

## GOOD FRIDAY, 2015

At yesterday's Mass, I pointed out how the rubrics in the Missal give instructions about what should be treated in the homily. Today, the Missal's instruction is of a very different sort, saying merely that after the reading of the Passion, the priest is to give what it calls "a brief homily." The brevity is surely recommended because not only the account of Jesus' passion and death but also the first reading from the prophet Isaiah are so long. I'll try to comply with what the Missal asks, but I do want to look somewhat closely at the reading from Isaiah because it sheds important light on our entire life of discipleship.

If you were at Mass the first three weekdays of Holy Week, you heard other readings from this prophet, namely, the first three of the four Songs of the Suffering Servant, while just now we heard the fourth. Literally hundreds of articles and books have been written about them, often discussing whether this mysterious servant refers to the whole people of Israel, or to a faithful remnant among the Israelites, or to an individual—and if an individual, whether he is the prophet himself, or the liberating Persian king Cyrus, or a coming Messiah. From the first century of our era, Christians have easily and understandably been drawn to the messianic interpretation, Christ Jesus himself being the "anointed one" by whose stripes we have all been healed. Perhaps nowhere in the New Testament is this more clearly seen than in the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, where the apostle Philip explains to a traveling Ethiopian eunuch that Isaiah is here referring to Jesus. Philip is so persuasive that the Ethiopian asks to be baptized at once.

It won't surprise you to hear that not everyone accepts this notion that chastisement undergone by one person can make others whole, or that God could rightly lay upon one person what the song calls "the guilt of us all." With characteristic honesty, the great Protestant exegete Rudolf Bultmann once wrote: "How can my guilt be atoned for by the death of someone guiltless....? What primitive concepts of guilt and righteousness lie behind any such notion?"<sup>1</sup>

However, even the many Jewish biblical scholars who interpret the suffering servant to refer to the entire people recognize that the suffering and even death of the righteous can indeed be of avail for others. Only a couple decades ago an Orthodox rabbi and historian wrote the following:

It was an old Jewish tradition dating back to Biblical times that the death of the righteous and innocent served as an expiation for the sins of the nation or the world. The story of Isaac . . . , the prophetic description of Israel as the long-suffering Servant of the LORD, the sacrificial service of the Temple—all served to reinforce this basic concept of the death of the righteous as an atonement for the sins of other men.

... The wholly bleak picture of unreasoning slaughter was somewhat relieved by the fact that the innocent did not die in vain and that the betterment of Israel and humankind somewhat was advanced by “stretching their neck to be slaughtered.”<sup>2</sup>

What that rabbi believed Israel as a whole could do, we Christians confess that Jesus did. This is, indeed, at the core of our faith. Yet it still leaves open the question of what our response should be. At times it has been argued that what God really asks of us is the firm conviction that this is indeed so, that Jesus is our redeeming savior (a faith-filled conviction that is itself a gift), and that all of our good actions will spontaneously flow from hearts alive with this conviction. Most Christians, however, recognize that something more is asked of us: a willing cooperation that was poignantly expressed by the great United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld just a year and a half before his tragic death in a plane crash as he was on a mission to try to resolve a civil war in the Congo. At Eastertide in 1960, reflecting on the forgiveness won for us by the one who was “pierced for our offenses [and] crushed for our sins,” he wrote in his diary:

Forgiveness breaks the chain of causality because he who “forgives” you—out of love—takes upon himself the consequences of what *you* have done. Forgiveness, therefore, always entails a sacrifice.

The price you must pay for your own liberation through another’s sacrifice is that you in turn must be willing to liberate in the same way, regardless of the consequences to yourself.<sup>3</sup>

For us, this means that Jesus’ dying for us does not at all mean that we need not die to sin. One way of realizing the true nature of what Jesus did for us, the sense in which his death was not some “substitute action” but rather the enabling cause of a process that goes on and on is to turn for a moment to the Fourth Gospel’s account of the Passion that was just read. Among Jesus’ last words were those giving his mother to the beloved disciple. A very astute theologian of our own day has pointed out that we ought not understand this merely as a way of seeing that Mary would henceforth be cared for. Rather, “there is something still more fundamental at work here: Jesus is founding a new family, the basis on which people who [otherwise may] have nothing at all in common can join together in unreserved solidarity. It is the place where true reconciliation with God and one another is possible.”<sup>4</sup> So even though there are weighty reasons for calling the feast of Pentecost the birthday of the Church, at least from a Johannine perspective that birthday took place already on Golgotha.

My final point is how we are to go about celebrating this. What does it really mean to be a member of what has often been called “the one true Church”? When I teach a course in the world’s religions, whether formerly at Catholic University or nowadays in our own high school, I

have to address the sad, indeed shameful history of anti-Judaism that has been all-too-prominent in Christianity from the earliest centuries of our era and that can be directly linked to the anti-Semitism that reached its nadir with Hitler and the Nazis.. A courageous German Christian woman named Basilea Schlink wrote some words shortly after the end of World War II that are still worth pondering, even though we have already had offensive references to the Jewish people removed from our liturgical books for Good Friday. She wrote:

The sight of Jews as an oppressed and afflicted people crossing the face of the earth, despised and rejected, should make us think of those words of Jesus: ... “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” Who matches so accurately our Lord’s description ... as His people Israel? Who has suffered so much contempt from all nations down through the ages? Who has been so rejected? From whom did men turn away their faces?... Here indeed are the brethren of our Lord Jesus. It may well be that He often feels closer to His people Israel than to those proud Christians who believe in him and yet refuse to acknowledge their guilt toward the Jews, their heartlessness in passing their brother in desperate need.<sup>5</sup>

The allusions to Isaiah’s Suffering Servant are evident there, allowing us the freedom to recognize that the Servant may properly be understood both as a people and as an individual. What really matters is not precisely how we interpret the passage but how we live in light of it.

1 Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," quoted by Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted; Who He Was*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 262.

2" Berel Wein, *The Triumph of Survival: The Story of the Jews in the Modern Era 1650-1990* (Brooklyn, NY: Shaar, 1990), 14.

3 Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W.H. Auden (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 173.

4" Lohfink, 267.

5" M. Balilea Schlink, *Israel, My Chosen People: A German Confession before God and the Jews* (Eng. trans., Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen, 1987), 33-34.