

Sermon: Christ for all nations
Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt

I have very mixed feelings about Good Friday. Feelings of guilt, shame, and thankfulness. All those mixed together.

Imagine you are so stupid to walk straight onto a busy highway. You know you trespass, the law says: do not walk on the highway. You do it anyway and then a gigantic lorry, a truck, is about to squash you.

One man who saw you being so stupid runs to you and pushes you away just in time. But in doing so, he is the one who gets squashed by the truck.

How will you face the family of the one who saved you? Guilt, shame, thankfulness. A complicated mixture of all that.

1 Appearance beyond human semblance

Good Friday is our day mixed feelings.

Throughout the Gospels we meet with a Jesus who was attractive to be in touch with; people came to him by day and by night, men, women, children, educated and non-educated.

On this Friday, we remember Him as the one no-one wants to look at. A man whipped and beaten and spit at; deeply humiliated, laughed at, scorned.

Isaiah describes in four different parts the Servant of the Lord; today we have read the fourth one. The early followers of Jesus immediately realised that these descriptions of the Servant of the Lord were actually prophecies of Jesus Christ.

This fourth description presents to us Jesus in his lowliness:

His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind. (Isa 52:14)

Isaiah uses other striking words about the Servant of the Lord. He has 'no form or majesty that we should look at him', he is 'despised and we esteemed him not', he is 'rejected'. He is also called a 'man of sorrows'.

'One from whom men hide their faces.'

What happened to him was too awful to watch. How he was treated was too ugly and the brutal torture on his last day made him look awful.

Our apostles regularly quoted from Isaiah 52 and 53 to show that Jesus of Nazareth was truly the Messiah - this prophecy had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

For the Jewish religious leaders this created a problem of course. They could not accept that Jesus was the promised Messiah, as they believed his coming would be glorious.

So Jewish interpretations of Isaiah insist that the Servant of the Lord is not a prophecy of the Messiah - but of the fate of Israel. "Israel", they say, "is the Servant of the Lord, and all you read in Isaiah is about how Israel as a nation throughout the centuries suffered for being a light to the world. For presenting Holy Scriptures, and the laws of God, to humankind."

And it is indeed possible to read the Servant of the Lord-passages in Isaiah as a description of the sufferings of Israel in ancient times. But there are many moments where you have to say - but here it is not about a nation, but about a single person.

How can Isaiah for instance say, 'he was wounded for our transgressions', (Isa 53:5) if the Servant is Israel? Some person was wounded for the sins of Israel, that is the logical way to understand this.

'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have every one turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' (Isa 53:6)

All of us have disobeyed God, but the Lord has laid our sin and guilt on this one person.

The confusion - are these passages about Israel or about Jesus Christ, is in a way good. Because in the misery of our Saviour, his suffering, his rejection, we do recognise much that also applies to Israel before the coming of Jesus and to our experiences as Christians.

In his life and death, Jesus was the true Israel; he did all God asked from Him. In his life and death, Jesus is the Church; he does what God asks from us. That is exactly why he is called the Servant of the Lord.

And God in heaven rejoiced. Finally a human being who truly loved him and who lived the life he intended all people to live. God had been so dishonoured by mankind, and now, he received the glory due his name. Finally, the name of God was hallowed.

2 Shall sprinkle many nations

Jesus glorified the name of God in his life and in his death; that made him the perfect High Priest for all of us, human beings.

The Bible uses many images to describe the essence and the impact of the life and death of Jesus Christ on us. Because he ran the course till the end, he could be our perfect saviour.

Exactly because of his ugly death on the cross, many - not merely a few men, not Israel only, but many nations shall be sprinkled.

It is this mistreated person who shall justify and purify, not just Israel but all nations.

Justify and purify, that is what this sprinkling points to.

The word 'sprinkle' is used about 20 times in the Hebrew Bible. It means to sprinkle with blood, as the high priest in the Jewish cult would do, for the forgiveness of the sins of the people.

Or it points to sprinkling with water, to purify. In Ezekiel 36:25 we read this promise for Israel:

I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from all idols I will cleanse you.

Because of the context, it seems better to think about the sprinkling in the Jewish temple service, the sprinkling with blood, because the Messiah is presented to us as the lamb led to the slaughter - a common image in the temple worship of Israel.

And Isaiah says that we all like sheep have gone astray - but God had laid the iniquity of us all on him. This seems a reference to the habit in Israel on Yom Kippur, the great annual feast of Reconciliation and forgiveness.

