

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Isaiah 50:4-9a

NRSV

The part of Isaiah written in exile (Chapters 40–55) contains four *servant songs*, sections that interrupt the *flow* of the book but have a unity within themselves. The first (42:1-7) begins “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen ...”; in the second (49:1-7) the servant, abused and humiliated, is commissioned anew; in the third (our passage) he is disciplined and strengthened by suffering; and in the fourth (52:17-53:12) even the Gentiles are in awesome contemplation before the suffering and rejected servant. In Late Judaism, he was seen as the perfect Israelite, one of supreme holiness, a messiah. In the gospels, Jesus identifies himself as the servant (or slave), the one who frees all people.

In vv. 4-6, God has “opened my ear”, commissioned the servant as one who is taught, i.e. like a disciple. God has made him a “teacher” (a prophet) of the “word” of God, to bring God’s comfort to “the weary”, his fellow Israelites – who reject God. He has accepted this command: he is not “rebellious”. They have tortured him (v. 6), as they did prophets before him, but he has accepted their “insult and spitting”. In vv. 7-9a, in courtroom language, the servant says that, because God helps him, he is not disgraced; he confidently accepts the suffering (“set my face like flint”), and will not be put to shame. God will prove him right (“vindicates”, v. 8). He is willing to face his “adversaries”, his accusers – for the godly to “stand up together” against the ungodly. He is confident that, with God’s help, none will declare him guilty.

Psalms 31:9-16

NRSV

The psalmist seeks deliverance from personal enemies. He is “in distress”: his troubles have led to ill health; his strength fails him (v. 10); perhaps he is terminally ill. He is “scorned by all ... [his] enemies” (v. 11a, Revised English Bible) and even by his neighbours; his friends avoid him. People forget about him, as though he is already dead (v. 12); he feels as useless as “something thrown away” (New English Bible). People are conducting a whispering campaign against him and they scheme to take his life (v. 13); but he accepts God personally; he has confidence in God (v. 14). His destiny (“times”, v. 15) is safe in God’s hands; he trusts that God will deliver him from his adversaries and persecutors. Seeing himself as a “servant” (v. 16), he cries *let me experience you, O God!* May God, in his compassion, save him from all that besets him. In vv. 21-24 (perhaps written later), he gives thanks to God for hearing his call for help. God’s unfailing love for him in his distress was wonderful. May his experience be an example for others.

Philippians 2:5-11

NRSV

In vv. 1-4, Paul has urged the Christians at Philippi, through “encouragement in

Christ”, and moved by God’s love for them, to “be of the same mind[set], having the same love, being in full accord ...”. They are to “regard others as better than ... [themselves]”, freely adopting a lowly, unassertive stance before others, replacing self-interest with concern for others.

Vv. 5-11 are an early Christian hymn to which Paul has added v. 8b. He exhorts his readers to be of the same mindset as Jesus – one that is appropriate for them, given their existence “in Christ” (v. 5). Christ was “in the form of God” (v. 6): he was already like God; he had a God-like way of being, e.g. he was not subject to death. He shared in God’s very nature. Even so, he did not “regard” being like God “as something to be exploited”, i.e. to be grasped and held on to for his own purposes. Rather, he “emptied himself” (v. 7), made himself powerless and ineffective – as a slave is powerless, without rights. He took on the likeness of a human being, with all which that entails (except sin), including “death” (v. 8). As a man, he lowered (“humbled”) himself, and throughout his life in the world, was fully human and totally obedient to God, even to dying. (Paul now adds: even to the most debasing way of dying, crucifixion – reserved for slaves and the worst criminals.)

God actively responded to this total denial of self, his complete *living and dying for others*, by placing him above all other godly people (“highly exalted him”, v. 9), and bestowing on him the name, title and authority of “Lord” (v. 11) over the whole universe (“heaven”, v. 10, “earth”, “under the earth”). God has given him authority which, in the Old Testament, he reserved for himself. (Isaiah 45:22-25, in the Revised English Bible, says: “From every corner of the earth turn to me and be saved; for I am God ... to me every knee shall bow ... to me every tongue shall swear, saying ‘In the Lord alone are victory and might ... all Israel’s descendants will be victorious and will glory in the LORD’”); everyone shall worship him; confessing that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (v. 11) is equivalent to proclaiming the victory and might of God. The ultimate goal is the “glory of God the Father”, the reclamation of God’s sovereignty, his power over, and presence in, the universe.

