate’s verdict is not mentioned, but it must have been treason to warrant crucifixion: Jesus’ claims sound like a threat to Caesar’s authority.

The custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover (“the festival”, 27:15) is unknown

outside the Bible, but such amnesties did occur at some Roman festivals. (In 27:16, “they” must be the Romans.) Matthew does not tell us Barabbas’ crimes, but Mark implies that he is a revolutionary and probably a murderer; it is his fate, not Jesus’, that has attracted the “crowd” (27:15). Note the contrast between “Jesus Barabbas” (27:16, meaning *son of the father*) and Jesus Son of the Father. For Pilate, it would be politically wise to release Jesus, not Barabbas (27:17). He gives the Jewish leaders and people the choice.

While Pilate sits in judgement (“judgement seat”, 27:19), his wife urges him to release Jesus – based on a dream she has had about him. This pause in the proceedings gives the Jewish authorities time to stir up the crowd (27:20). They demand Jesus’ crucifixion. Pilate sees no guilt in Jesus (27:14), but he takes the politically expedient path, to avoid a riot (27:24). In symbolic gesture and word, Pilate pleads before God that he is innocent (27:24). (*Washing hands* is a Jewish custom, not a Roman one.) He has Jesus flogged with a leather whip containing pieces of bone or metal. At either Herod’s palace or the Fortress Antonia, a detachment of soldiers (“the whole cohort”, 27:27) mock Jesus: they dress him in a soldier’s cloak, put a crown on his head and a sceptre (“reed”, 27:29) in his hand, and salute him. (The “thorns” available would not twist easily so the crown was probably radial, as on the Statute of Liberty, not round; wearing it was not torture.) They hail Jesus as they did the Emperor (*Hail, Caesar*), ironically proclaiming his true identity.

“Cyrene” (27:32) was in North Africa, near Bengazi. That “Simon” is named probably indicates that he became a Christian. The custom was for a criminal to carry the crossbar, but Jesus was already too weak to carry it himself. (Flogging was usually at the place of crucifixion.) “Golgotha” (27:33), a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic word for *skull*, was a small stone hill near an abandoned quarry. Jesus refuses “wine ... mixed with gall” (27:34), a sedative; he prefers to remain conscious. Matthew’s description of the crucifixion is just two words in Greek (27:35). The executioners divide the victim’s clothes among them by lot – to avoid a dispute over who gets the best – but this verse also fulfills Psalm 22:18. A placard placed around Jesus’ neck states his crime: they are from 27:2: his claim of messiahship has been twisted into a conviction for treason. Perhaps the “two bandits” (27:38) are revolutionaries. Three groups mock him: (a) passers-by, who scorn him (“shaking their heads”, 27:39, a Middle Eastern gesture) and repeat the first charge made before the Sanhedrin (26:61), (b) the religious authorities, who say: *If you are the Messiah, work a miracle: save yourself* (27:42), and (c) those crucified with him (27:44). Crucifixion was a very cruel form of execution; death from suffocation came slowly, often after several days, and resulted from the trauma caused by flogging, thirst, hunger, exhaustion, and exposure. The victim’s arms being stretched back, breathing was difficult. While he had the strength, he periodically lifted himself with his legs to take a breath.

Matthew does not explain the “darkness” (27:45). Jesus’ cry is the first verse of Psalm 22, in Aramaic. This psalm, as a whole, tells of a righteous sufferer who, despite his travails, comes to trust in God. Jesus feel abandoned but not in despair, for his prayer is to the Father. Perhaps “some” (27:47) misunderstand Jesus’ words

because they are spoken in pain, leading them to believe that he is “calling for Elijah”. (Based on Malachi 4:5, Jews expected Elijah to return at the end of the age.). The gift of “sour wine” (27:48, what a soldier carried) is an act of kindness, but others are curious: maybe Elijah will save him. Jesus dies suddenly, violently, probably in pain (27:50). The “curtain of the temple” (27:51) hung before the Holy of Holies; only the high priest passed through it. 1:10 tells of the tearing open of heaven at Jesus’ baptism. In ancient cosmology, a giant *pudding bowl* separated earth from heaven: a barrier between God and humanity. So both the ritual and cosmological barriers are torn open – as a result of Jesus’ death; it is an act of God, symbolizing the arrival of open access of humankind to God. (See Isaiah 64:1) The point of 27:52-53 seems to be that Jesus’ death brings life. The earthquake cracks the rock, opening the tombs and bringing “saints”, honoured dead of Jewish tradition, to new life. But perhaps 27:53 is a correction: they actually rose “after his resurrection”. The words of the “centurion” (27:54), a Gentile and member of the hated Roman army, may show only that he recognizes Jesus as a benefactor of humankind, but they are much more significant for us. Jesus dies in only about six hours, probably because he had been flogged severely. Women are very much followers of Jesus, from the earliest days (27:55-56). They are faithful even now – unlike the eleven.

Jesus dies at about 3 p.m. (27:46) on Friday, the day before the Sabbath (27:62). Because the Jewish day begins at sundown, and no work can be done on the Sabbath, there are only a few hours in which to bury his body. Deuteronomy 21:22 stipulates that the corpse of one convicted of a capital crime be buried on the day of his death, so an effort must be made to bury Jesus before sundown. So “Joseph” (27:57) of “Arimathea”, a man of means, immediately asks the Roman authorities to release Jesus’ body. Matthew brings out the dignity and grandeur of the burial, but it is likely that Mark’s account is more accurate. Here the burial shroud is a “clean linen cloth” (27:59), the tomb is “new” (27:60) and the stone door is “great”. Joseph lays the body in a tomb presumably intended for himself. He rolls a disk-shaped rock “to [against] the door”; “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” (27:61) witness this action. (A body was normally washed and then anointed with oil before burial, but in Jesus’ case, there was no time to do this.)

27:62-66 prepare for the resurrection. The religious authorities wish to ensure that the faithful do not steal Jesus’ body and falsely claim that he has risen from the dead. A false rumour of resurrection (“the last deception”) would be worse than the “first” (Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah). The tomb is “made secure” (27:64, 66) and is guarded by soldiers.