All of Israel would, to receive God's forgiveness, send one blameless lamb into the desert, carrying their sins away. The lamb would suffer and die for them.

Surely the blood of animals cannot satisfy the great God - these sacrifices in Israel's worship service prefigure the great sacrifice of the true Lamb, Jesus Christ.

His perfect life and obedience, even into death were *not only* the cause of the perfect satisfaction of God with anyone who attaches himself to Jesus Christ;

his life and death also did away with all our sin and guilt. He carried it into the desert of death. So that God, fully satisfied, can embrace you as his child. Forgiven, guiltless, free.

So... Isaiah says, kings shall shut their mouths, because of Jesus.

Wow. We are not used to kings keeping their mouth shut.

In Psalm 2, we read,

Why do the nations rage, and the kings plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves [...] against the Lord and against his anointed,

that is, against God's Messiah, his Christ. Rulers and people of Israel and the nations together ensured that Jesus was crucified.

But after all that was done, Isaiah says, "kings will shut their mouth".

And Isaiah continues, they shut their mouth in astonishment, shame maybe, "for that which has not been told them, they see. And that which they have not heard, they understand."

Interestingly, our apostle Paul uses these same words to explain why he preaches the gospel to people all over the Roman world. Romans 15:20-21:

I make it my ambition to preach the Gospel, not where Christ has already been named [...] but as it is written, Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.

Paul understood the words of Isaiah 52 in the context of mission.

People who see the sufferings of our Lord - how a perfect life came to a cruel end - shut their mouth. They become silent in awe... Awe because we humans are so wicked that we killed a perfect man. And awe because his life and death are God's instrument for our salvation. He sprinkles the nations with forgiveness and cleansing.

3 High and lifted up

But how is this possible! How can a mere man do all this for us! How can *one* perfect man be the salvation for all humankind. How can one man satisfy God, forgive the sins of the world, renew our lives, bring us back to God.

Isaiah began his passage about the Servant of the Lord with strange words. He said, the Servant of the Lord shall act wisely. Well, that we can understand.

But he added. "He shall be high and lifted up and shall be exalted", and those are astonishing words.

High and lifted up... do you remember when Isaiah used exactly those same words? We even have a song about that vision of Isaiah. 'I see the Lord...'

Yes, in Isaiah 6, when Isaiah had a vision of JHWH himself.

In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. [...] The whole earth is full of his glory.

When Isaiah described JHWH, he described him as 'high and lifted up'. When he described the Servant of JHWH, he used - in Hebrew - the very same words. He is 'high and lifted up'.

What does this mean?

Well, imagine you see God. You are totally overwhelmed, and then you describe him... "I saw God, and he is utterly utterly glorious and high and lifted up..."

And then you see a servant of God, say our lay leader Clare and you use exactly the same words to describe her... "She is utterly utterly glorious and high and lifted up..."

That is impossible, is it not? Because this is blasphemy. Either you lower God with such a statement, comparing him with Clare, or you lift Clare up to the levels of a goddess, and though she is nice, that is also blasphemy.

When Isaiah carefully chooses his words about the Servant of the Lord, by calling him 'high and lifted up', he purposely lifts him up to the same heights as the Lord God himself.

The Servant of the Lord is in fact part of God in a way that may be hard to describe or understand, but that is very true nonetheless.

And this makes us see the description of the Servant of the Lord who is too awful to watch, too ugly as crucified, into something totally unexpected and amazing.

Isaiah begins by underlining: The Servant of the Lord is divine, of the same height and elevation as God himself.

And then he tells us that his appearance as the Crucified one, was awful.

That is such an incredible contradiction.

But it is exactly because God himself lived his life among us, and because God gave his life for us, that his life and death has cosmic impact.

The one wounded and crucified is our Lord God himself. How else could humankind please God - only God himself could set things straight.

How else could God find a perfect saviour except if he would go himself, to do what mere humans could never do.

Because God gave himself up for you and I, our salvation is strong and guaranteed.

Conclusion

We feel shame and guilt; our sins made God come down from heaven and undergo torture and crucifixion for us.

We are thankful as well; thanks to his death on the cross, life is offered to us. The truck of God's justice did not squash us, but Jesus Christ.

The justice of God will not crush us, if we hold on in faith to the one who was wounded for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities. If we hold on to him, we share in God's justice for his own perfect son who even in the face of ugly death, loved God and loved us.

And because of this, he became our perfect Saviour

Amen

