

**Isaiah 52:13-53:12**

**Psalm 130**

**John 11:1-26**

**Sin-sick**

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*In a sentence*

*God's promise is that all that which limits us – spiritually, physically, politically – will be healed; until that time, faithful living bears what is not right in the world and looks forward to God's fulfilment of this promise.*

There is a lot going on in our reading from Isaiah this morning, only a small part of which we'll be able to address closely in this time together.

We begin by picking up something we noted a couple of weeks ago. This is the 'flicker' the prophet allows around the identity of the 'Servant' who features in the readings we have been considering over the last month. We saw how the Servant is sometimes the people – 'Servant Israel' – and sometimes an individual distinct from the people but nevertheless deeply connected to them – the 'Saviour-Servant'.

We can detect hints of this again in today's text. If we replace the pronouns which appear to refer to the individual Saviour-Servant so that they now refer to Israel, we get the following from one section of the passage:

<sup>53.2</sup> For [Israel] grew up before [the LORD] like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
[It] had no form or majesty that we should look at [it],  
nothing in [its] appearance that we should desire [it].  
<sup>3</sup> [Israel] was despised and rejected by others;  
a [people] of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces.  
[Israel] was despised, and we held [it] of no account.

This 'works' as an account of Israel's own experience: a people chosen for no value it had in itself other than God's own call to it, a people raised up out of nothing, a people overrun, afflicted and dismissed by the nations.

We noted last time how this flickering from the Saviour-Servant to Servant Israel is important for Isaiah and also, ultimately, for our understanding of how God works with us in Jesus.

I bring this to mind again because there is another important 'flickering' in today's reading: between illness and disease on the one hand, and sin and unrighteousness on the other.

Verse 4 in today's translation (NRSV) ran,

<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.

But, in a modern Jewish translation, the text reads:

<sup>4</sup> Yet it was our *sickness* that he was bearing,  
Our suffering that he endured.  
We accounted him *plagued*,  
Smitten and afflicted by God (JPS Tanakh translation)

Those who know this passage well ‘know’ that it is about how the sin of the people is overcome by the afflictions of the Saviour-Servant: ‘he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors’ (53.12). Yet there is a flickering here between the suffering from disease and the suffering brought about by guilt and transgression which is also present in the fuller passage.

We are greatly tempted to read the reference to sickness and plague as ‘metaphorical’. This is the way many modern translations prefer to slant the references to ‘disease’. But why exactly do we do this?

One reason is that we reject – rightly, and with the righteous sufferer Job – any notion that illness and suffering are reliable indications of personal sin. Against this, we hold that a person must not be reduced to what happens to her; that the sick person does not ‘deserve’ to be sick *because of* her sin.

And yet here in Isaiah sickness is at least a ‘sign’ of sin – something which appears where we might expect sin to appear.

Perhaps another reason we treat sickness as ‘only’ a metaphor for sin is that we hold physical illness to be more ‘real’ or tangible than sin – almost *too* bodily to stand for sin. Yet the text does not hesitate here. Isaiah flicks happily between sickness and sin as if they were the same *kind* of problem, as if the one had something to do with the other.

Of course if this *is* what Isaiah is doing then it matters for us here and now, quite directly and existentially. For today we ‘gather’ remotely for the first time on account of a plague which has fallen on the world. Reading this text in *this* context, we have to ask, ‘Has the Servant’s being ‘wounded for our *transgressions*, crushed for our *iniquities*’ (v5) got anything to do with the suffering that afflictions like COVID-19 (or any other plague) bring?’

The answer to this question would have to be ‘No’ if disease and sin are ‘only metaphorically’ related in this passage. If illness is merely ‘borrowed’ as an analogy to illuminate what it means to be a *sinner* and is not really about the meaning of *sickness* before God, then what the Saviour-Servant experiences has very little to do with what COVID-19 might do to us. For if the biblical text will not allow it, our modern minds *certainly* won’t allow that the unhappy accident of a new virus springing from genetic mutation has anything to do with sin.

