

Servant To All”

Isaiah 53:4-12 and Mark 10:35-45

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May my words be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

Today’s reading from Isaiah is the fourth of the prophet’s “servant songs.” In the first song, the writer portrays the suffering servant as a king who brings justice through his royal and prophetic roles. Unlike prophets who proclaimed ecstatically in the marketplace, this servant moves quietly and confidently to establish “right religion.”

The second song, written from the servant’s point of view, speaks of the servant as a prophet of the Lord who is equipped to restore the nation to God.

The third song is darker in tone: although the servant has been beaten and abused, he is more confident than his predecessors, leading his people on the path God marked out for them.

The fourth song does not clearly identify the servant as a prophet or a king. Jewish scholars suggest that the suffering servant is the nation of Israel, which has borne injustices under Assyria, Babylonia, ancient Greece and Rome, Nazi Germany, and modern-day Palestine. Christian theologians, reflecting on the pain that Jesus endured, tend to see the servant as a foreshadowing of the messiah.

Now fast forward seven or eight centuries, from the “Songs of the Suffering Servant” to Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. He has been teaching the crowds that gather around him everywhere he goes. Now he walks ahead of his disciples, his shoulders set for what is in store for him when they arrive in Jerusalem.

Hear again today’s words from the Gospel of Mark:

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

And Jesus concludes with this admonition:

". . . whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

With his words, Jesus opens his disciples to the suggestion that he is the "suffering servant" and that they must also assume this role if they are to do God's work in the world.

Not much has changed in this world since the years that Jesus walked the roads of Palestine. His great hope for God's kingdom to rule has not come to pass. There have, in the intervening years, been many "suffering servants" who have risked everything to bring peace and justice to the world: Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Salvadoran bishop Oscar Romero, Pakistani school girl and Nobel prize winner Malala, Oskar Schindler, Nazi Party member who rescued Jews from the holocaust.

Suffering servants of many faiths, many political persuasions. These are men and women who have gone so far beyond bravery that most of us cannot imagine emulating them. And most of us probably won't.

But they are reminders, nevertheless, that we are all called to serve, usually in the most ordinary ways. Indeed, every day we see acts of kindness, courage, unselfishness from the men, women, and children around us.

As I worked on this homily I reflected on Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest who worked with cognitively impaired children and adults at L'Arche homes in France, Toronto, and the United States. L'Arche is a Christian ministry whose caregivers live in the same house with their disabled friends. Nouwen wrote extensively about taking care of Adam, whom he held up as an incarnation of the suffering servant. He wrote about his own role as a servant to Adam, who relied on Nouwen for food, clothing, a change of diapers, an affectionate touch, a soothing prayer. Nouwen entered into and eased the young man's suffering. His journey with Adam relieved the young man's pain, as well as Nouwen's lifelong struggle with depression. I see this played out every week when I go to Lynnwood Home for worship: the staff serving the residents with cheerful hearts and gentle hands. The residents trusting their ministrations.

We see so much these days of persons in public life who want to be rich and powerful, who want to "be somebody," to be famous because they make it into the tabloids. How much better our world would be if they could truly hear the words of Jesus: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." How much better if we could all embrace the "upside-down" understanding of God's will for us that Jesus holds up for his disciples. How much better if we could live the words of today's offertory hymn:

"Will you let me be your servant, Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too. . . .

We are pilgrims on a journey, we are travelers on the road;
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.”

Amen.