Mark 14:1-15:47

NRSV

It is “two days” before the combined festivals of Passover (commemorating the time in Egypt when the plague which killed firstborn boys *passed over*, skipped, Jewish homes) and that of Unleavened Bread (remembering the freeing of the Israelites from Egypt.) Many pilgrims have come to Jerusalem for the celebrations. Some of the religious authorities (“the chief priests and the scribes”) have been plotting for some time to kill Jesus: see 11:18 and 12:12. Having him killed during the “festival” (14:2) might cause a popular uprising (“riot”). Their intention was probably to wait until the pilgrims had left the city.

Jesus is visiting Simon “the leper” (14:3) – a person who is ritually unclean. His house is in “Bethany”, a village south-east of Jerusalem, on the edge of the Mount of Olives. While there, an unknown woman brings an “alabaster jar of ... nard”, a perfume flask containing an ointment made from a rare Indian plant (and imported from there.) In pouring it over Jesus’ head, she (in effect) anoints him as kings

were anointed (see 2 Kings 9:6, where Elisha anoints Jehu as king) – but this may be fulfilment of Psalm 23:5: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil ...” She perceives that he is the Messiah (meaning *anointed one*); she sees what the religious authorities and some of those present at the meal (14:4-5) fail to understand; unlike them, she has spiritual insight. (“Three hundred denarii”, 14:5, was a year’s wage for a labourer, if he had steady employment; to possess something of such value, she was probably not poor.)

Jesus answers her critics in five ways: (a) she has done “good service” (14:6, literally: *a beautiful deed*) for him; (b) the opportunity to be with him in his humanity will soon end; (c) poverty will always exist in the world – the poor can always be helped; (d) she has, in the way she is able, done what she can for him; and (e) she has anointed his body for burial (while he is still alive). (The custom was to anoint a person when he had died, but there was no time to anoint Jesus’ body: see my comments on 15:42-47 below.) The story of her action will be proclaimed as part of the story of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection.

There is a huge contrast between the woman and “Judas Iscariot” (14:10): his infidelity and betrayal are especially horrifying since he is “one of the twelve”. His offer to betray Jesus makes possible a change in the religious leaders’ plans: killing him *before* the festival is now possible. In 14:12a, Mark may be speaking of the Roman “day” rather than the Jewish. (The Roman day started at midnight, but the Jewish at sundown.) He implies that the Last Supper was at the time of the Passover meal, but John the evangelist places it on the evening before. I agree with those scholars who say that the Supper was not a Passover meal.

In 14:13, that a man would *carry a jar of water* is unusual: men carried water in skins and women in terra-cotta jugs, so identifying the man would be easy. Was this meeting pre-arranged, or is it an example of Jesus’ foreknowledge? The two disciples speak of Jesus as “The Teacher” (14:14), so possibly the house owner is a follower of Jesus. The “room” (14:15) would be a guest room, furnished with rugs, cushions and perhaps a low table. 14:16 does not mention the disciples’ surprise, so it is likely that the meeting was pre-arranged.

Jesus knows in advance of Judas’ plot (14:18). Each disciple denies involvement to another (14:19). The treachery is enormous: the traitor is a member of the community, one who dips “bread into the [common] bowl” (14:20) with Jesus. (This verse may allude to Psalm 41:9: “Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.” It is surprising that, if this is a Passover meal, the contents of the bowl are not mentioned; elsewhere, Mark is keen to show Jesus as an observant Jew.) The Old Testament does not mention the Son of Man suffering, so 14:21 is probably an imposition of the *Son of Man* on the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Jesus, “the Son of Man”, is willing to submit to God’s plan, but Judas will be condemned at the Last Day.

