

Man of Sorrows
Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Last week, we read in Mark's gospel about how, while they were still on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus told His disciples everything that would happen when they got there. He said that He would be delivered unto the chief priests and the scribes, and that they would condemn Him to death and deliver Him into the hands of the Gentiles, the Romans. He predicted that He would be mocked and scourged, beaten with a whip. He said they would spit on Him and kill Him. And he said that He would rise again on the third day. And all those things happened, just as He said they would.

Now, it's remarkable enough that Jesus was able to predict what would happen even only a few days in the future. But today's passage shows us something even more amazing – that Isaiah also knew a lot about Christ's crucifixion, over 600 years before Jesus was born.

For example, 53:7 says that the Servant of God would not open His mouth in response to His accusers. Just so, Mark 14:61 says that Jesus kept silent, making no answer to those who falsely accused Him. Isaiah 53:5 tells us that He would be chastised, beaten in a way that would leave stripes on Him. Sure enough, Mark 15:15 says that Pilate had Jesus scourged, beaten with a whip containing bits of bone that tore his skin, making His back a bloody mess. Isaiah 53:9 predicts that after He died, He would be buried with the rich. Again, this is spot on. Mark 15:43 says that Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy and prominent man, came to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus, and verse 46 says that he laid Jesus in his own tomb.

So, if we were to learn nothing else from this passage from Isaiah, taking a close look at it should demonstrate once again how true, how reliable the Scriptures are, right? I mean, unless God hadn't somehow spoken to him, how could Isaiah have known so many details, not just about what Jesus would do, but about what Pilate and Joseph of Arimathea would do as well? How else can we explain this, unless the Holy Spirit really did inspire the Old Testament prophets as well as the New Testament apostles? No, when we read these words from Isaiah we can't escape the conclusion that all of the Bible must be what Paul told Timothy that it is – breathed out by God, and thus useful not only to teach us the way to better living, but also to correct our behavior and to train us in righteousness, so that we might truly know and do the will of God.

But given our responsive reading this morning, how could Isaiah's predictions have come true? Why would the one that Isaiah 52:13 says was so exalted come to be what 53:3 says, so despised and rejected by His own people? Why did the Palm Sunday crowd which hailed Jesus as the Son of David turn on Him so completely in less than a week's time? Why did they one day believe that Jesus had come in the Name of the Lord, only to become just as fully convinced that He had, as 53:4 says, become stricken, smitten, cursed by God?

Isaiah gives us a hint in 53:2 – in spite of their words of welcome on Palm Sunday, the Jerusalem crowd did not, in fact, believe that Jesus had the form or majesty of a king, at least, not the sort of king they wanted Him to be. After all, even on Palm Sunday Jesus didn't come

riding in to His capitol city on a great charger, towering above the crowd the way a conqueror would. No, He humbly rode on a donkey's colt with His feet dragging the ground. And as the days went by, especially after He allowed Himself to be arrested, it was obvious that Jesus had no intention of leading His people in a rebellion against the Romans.

And so they did exactly what Isaiah predicted they would do. They turned on Jesus. They handed Him over to the very Romans they hated. And the Romans did everything to Jesus that He himself had predicted. They mocked Him and spit on Him and beat Him with a rod and with a whip. They jammed a crown of thorns down on His head. They nailed Him to a wooden cross and stuck it in the ground and left Him to die. Isaiah 52:14 sums up all of this brutality, saying that His appearance was so marred that He couldn't even be recognized as a human being. No wonder Isaiah 53:3 says that He would be a man of sorrows, that He would know a lot about grief.

So, why did the Palm Sunday crowd do all those horrible things to Jesus on Good Friday? It wasn't just because He had disappointed them. No, because He didn't give them the things they wanted, because He wasn't the sort of Messiah they thought He should be, they became convinced that He wasn't the Messiah at all. And that made Him a blasphemer in their eyes, someone Who made Himself to be equal with God. Because of that, they thought His sufferings were completely justified, and that His death proved that God was punishing Him for His sins. They certainly considered Him, as verse 4 says, to be stricken, smitten by God.

Now, at this point it would be very easy for us to condemn the people in Jerusalem for their selfishness and their fickleness. I mean, they had all the Old Testament prophecies that we have, including today's passage from Isaiah – many of the religious leaders even knew the words of the prophets by heart. So, why couldn't they see the signs that are so clear to us? Why did they allow their own desires to overcome the clear teachings of Scripture? If they really had meant what they had said on Palm Sunday, if they really thought Jesus was their Savior and King, why didn't they listen to what He said? Why didn't they allow His words and actions to mold and moderate their expectations?

Well, maybe we need to ask the same questions of ourselves. For we not only know that Jesus so clearly fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. And we not only know that Jesus correctly predicted everything that would happen to Him. Because of His resurrection we know without a shadow of a doubt that He is in fact everything He claimed to be – the Savior of the World, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Son of God.

