

Isaiah 53:10-11
Psalm 33
Hebrews 4:14-16
Mark 10:35-45

October 17, 2021

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah contains some of the most beautiful and most poetic imagery, not just in Holy Scripture, but in all of literature. Isaiah has given us such well-known quotes as, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...” (9:1), “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...” (2:4), and “They will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.” (40:31). The lyrics of many of our most popular hymns were taken from, or were at least inspired by, Isaiah. “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “Here I Am, Lord” are from Chapter 6. “A Voice Cries Out” is from Chapter 40. “Be Not Afraid” is from Chapter 43. “Only a Shadow” and “I Will Never Forget You” are from Chapter 49. And “Come to the Water” is from Chapter 55. But our first reading today, from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is different. It is neither poetic nor beautiful. From its opening line, “The Lord was pleased to crush him in infirmity.” this reading hits hard and makes us wonder where the prophet is going with it. The reading is taken from one of four servant songs in the Book of Isaiah, and it conveys Isaiah’s prophecy about a Servant chosen by God to suffer for the sake of others. During his lifetime, the Suffering Servant was ignored and shunned by his contemporaries. But after he died a shameful death and was buried among the wicked, the people realized that this Servant suffered for them. He bore their guilt and took their punishment. Hundreds of years later, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his disciples, inspired by his teaching and the Holy Spirit, revealed a deeper meaning in Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant. The prophecy led these early Christians to the understanding that Jesus suffered great agony and died a shameful death for all of humanity – to bear our guilt and to take our punishment. The story of Isaiah’s

Suffering Servant is not pretty, but neither is the agony and death of Jesus.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are nearing the end of their journey through Galilee to Jerusalem. Jesus’ focus has shifted away from teaching the crowds to preparing his disciples for what they will encounter with him when they get to Jerusalem. He has forewarned them three times already of his impending passion and death – predictions that were met with shock and disbelief. Early in the journey, Jesus overheard the disciples arguing, and he asked what they were arguing about. The Gospel says they grew quiet because they had been debating about who among them was the greatest. Knowing that, Jesus reminded them that the greatest “will be the last of all and the servant of all.” And today, we read that personal ambition and greed had once again come back to the forefront among the disciples when brothers James and John asked Jesus for places of honor in the kingdom, one on his right and one on his left. This angered the others, possibly because they did not think of it first. They were all still missing the point of everything that Jesus had been trying to get across to them from the start of their journey – that following Jesus to the kingdom meant being with him in his humiliation, suffering, and death. In my mind, Jesus had every right to blast his disciples at this point. “What’s wrong with you guys?” he could have asked. “Haven’t you been paying attention?” “What are you thinking?” Instead, Jesus, the master teacher, calmly repeats the words they had heard before, “Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.” And he adds, “For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

James and John, and all the disciples for that matter, were chasing what the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer later called “cheap grace.” While in a Nazi prison, Bonhoeffer wrote that “cheap grace is the grace

that we bestow on ourselves.” It is a practice of Christianity that seeks the glory of salvation while avoiding the cross. But lest we become too critical of the disciples, we need to acknowledge that we too can fall into the trap of chasing “cheap grace.” We can be lured into seeking salvation through self-serving, superficial acts of personal piety rather than by following the teachings and example of Jesus. Holy Scripture repeatedly shows us the way to salvation. The Prophet Micah wrote in Chapter 6 that the Lord wants only that we act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus says the kingdom is prepared for those who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the incarcerated. And in today’s Gospel from Mark, Jesus calls on us to serve one another as he serves us all. The way to holiness is not piety, but service, focusing on the needs of others, not on ourselves.

Following the teachings and example of Jesus does not shield us from suffering. It oftentimes involves suffering. We may not have to die a cruel death like the Servant of Isaiah’s prophesy or like Jesus, but serving others makes us vulnerable, and we could very well suffer as a result. Those we try to serve may reject us. Others may call us foolish or naive. But no amount of suffering, whether physical or emotional, should ever deter us from following Jesus. We may stumble and we may fall as the disciples did. After all, we are all human. But as Saint Paul wrote in our second reading, Jesus was human too. He understands our weaknesses. He forgives our failures. He helps us up when we stumble and fall, and he helps us do what we are called to do.

This month the Church is beginning a new process of discerning its mission – what it is called to do. This process is called a Synod. Pope Francis opened Synod 2021-2023 last weekend in Rome. It is being opened at the diocesan level all over the world today. The opening mass for our diocese is taking place at

St. Patrick Cathedral at 9:30 a.m. today. With this Synod, Pope Francis is inviting the entire church to journey together on a path of listening, reflection, and conversion. Pray for the success of our Synod. Watch for announcements, and participate where you can.