

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

Scripture is fulfilled

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last night in our Maundy Thursday service we confessed the Nicene Creed, and one of the things we say in it is that Jesus' death and resurrection was 'in accordance with the scriptures'. This means that God had already told his people what was going to happen. It's not just one place in scripture, but when we look back, having seen all that Christ Jesus did, we see it everywhere. Psalm 41 talks about being betrayed by a friend. Psalm 69 speaks of being given vinegar to drink. In the prophet Zechariah, we have the king riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, mention of the 30 pieces of silver, a verse about Israel looking upon the one they have pierced, and also the sheep scattering when the shepherd is struck down. Psalm 22, which we read today, has the mocking, the piercing of his hands and feet, and the dividing up of the clothes.

But the text I want to focus on today is our reading from the prophet Isaiah. This passage that starts at the end of chapter 52 is known as the suffering servant. This is one of four sections in the book of Isaiah that are often termed the 'Servant Songs'. The others are in chapter 42, 49, and 50. And all throughout, the references to the servant are shrouded in mystery. Their identity is never really made clear. The servant is named as God's chosen one, in whom God delights and upon whom God's spirit rests. The servant has been called by God before his birth on a mission to glorify God and restore Israel. And the servant is a light to the nations through whom God's salvation will reach the ends of the earth. And this fourth passage starts not with suffering, but with the servant prospering and being exalted and being lifted up.

This doesn't really sound much like what happened to Jesus on the cross. Except Jesus was lifted up, and it was his moment of glory, it just wasn't recognised by most people. Jesus was lifted up upon the cross. His glory was in doing the task he had come to do. He fulfilled the Father's will and thus brought glory to himself and the Father.

We see this sort of paradox all throughout the suffering servant passage. He is exalted and yet despised. He is lifted up and yet struck down. There is nothing desirable in his appearance, and yet he will have a portion among the great. He is weak, and yet will divide the spoil with the strong. The mighty power of the Lord's arm is revealed in the suffering of his servant. The passage again and again hits us with such reversals. The exalted one is laid low. The lowly one has a place among the greatest.

Jesus preached on this very thing. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. So it is in the kingdom of God. And so much of how Isaiah describes this servant can be seen in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus. At one point, the suffering servant passage reveals a new understanding that he suffered on behalf of God's people. The realisation that Jesus died an innocent death on the cross. Israel confessed that they never had considered such a thing possible. They regarded him as insignificant and interpreted his intense sufferings as a sign of God's displeasure. They now realised that the servant's suffering was due to their sins and for their benefit.

Like stray sheep, all Israel had wandered from the Lord, and the servant had borne the punishment for their rebellion. He was innocent of wrongdoing, yet he silently endured oppressive treatment and a humiliating death. Isaiah even describes this servant as being so disfigured that no one would look at him. And when you consider all that Jesus endured physically between the time of his arrest and his crucifixion, it is no wonder he no longer looked like a man.

We can't help but see Jesus in this passage. And the New Testament itself does much the same. In Acts chapter eight we have the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch who is reading Isaiah 53. The eunuch, like many interpreters before and after him, is struggling to understand the text. When Philip comes upon him, he asks if the eunuch understands what he is reading, to which he replies, 'How can I unless I have someone to guide me?' He asks Philip if the servant refers to the prophet or to someone else. In response Philip began to speak, 'and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus'.

Philip doesn't necessarily say that the servant of Isaiah 53 is Jesus and represents no one else. But, starting with this scripture, he proclaims to the eunuch the good news of Jesus. Like much of the Old Testament prophecy, there is deliberate ambiguity, but this is part of its beauty. And whether or not it's referring directly and exclusively to Jesus, it still gives us an insight into the character of God. And we can still confess that Jesus fulfilled the scriptures. Not just particular passages that give us direct reference to the circumstances of his crucifixion, but the whole thing. The entirety of the Old Testament is wrapped up in Jesus. It all points forward to Jesus, and Jesus brings it to its close. He said on the cross, 'It is finished', and this can mean more than just the event of his crucifixion. Everything that's prophesied, everything that's foreshadowed, everything that happens between God and his people Israel finds its fulfilment in Jesus.

God has done what he has promised. He has sent his Messiah. He has suffered in our place. He has died our death. He has ushered in a new covenant between God and his people. This covenant is sealed with the blood of Christ, shed on the cross for you and for me. And so everything promised in this new covenant will happen. Just as Jesus brought the old covenant to its fulfilment, so he will with the new when he returns to restore all things to himself. And until that day, may we rejoice in all that our God has done for us, is doing for us, and will do for us, through our Lord Jesus Christ, our saviour and our redeemer. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.