But how often do we let our own disappointments cloud our view of Jesus? How often do we let the difficult circumstances of our lives move us to doubt His love for us, His power to save us? How often do we let the temptations and distractions of life crowd out His clear instructions in Scripture – the same reliable Scriptures that accurately predicted even the smallest of details hundreds of years in the future? In the midst of our own fears and frustrations, isn't it all too easy for us to do what the Jerusalem crowd did, to turn away from Jesus?

Yes, perhaps that's why Isaiah insists on using all these strange first person pronouns in his prophecy. I mean, he didn't personally see all the events he was describing – they all

happened some 600 years after he wrote down this passage. And none of us were there either, not in person.

And yet, Isaiah insists on using that word – **we** did not desire Him, **we** did not esteem Him, all **we** like sheep have gone astray, **we** have turned everyone to his own way. That was true of the Jerusalem crowd, with their dreams of worldly glory and prosperity. It was true of Isaiah, 600 years before Christ. And it's true of all of us today. For whenever we choose our own way over Christ's commands, whenever we prefer the gifts to the Giver, the creation to the Creator, whenever we deny His love or doubt His power, aren't we also saying "There is no reason we should desire Him?" Aren't we also despising Him? Aren't we also rejecting Him? Aren't we also hiding our faces from Him? In spite of our profession of faith in Him, aren't we turning on Him just as the Jerusalem crowd did, saying "Hosanna to the Son of David" on one day and "Away with Him" the next?

But if we understand that this passage predicts the sufferings of Christ so accurately, and if we understand that this passage describes our sin so clearly, then we are ready to hear the good news: everything that happened to Jesus, happened to save us from our sins.

And make no mistake – the cross was part of God's plan. That's exactly what Isaiah 53:10 says: it was in fact the Father's will that Jesus go through such suffering and death. And Jesus agreed to go to the cross, offering up His own soul as a lamb is offered on the altar as a sacrifice for sin.

But why would Jesus do that? Verse 9 reminds us that Jesus Himself was righteous. He had committed no sin of His own that made Him worthy of death, let alone the beating and crucifixion that He endured. But verse 11 says that because Jesus went through this anguish with full knowledge of what He was doing, because Jesus completely submitted Himself to the will of the Father, He would bear the iniquities of the people upon Himself. Because of His obedience, many would be justified, accounted righteous.

That's right – by dying on the cross, Jesus would take His people's sin and guilt upon Himself, paying their penalty with His own body and blood. And in the same way and at the same time, Jesus would give His people His own righteousness, so that when God looks at all those who belong to Christ He would consider them to be just as perfect, just as spotless as the Son of God Himself. In other words, by dying for all who trust in Him, Jesus would prove Himself to be Who Isaiah said He would be, Who John the Baptist said He was: the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

And whose sins has Jesus taken away? Who is considered righteous by virtue of what Jesus has done? Isaiah tells us in verse 5. He died for our sins, ours – those of us that went astray in verse 6. Verse 5 says that Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God, was wounded for **our** transgressions. Jesus, the Holy Son of God was bruised, was crushed because of **our** iniquities. Verse 4 says that He bore **our** griefs. He carried **our** sorrows, accepting in Himself the punishment **our** sins deserve.

This is the great good news of the gospel – that salvation is not something anyone can work for or earn in some way. We do not earn God's favor by enduring suffering – no, what we

deserve is what happened to Jesus on the cross, and none of us in this life will ever go through that sort of hell. In the same way, we cannot earn God's blessing by any good deeds that we do – for we've already seen that our hearts are just as fickle, just as capricious as those of the Jerusalem crowd. No, none of us will ever be as consistently loyal to King Jesus as He deserves.

But that's why this passage from Isaiah is such good news. For here we see so clearly that our salvation comes not from anything we do or leave undone, but instead from something Jesus has already done for us, something that we helpless sinners cannot do for ourselves. It is Christ alone, by His death, burial and resurrection that can save us. And the good news is that this salvation comes to sinners like all of us, to fickle, faithless people like us who do not deserve such grace. The good news is that Jesus died to take away the sins of the same people who despised Him and rejected Him, people like that Jerusalem crowd, people like those disciples who ran off and left Him, people like us.

This is the mystery of grace. But how do we gain access to it? By fully embracing what Isaiah has told us. By confessing that we are indeed helpless sinners. By confessing that Jesus is the only One Who can possibly save us. By trusting Him to do what we cannot do for ourselves – to take our sins upon Himself, and to credit us with His righteousness. And, ironically enough, by doing what the Palm Sunday crowd did at least at first – confessing that Jesus is the Son of David, the Son of God, our Lord and King, and devoting all that we are and all that we have to the One Who gave up everything for us.