14:22-25 describe the institution of the Lord’s Supper. (The name comes from 1 Corinthians 11:20.) The meal has begun with a preliminary course (“while they

were eating”, 14:22). The “loaf of bread” was likely a flat cake of leavened bread. Jews to this day bless the bread and break it, but Jesus says something special: “this is my body.” That his body is to be broken may indicate that he expects to be stoned. (Crucifixion did not necessarily involve breaking bones, while stoning did.) The traditional prayer of thanks (Greek: *eucharistesas*) over the cup is *Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the world, who has created the fruit of the vine*.

“All of them” (14:23, including Judas) drink from the cup. The wine is “my blood of the covenant” (14:24): recall Exodus 24:8, spoken by Moses when the Sinai covenant was ratified: “See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you ...” Again, “poured” points to death by stoning. The new relationship between God and humankind is “for many”, not just for those present. 14:25 speaks of the past (Jesus has shared meals with many) and of the future, when he will drink the wine “new”, *afresh*: it points to the heavenly banquet at the end of time, the coming of the Kingdom of God.

As they walk to the “Mount of Olives” (14:26), outside the east wall of the city, Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7: a prediction of his death and the temporary desertion of his disciples. All deny that they will leave him: they are willing to die for him (14:31); Peter insists that he will remain loyal (14:29). Jesus predicts that Peter will “deny” (14:30) him three times (see 14:66-72). In 14:28, Jesus speaks of his post-resurrection appearances (cf. Matthew 26:31-35): he will lead them again. “Gethsemane” (14:32, meaning *olive oil press*) is a small garden on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. Jesus takes with him “Peter and James and John” (14:33), the three disciples who have seen his glory in the Transfiguration; now they see his distress and weakness. Even though he knows what is to happen to him, he is apprehensive: a thoroughly human reaction to a great impending event. He asks the three to “keep awake” (14:34), to remain alert, to be with him in this difficult time. In 14:35-36, he struggles (humanly) with his destiny.

In a supreme gesture of supplication to the Father, he throws himself on the ground and prays that, if it be the Father’s will, he may avoid the coming ordeal by simply dying. His prayer is a very personal one to his Father (“Abba” means *Daddy*): *you can do anything*: “remove this cup” *of suffering*. (Recall 10:38, where he asks James and John: “Are you able to drink from the cup that I drink?.”) But dying on the cross is in God’s plan, and Jesus is obedient to it. Finding Peter asleep, he calls him “Simon” (14:37), the name he had before becoming a disciple. Peter is to pray that he not be faced with a struggle between God and the devil. In 14:41-42, Jesus announces that the next step in God’s plan will now happen: “my betrayer is at hand”.

The “crowd” (14:43), a *mob*, which includes the high priest’s slave (14:47), has been stirred up by the religious authorities. The crowd would not know Jesus by sight, so Judas has “given them [the authorities] a sign” (14:44): a kiss was the traditional greeting to a teacher. Judas calls Jesus “Rabbi” (14:45, my master), a form of address used to honour teachers of the Law. Cutting off the slave’s “ear”

(14:47) – or part of it, as the Greek implies – is an act of revenge for the indignity done to Jesus. Jesus points out that he is not a “bandit” (14:48): he is not a threat to law and order, to Roman rule.

14:49 suggests that Jesus taught in the Temple more than is recorded in the gospels. As Jesus predicted in 14:27, a quotation from Zechariah, the eleven (“all”, 14:50) flee. The “certain young man” (14:51), by tradition, is Mark.

In 14:53-65, Mark conflates (combines) the preliminary hearing before a committee of the “high priest” and the meeting of the whole Sanhedrin (“chief priests ... scribes”), but in 15:1 the Sanhedrin holds a “consultation”. (Luke says there were two meetings: one of the committee and one of the Sanhedrin.) Peter warms himself “at the fire” (14:54) or charcoal brazier in the “courtyard” of the high priests’ house. Per Deuteronomy 19:15, for a charge to be valid, at least two witnesses had to bring the same “testimony” (14:55); witnesses were questioned separately. Jesus’ statement in 14:57 lays him open to a charge of wizardry (“not made with hands”, 14:58), a capital offence under Leviticus 20:27. The witnesses take Jesus’ words literally; he probably meant *If the Temple is destroyed, I will restore the worship of God in my resurrection.*

Why would Jesus even attempt to answer conflicting witnesses? (14:60) (But note Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed, ... yet he did not open his mouth.”) So the chief priests ask him: do you have royal pretensions? Are you God’s Son? (“Blessed One”, 14:61, and “the Power”, 14:62, are Jewish ways of referring to God.) Jesus answers: “I am”; perhaps echoing Exodus 3:14: there God says he is to be called “I AM WHO I AM”.

Jesus asserts that he is the Son of Man insofar that he is transcendent, will be enthroned in heaven, and will judge. His glorious coming at the end of the era will be final proof of God’s victory over evil. Jesus is found guilty of blasphemy (claiming to be God), although his *offence* does not properly fit the definition of the crime (cursing in God’s name) in Leviticus 24:10-23. Perhaps “all of them” (14:64) does not include Joseph of Arimathea – see comment on 15:43. Jesus is sentenced as “deserving death”, for which the penalty should be stoning (but at the time the Sanhedrin may have lacked the power to give the death penalty). The high priest was required to *tear his clothes* (14:63) in a case of blasphemy. Some mock him (14:65): the Messiah was expected to be a prophet. (This verse fulfills the prophecy in 14:4-6 of today’s reading from Isaiah.)

14:66-72 present Peter’s faithlessness in contrast to Jesus’ faith. Peter denies association with Jesus three times before the cock crows, fulfilling Jesus’ prediction of 14:30. (Peter’s dialect showed him to be Galilean.)

“As soon as it was morning” (15:1) the Sanhedrin, the supreme court, (“chief priests ... with the elders and scribes and the whole council”) meet to decide on Jesus’ fate. They hand him over to the Roman authorities on the political charge of claiming to be king. (It appears that they did not reach a decision in the meeting(s) described in 14:53-65.) Mark implies the complicity of the Jewish authori-

ties (“They bound Jesus ...”). “Pilate” was Prefect of Judea, Samaria and Idumaea 26-36 AD; perhaps he says: *You the King of the Jews? You don’t look like a revolutionary!* Jesus’ answer amounts to: *Yes, but not the way you mean it.*

Mark portrays the Jewish authorities as instrumental in raising (further) charges (15:3); he minimizes Pilate’s guilt. Jesus does not answer these false charges (15:4). Pilate is “amazed” (15:5) because a simple peasant would protest innocence, and a revolutionary would deliver a political manifesto: Jesus does neither. (Outside the Bible, Pilate is described as cruel and obstinate; Mark shows him differently.) Pilate’s verdict is not mentioned, but it must have been treason to warrant crucifixion: Jesus’ claims sound like a threat to Caesar’s authority.

The custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover (“the festival”, 15:6) is unknown outside the Bible, but such amnesties did occur at some Roman festivals. There were several *insurrections* (15:7) during Pilate’s prefecture. Barabbas was a revolutionary and probably a murderer; it is his fate, not Jesus’, that has attracted the “crowd” (15:8). For Pilate, it would be politically wise to release Jesus, not Barabbas (15:9), but the “chief priests” (15:10) fear that Jesus may attract many as a religious leader, and urge reform of the Temple (see 11:17). The crowd, stirred up by the chief priests (15:11), demand Jesus’ crucifixion. Pilate sees no guilt in Jesus (15:14), but he takes the politically expedient path, “wishing to satisfy the crowd” (15:15) and avoid a riot. He has Jesus flogged with a leather whip containing pieces of bone or metal.

Either at Herod’s palace or at the Fortress Antonia, soldiers (“the whole cohort”, 15:16) mock Jesus: they dress him in a royal cloak, put a crown on his head and salute him. (“Purple”, 15:17, was reserved for royalty, but likely the cloak was one of theirs – scarlet. The “thorns” available would not twist easily so the crown was probably radial – as on the Statute of Liberty – not round; wearing it was not torture.) They hail Jesus as they did the Emperor (*Hail, Caesar*), ironically proclaiming his true identity. (The significance of 15:19a is unknown.)