But hesitation to bring sin and sickness at least into ‘dialogue’ with one another requires that we do a violence to ourselves. It requires that we separate what ails us ‘physically’ from what ails us ‘spiritually’. It tempts us to imagine that we can be ‘fixed up’ spiritually even as we still suffer physically, because sin and sickness are cast as problems in different unconnected parts of *ourselves*. A common manifestation of this way of thinking is talk about the ‘now-and-not-yet’ nature of our salvation: the ‘now’ is that God already forgives us completely (‘spiritually’) and the ‘not-yet’ is that our health or mortality or even our politics lag behind in the process, still to be ‘fixed’.

Yet the Scriptures will not divide us into ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical’ like that. If the ‘physical’ is incomplete or still ailing, so also is the ‘spiritual’. Instead of ‘now-and-not-yet’ the Scriptures tend more towards ‘not-yet, *and yet...*’ (to which we’ll return in a moment).

What holding sin and sickness together might speak to us is that, if we continue to be afflicted by plagues, so we continue to be afflicted by sin. If we continue to sin, so we continue to be afflicted by plagues. This is not to say that the one ‘causes’ the other. Abstractions of cause and effect are not the point here. The point *is* that the human being is a spiritual and physical *whole*. If we dare to separate out the spirit or the soul for a moment, whatever happens to it happens to the body, and vice-versa. Letting illness ‘stand’ for sin, and sin ‘stand’ for illness, keeps us *whole*, even in our alienation from the fullness of life.

It is this wholeness – or its absence – which most deeply ails us. We are divided. We can treat the interior while the exterior suffers or decays; we can treat the exterior while the interior languishes. We can favour the now at the expense of the future; we can languish in the now for a future which may never come. We would have to say that it seems impossible not to divide ourselves against ourselves in this way.

And this division *within* ourselves flickers back and forth with the division *between* ourselves and God. This brings us to the heart of the work of God’s Servant in Isaiah.

The Saviour-Servant in Isaiah reveals the ‘not-yet, and yet’ of living faithfully in a world of divisions. His afflictions are the ‘not-yet’, whether in sickness and disease or in being abused by others. In sickness he is divided from himself; in oppression he is divided from common humanity. The world is not *right*, and the Servant’s experience is evidence of this.

But his *posture* in this suffering is the ‘*and yet*’: ‘This *is* ghastly, *and yet* I still know who is God’. This *is* pain, *and yet* it is not the end of all things. This *is* rejection, *and yet* God embraces me. This now *is* the not-yet, *and yet* God’s tomorrow is coming.

The triumph of Isaiah’s Servant is not what God does with the Servant’s faithfulness but his very faithfulness itself. Infected by the sin-sick world, he is brought to death. But he dies denying that death is the last word, affirming that division from self and other will be overcome, affirming that he will be – in God – whole.

The miracle is that God takes the Servant’s faithfulness and makes it our own.

In the same way Jesus dies on a cross, the lines of which divide the world horizontally and vertically. Signalling our division from each other and from God in this way, the cross becomes the final word about our condition: separation left and right, up and down, within and without. This is as ‘not-yet’ as any talk about wholeness and reconciliation could be; such things are not even in sight.

*And yet.* And yet the miracle is that God takes the dividing lines of the cross and makes of them a sign of God’s power to create from nothing. God makes of Jesus’ outstretched arms a span which holds together what the ‘horizontal’ divisions between us separate. God makes of the stretch between the crown of thorns and the nail in Jesus’ feet a span holding together the ‘vertical’ division between us and God.

In this way, as with the Servant, God makes a *reconciliation* of Jesus’ own faithful ‘and yet’ in the face of all of which afflicted him. For Lent is the ‘not yet, and yet’ of Jesus.

This righteous one – the Servant of God, makes many righteous (v.11) – by carrying our disease and bearing our iniquity, by identifying with us in an intercession which prays, ‘Yes God, they are sin and disease, *and yet...*’

Praise be to God that the prayer of the Servant is heard.

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