

**Good Friday**  
**25/03/05**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 52:13-53:12**  
**Psalm 22**  
**Hebrew 4:14-16**  
**John 18:1-19:42**

### **Here is my servant**

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One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a novel in which the suffering and virtual death of the main character brings about redemption from futility for numerous others. The story takes place in a mental hospital. The hero, Randall McMurphy, played by Jack Nicholson in the film of the book, is a tough, outspoken, fun-loving Irishman who is serving a prison sentence. Sick of hard work on the prison farm he feigns insanity in order to have a quieter and easier life in a mental hospital. He is committed and placed in a ward run by Nurse Ratched, a tyrant whose administration is comparable to a precision-made machine. In this efficient environment the needs the inmates run a poor second to the convenience of Nurse Ratched. Her policies are petty and demeaning, and lead to conformity and erosion of human dignity. Nurse Ratched represents the status quo - normality - the sanity of the establishment and all who hold authority. The hospital, supposedly regulated and normal, comes to symbolise the crazy mixed up world we live in. In contrast McMurphy, though regarded as insane, comes to symbolise courage, humanity and the affirmation of personal worth. In other words - the sheer decency of what it means to be a real human.

The plot begins in fun. McMurphy play tricks and jokes on Nurse Ratched to deflate her ego and destabilize her super efficient administration. He notices his fellow patients live in abnormal fear of her and tries to cut her down to size. The more he tries, the more it is taken as evidence that he is insane. Nurse Ratched determines to cure him of his behaviour, and what started as fun becomes deadly serious. Further into the story McMurphy is astonished to discover that most of his fellow patients are in the ward of their own volition. He simply cannot believe that ordinary human beings would voluntarily submit themselves to such dehumanisation. From then on McMurphy decides to convince his fellow patients that it is their loss of will that is involved, not their supposed insanity or abnormality. But Nurse Ratched has all the trump cards. She convinces the doctors McMurphy is so obstreperous that he should be given shock treatment, and when this fails to curtail his behaviour, she persuades the physicians to give him a frontal lobotomy. The operation is unsuccessful and McMurphy is left a helpless vegetable, as good as dead.

The result of McMurphy's suffering is that the lives of the patients on the ward are changed. When he first arrived they were apathetic and docile - tired of fighting Nurse Ratched. McMurphy showed his fellow inmates a new style of life. One that reflected authentic human living - a spirit not cowed by authority but a life with vivacity, freedom and joy. The more the inmates see of McMurphy's strong and generous spirit the less they are willing to go along with the institutionalised insanity of the ward. At the end of the novel Nurse Ratched is finished, her tyrannical rule defeated. Patient after patient leaves. Some are transferred to other wards but most of them go off determined to re-establish their lives in the real world, raised up by the spirit of McMurphy.

This is a haunting story, and so is the image of the suffering servant in Isaiah. It may seem trivial to place the two alongside one another but the depth of the Isaiah passage calls for some analogy in our world as a way into its meaning.

So accustomed are we to hearing the fourth Servant Song in this setting that it seems clear to us that it is an explicit reference, before time, to the work and ministry of Jesus Christ. Whether the Servant was one person or the people of Israel does not really matter. For the servant's faithfulness against all perceivable odds is what we have to see, and an individual or a community can accomplish this.

The fourth Servant Song was most probably written amongst people in exile, and reflected part of a profound spiritual search for an answer to the question of how the tragic pattern of sin and punishment affecting the people could be broken and replaced by wholeness, resulting from a renewed experience of a compassionate God. For the Prophet, the central tragedy of Israel's history was the refusal to obey God's will, leading to a web of sin and destruction that affected the offenders and subsequent generations. Although priests performed atoning sacrifices and prophets preached repentance and judgement, the pattern persisted. Isaiah's solution revolves around the figure of the Servant of the Lord whose surrender to God's will was so total that he took the consequences of the sin of the community upon himself, even though he himself was innocent of wrong. He was a faithful remnant whose service, like the Lamb of the Passover, delivered them all into a new relationship with God.

The remarkable thing is that the suffering of the Servant was not tragic fate, or suffering undergone through pathetic resignation. Isaiah says: he poured himself out to death. His was a service chosen and willed to the higher purposes of God who used his innocence, his commitment to a vision of God's righteousness, and his defiance of all human cowardice, to atone for the sin of the people through an act which otherwise could be regarded as a perversion of justice. This involved the life and death of one who was closest to the heart of God. But, paradoxically, it was the ingloriousness of the Servant which expressed the glory of God, whose sole aim was to recapture the hearts of the people.

In the servant's death defying commitment he ultimately does not lose his life. Instead he redefines the nature of life as light that breaks through the darkness, as forgiveness that destroys the bondage in which the people have for so long been held. It was through his obedience that the servant became the human vehicle through which others were healed. By his death he was raised up, and the mystery that is so hard to plumb in the passage is that he took others with him.

The imagery of this passage is arresting. It is so new and different from previously held ideas about the presence and power of God people are driven beyond the limits of their imaginative powers - kings and nations shut their mouths. What happens in and through the servant runs against the grain of human reason, but in him was found to be the presence of God, atoning for the sins of the world in the life of a lowly and despised human being whose ugliness is the antithesis of the beauty normally associated with holiness, and otherwise admired by the world.

From the time of Abraham Israel's true calling was to be a blessing to the nation. In Babylon, without a king, a temple or a promised land, this blessing had to be carried by another. The image of the Servant who accomplished God's purposes through gentleness, not force, was the one the prophet offered. The gentleness of this one defeated the violence of his opponents. Because the Servant in Isaiah offers such a dramatic alternative to worldly understandings of power, persecuted communities have

found in this image a model which gave them a reason for living, and enabled them to remain steadfast in faith, even in times of extreme trial. By the Servant's alternative power friends of peace have been enabled to resist militarism, people have spoken for the superiority of patience over aggression, of wisdom over self-assertion, and of love over hate. By this means the suffering servant has given understanding to many, enabling them to reclaim the path to righteousness, and raised them up to live a new life. All of this flows from a core set of images which fits so easily with the central symbol of today, the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is right that it stands before us always, and that today we focus on it, venerate it, and take to heart afresh. For in this do we find a concrete image of the power of God's ways with us, and what it cost God to show us the way.