

Suffering Messiah

One of the first pastoral visits which I made early in my ministry was to a lady who was suffering from spinal cancer. She was in considerable pain most of the time. As I sat with her with little to say she asked me why God was punishing her. “What have I done to deserve this?” she asked. I tried my best to assure her that God was not a punishing God, but a loving God. Whether that was any comfort to her I shall never know. What I did know was that I had a firm conviction that God loved her and that therefore the idea of punishment from God was a contradiction.

Many years later, as I stood on a viewing platform ground zero in New York, I heard the same cry from the lips of many Americans standing nearby. “What have we done to deserve this?” “Why is God punishing his people?” It was a month or so after the planes had demolished the twin towers and the smell of smoke and death was still in the air. I wondered at that time why so many people seemed to have the same response to tragedy.

It was over 500 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. It is difficult for us to imagine what a tragedy this was for the people of Israel. This proud nation, convinced of their role in history as the people of God, believed that the Holy God Himself was present in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. But the Temple was in ruins, the people massacred and survivors carried off as slaves in Babylon. This was a severe crisis of faith. “How could God do

this to us?” Jerusalem has fallen, the nation is in exile in Babylon, and Cyrus the liberator is on the horizon. It is in this context that the spiritual genius, poet and prophet known as second Isaiah (ch. 42 – 53) writes ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people’. Embedded in this section of the book of Isaiah are four poems known as the ‘servant songs’ in which the prophet depicts Israel as the perfect servant of God; this servant proclaims the true faith and suffers to atone for the sins of his people, but God exalts him at the end.

‘Surely, surely, he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows’..... ‘But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.’ (Isa. 53 : 4ff)

Turning now to Psalm 22; it is possible that this psalm also originated during the exile which was a period of suffering and despair for the people of Israel. To the tormented mind of the psalmist the suffering of Israel is proof that the Lord has forsaken his people. With gestures of derision the psalmist’s enemies mock his confidence and faith in an almighty God. Hence he begins with those poignant words “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

In all this the Christian tradition has seen the foreshadowing of Jesus of Nazareth. It would be quite wrong however to suggest that both 2nd Isaiah and the writer of the Psalm 22 had foresight of the events which happened 500 years later at the death of Jesus Christ. Such a magic mentality is not acceptable in this day and age. What they wrote, they wrote for the people of their generation. Prophets are men of insight not foresight. However there can be no doubt that in the struggle to find

words adequate to describe the devastation felt by the followers of Jesus, the new testament writers, themselves steeped in the culture and traditions of Judaism, should turn to these old testament texts to find imagery and language which seemed to ideally fit the enormity of the events of the passion and death of Jesus. The idea that God should pour out his wrath upon Jesus in order to make him 'pay the price of sin' is as unreasonable as telling the lady who was suffering with the agony of spinal cancer that God was similarly angry with her or that the people who were slaughtered at 9/11 were being punished for their sins.

It may not be appropriate for us in the 21st century to interpret the passion of Jesus in terms of metaphors and poetry from 55 years before the events which took place. But one thing is surely certain; there must have been something about this Jesus that was so powerful that it seemed appropriate for his disciples to portray him in terms of the sacred symbols of their worship, and the myths of their messianic hopes, magnified to supernatural proportions. There was something about him that caused them to conclude that the God in whom they believed was present in and with the Jesus they had known.

To conclude I will read St. Mark's version of that turning point in human history; the crucifixion of the Son of Man.

27.33 And when they came to a place called Gol'gotha (which means the place of a skull), they offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 27.35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots; 27.36 then they sat down and kept watch over him there. 27.37 And over his head they

put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." 27.38 Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. 27.39 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads 27.40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 27.41 So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 27.42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 27.43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" 27.44 And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. 27.46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?" that is, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" 27.47 And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "This man is calling Eli'jah." 27.48 And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink. 27.49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Eli'jah will come to save him." 27.50 And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit
