

There is no getting away from the fact that today's Gospel reading gives us a tough-love vision of the Christian life in the interaction we have just heard between Jesus, James and John. But before we explore it, I want just us to dwell on the other readings, starting with Prophecy of Isaiah.

This extraordinary passage is so identified with Jesus, that we sometimes forget that it was written over 500 hundred years before his birth. It is one of what are known as the Suffering Servant Songs of the Second Isaiah (the book is actually a compilation of several different prophets, although Isaiah, the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet we read about at the start of the book, is the one whose name stuck). The so-called Second Isaiah had the unenviable task of persuading the exiled Jews of Babylon to return to their land (a freedom granted them by Cyrus, the Persian Emperor), to rebuild their homes, and most especially Jerusalem and the Temple – the restoration of the principal place of worship a primary concern in drawing people back to the essentials of their faith. His problem was that they had experienced a settled lifestyle during the Babylonian Captivity and many were obviously reluctant to be uprooted even though this was to return home. Nevertheless, the prophet's role is to act as a critical conscience for the whole of society: for king, priesthood and people. This is what the prophet does as he calls them to know that returning to Zion, to restored worship and obeying the Torah (Law) are of primary importance. This won't have made him popular!

This passage, in the Hebrew, poetry of great beauty, has as its underlying theme that of righteousness – a call to righteousness - as God shows righteousness to his people. Although we could get bogged down in the precise understanding of what Isaiah is trying to put across (and many theologians study such minutiae!) it is surely about the approach to life and a call to transformation. For Christians this powerful imagery points to the figure of Jesus. Our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews – a book of radiant imagery – portrays Jesus, through his passion, death and resurrection, as the Great High Priest forever – *a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek*. This mysterious character appears in the book of Genesis and is described as the king of Salem (Jerusalem) who displays generosity as he brings bread and wine out to Abraham (at this point still Abram). The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews uses this imagery, and there is no coincidence that Melchizedek means (in this context) 'King of Righteousness'. There – a running theme!

The reading from Hebrews reveals that the original purpose of Temple worship and the necessity of sacrifice is overtaken by Jesus Christ, who in love gives himself for humanity, and through passion, and death brings about **Resurrection Life** – the life to which all Christians are called.

This leads us to the request of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. You can understand the brothers not getting the running theme that Jesus has taught and demonstrated in his ministry until this point. In fact, they will only fully understand the discipleship they are called to following his death and resurrection, together with their Spirit-filled ability to finally share the message of true life found in Jesus. Matthew the Gospel writer was so

embarrassed by this story that he has their mother asking the question on their behalf – dare I say it, a form of Biblical fake news!

It is human nature to prefer preferential treatment, and it points to that within us which can be self-serving and self-absorbed. Even the ire the other ten feel is an example of more of the same. In response to James and John's question, Jesus talks of cup and baptism – they won't at this point understand that this is the cup of suffering and the baptism of disaster.

So what of – the call to righteousness – of right living?

Although Jesus talks of servanthood, we might better use the term discipleship. We are people called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. This proclamation we each do in different ways; sometimes through mere example, sometimes through exhorting and challenging. In doing so we are always called to remember that we are called to imitate the example of Jesus. He displayed his servanthood in many ways, from angrily overturning the moneychangers' table in the Temple, to refusing to condemn the woman accused of adultery. When we proclaim the Good News, we are never to make it into a power-game – something which, alas the Church has got very wrong indeed, particular in the response to abuse. There can be no more shameful betrayal of Christian discipleship than this. Indeed, it is a wickedness which the Church must continue to confront and deal with.

Wider society also has much wrong with it at present, from the obsession of the cult of 'self' to the coarsened nature of social and political discourse together with the lack of probity in so many areas of life. The almost industrial incidences of child sexual exploitation which we keep hearing about are an indictment on organs of state including social care, the police and the general attitudes of people who look the other way.

The Christian's responsibility is to counter this with the call that following Jesus is the pathway to the fulness of life – if not in illusory or transitory happiness, but the deep joy of knowing his Love within our lives, no matter what happens within them. This is achieved in travelling in the opposite direction to modern culture. Instead of 'me' we are called to serve and love 'the other.' This is proper fulfilment within life. Many will know that I am struck by the example of those who seek to do this in extreme circumstances. The Baptism rite says: 'Day by day the Lord is adding to our number.' In China, thousands of people become Christians week by week. The same is true in Africa. Despite persecution, Christians respond to the call to servanthood Jesus offers through his own example: an increasing number of the Untouchables in India, persecuted Christians in Turkey and North Korea. The Muslim world is also seeing a rise in people turning to Christ, sometimes at great cost to themselves. What an example to us!

We are challenged by this Gospel reading to imitating the servanthood of Jesus in order to build up the Kingdom of God here and now. This requires our time, energy and commitment. We can all too easily live lives just for ourselves, barely dipping our toe in the society we inhabit. We should (to mis-quote President Kennedy) ask not what our community can do for us, but rather, what we are able to do for our community. In this way, we begin to understand the call of Jesus Christ within our lives.

There is a story of John Ruskin, the 19<sup>th</sup> century art critic, who as an old man was standing at a window in a friend's house at dusk. A lamplighter was gradually lighting the street lights up the road one by one but could not be seen. Ruskin remarked that the lamplighter was a wonderful example of genuine Christianity. His way was clearly lit by the lights he lit, and the light he kept burning, even though he himself may not be known or seen.

There is no rocket science to making the world a better place. Our Christian call is to love and serve – discipleship and servanthood in its truest form – truly following the example of *'the Son of Man, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'*



Ugolino di Nerio - documented 1317-27; died possibly 1329

#### **Isaiah 53: 4-end**

<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;

yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.

<sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

<sup>8</sup> By a perversion of justice he was taken away.  
Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people.

<sup>9</sup> They made his grave with the wicked  
and his tomb<sup>[c]</sup> with the rich,  
although he had done no violence,  
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

<sup>10</sup> Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.  
When you make his life an offering for sin,  
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;  
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

<sup>11</sup> Out of his anguish he shall see light;  
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,  
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;  
because he poured out himself to death,  
and was numbered with the transgressors;  
yet he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors.

### Hebrews 5:1-10

<sup>5</sup> Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. <sup>2</sup> He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; <sup>3</sup> and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. <sup>4</sup> And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

<sup>5</sup> So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you';

<sup>6</sup> as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek.'

<sup>7</sup> In the days of his flesh, Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. <sup>8</sup> Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; <sup>9</sup> and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, <sup>10</sup> having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

### Mark 10: 35-45

<sup>35</sup> James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' <sup>36</sup> And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' <sup>37</sup> And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' <sup>38</sup> 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?' <sup>39</sup> 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; <sup>40</sup> 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.'

<sup>41</sup> When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup> So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup> But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'

<sup>45</sup> For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'