“Cyrene” (15:21) was in North Africa, near Bengazi. “Simon” was probably known to Mark and his first readers; he was either from a farm or had just visited one (“country”). The custom was for a criminal to carry the crossbar, but Jesus was already too weak to carry it himself. (Flogging was usually at the place of crucifixion.) “Golgotha” (15:22) is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic word for *skull*. Jesus refuses “wine mixed with myrrh” (15:23), a sedative. Mark’s description of the crucifixion is just three words (15:24).

The executioners divide the victim’s clothes among them, but this verse also fulfills Psalm 22:18. A placard was placed around the criminal’s neck, stating his crime. The words on Jesus’ “inscription” (15:26) are from 15:2: his claim of messiahship has been twisted into a conviction for treason. Perhaps the “two bandits” (15:27) are revolutionaries. Three groups mock him: (a) passers-by, who scorn him (“shaking their heads”, 15:29, a Middle Eastern gesture) and repeat the first charge made before the Sanhedrin (14:58), (b) the religious authorities, who say: *If you are the Messiah, work a miracle: save yourself*, and (c) “those ... cruci-

fied with him” (15:32). Crucifixion was a very cruel form of execution; death from suffocation came slowly, often after several days, and resulted from the trauma caused by flogging, thirst, hunger, exhaustion, and exposure. The victim’s arms being stretched back, breathing was difficult. While he had the strength, he periodically lifted himself with his legs to take a breath.

Mark does not explain the “darkness” (15:33). Jesus’ cry is the first verse of Psalm 22, in Aramaic. This psalm, as a whole, tells of a righteous sufferer who, despite his travails, comes to trust in God. Perhaps “some” (15:35) misunderstand Jesus’ words because they are spoken in pain, leading them to believe that “he is calling for Elijah”. (Jews expected Elijah to return at the end of the age, Malachi 4:5). The gift of “sour wine” (15:36, what a soldier carried) may be an act of curiosity: maybe Elijah will save him. Jesus dies suddenly, violently, probably in pain (15:37).

The “curtain of the temple” (15:38) was that before the Holy of Holies, through which only the high priest passed. Recall 1:10, the tearing open of heaven at Jesus’ baptism. In ancient cosmology, a giant *pudding bowl* separated earth from heaven: a barrier between God and humanity. So both the ritual and cosmological barriers are torn open – as a result of Jesus’ death; it is an act of God, symbolizing the arrival of open access of humankind to God. (See Isaiah 64:1) The words of the “centurion” (15:39), a member of the hated Roman army, a Gentile, may show only that he recognizes Jesus as a benefactor of humankind, but they are much more significant for us. Jesus dies in only about six hours, probably because he had been flogged severely. “Women” (15:40) are very much followers of Jesus, from the earliest days.

Jesus dies about 3 p.m. (15:34) on Friday, “the day before the sabbath” (15:42). Because the Jewish day begins at sundown, and no work can be done on the Sabbath, there are only a few hours in which to bury his body. Deuteronomy 21:22 stipulates that the corpse of one convicted of a capital crime must be buried on the day of his death, so it is important that an effort be made to bury Jesus before sundown. So “Joseph of Arimathea” (15:43), “a respected member of the council”, a sanhedrin (but possibly not of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin), and a pious Jew or a follower of Jesus (“waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God”), immediately asks the Roman authorities to release Jesus’ body.

Pilate naturally wonders whether Jesus is dead yet, for death usually came only after many hours or even days, but after checking with “the centurion” (15:44), he pronounces Jesus dead, and releases his body. Some burial shrouds were elaborate, but Jesus’ is a simple “linen cloth” (15:46). Joseph lays the body in a tomb (a cave-like structure) presumably intended for himself. He rolls a disk-shaped rock “against the door”; “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph” (15:47) witness this action. (A body was normally washed and then anointed with oil before burial, but in Jesus’ case, there was no time to do this. It was the custom to leave a body to decompose for about a year, and then transfer the bones to an *ossuary*, a bone-box.)