

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many”

Have you ever wondered where Jesus and the gospel writers got this idea from?

Today’s reading from Isaiah 53 is directly relevant here.

It is normally called one of the (and the greatest of them) Servant Songs of 2nd Isaiah, set in the time of exile in Babylon.....and clearly in chapter 53 very much the ‘Suffering Servant’.....

But no one before Jesus connected this picture of stricken suffering....wounded, crushed, punished, bruised, and that’s just one verse....with the person of the Messiah to come...

And as we know the disciples could not square Jesus as the Christ of God with the possibility that he would suffer.....so whenever He broached the subject...that the Son of Man was to be rejected and suffer, even die.....they either did not understand or in the case of Simon Peter, he took Jesus aside and rebuked him....

Messiahs do not suffer! Discuss.....

It fascinates me how the self understanding of Jesus came to be..... on the road to Emmaus, meeting the 2 gloomy disciples after his resurrection, you may remember that he ‘opened the Scriptures’ to them...with the words “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer?”

Clearly, in the formative years, somewhere between his visit to the temple aged 12, through his adolescence and early years in the carpenter’s shop..... he was studying, no doubt listening to the OT being read for example, absorbing it....and the Spirit revealed to him.....certain highly significant Scriptures....

...and 2 in particular it seems, *one* Daniel’s description of one “like a Son of Man” (coming on the clouds of heaven) which then became his favourite title for himself (it brilliantly included both his true humanity and his final glory being seen in the clouds)....and *the other* the servant songs of Isaiah, and in particular chapter 53’s suffering servant, part of which we have read.we did not read the early verses immortalized in Handel’s Messiah: “He was rejected and despised, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”.

Powerful stuff. How we interpret prophecy is an interesting question. Before Jesus the Hebrew interpretation of the Suffering Servant put simply had 2 possible suggestions - the first that it described somehow a corporate personality, so either the whole of the nation of Israel suffering in exile, or one group; or second that it applied to one individual - maybe Jeremiah, who probably comes closest to Jesus in prefiguring a ministry full of agonizing suffering.

The interpretation of biblical prophecy can be ‘both and’its a bit like horizons....so for example if I drive towards my home country, the South Downs, there are 2 horizons, first the Ashdown Forest and once you get there the line of the South Downs.....

thus whatever the interpretation of 'the one who suffers' was during the time of exile...is perfectly valid....AND in the light of the NT the further horizon becomes the messianic fulfilment in Jesus.... the suffering God in Christ....

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... This is why the request of James and John to sit at his right hand in glory, misses the whole point Jesus has been trying to make.....and he has to spell it out again: Greatness in the kingdom of God will mean becoming the servant, and to be first will mean becoming the slave of all....

.....and this will involve suffering.....interestingly we know that James was put to death by Herod (Acts 12).....he did indeed drink the cup and share the baptism of Jesus.....

..... a commentator puts it that "suffering and victory" belong to each otherwe could say victory comes through suffering?

.....as we look at those who suffer in our world today.... including in places the suffering church... we obviously want to reach out with help...AND we can see them as types of Christ....on the path of victory through suffering....

.....one of the crushing experiences of suffering was (and still remains) the slave trade....(today happens to be Anti-Slavery Sunday) and the African American spirituals resonate here : "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus.....Glory Alleluia!"

At the lowest possible point of human endurance, as George Appleton put it we can "break our heart into the agelong heartbreak of Xt"....

Certainly when I worked in a hospital setting.....I needed time and time again to come back to Isaiah 53 and the man of sorrows bruised in a way that redeems every dark place...'the crucified God' in Moltmann's phrase.....changes everything however bleak....

Indeed.....and this was a quote I would only share with particular patients....STERESE of Lisieux put it that "suffering is his very best gift: he gives it only to his chosen friends"that quote is very like marmite.....it may hit the spot, but if it doesn't let it go, its for somebody else not you....

What remains true and changes our view of both greatness, service and suffering is

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