

Passion Sunday  
5/4/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:13-53:13

Psalm 31

Matthew 27:11-26

The God of COVID 19

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*In a sentence*

*Nothing is outside of God's power to be used to reveal God's nature as love for us, even what is evil.*

If someone were to assert that God caused COVID-19 and the crushing effect it is having around the world, the obvious response of God's good people would likely be a very strong, *No*.

Let us then consider another similar proposal, the response to which is a little less obvious because it is made by the prophet Isaiah in our text today: '...it was the will of the LORD to crush [the Servant] with pain...' (v10; cf. 4f).

There is no getting around the assault of this verse on our modern sensibilities, and probably not just modern ones. What has such divine sadism to do with 'the God of love' we believe we know from elsewhere? Must we not reject Isaiah here for *God's* sake? For this is surely more than any theology of divine compassion can accommodate.

And yet this confronting assertion, and the tone of the whole the passage (and of several of the other Servant Songs), is there on the scriptural page and features historically as a significant key to the interpretation of the passion of the Christ (This text is, for example, set for Good Friday each year in the Revised Common lectionary).

It is too easy, then, simply to dismiss Isaiah here because we do not understand him. We must ask, Does this text understand anything which we don't, yet? Likely it does.

To reject the text for the reasons just acknowledged would be to miss the relationships which are in play here – in the first instance, the general relationship between a god and its people.

We have noted before (particularly in the [first sermon](#)) that a central theme in this second half of Isaiah is the absolute sovereignty of the God of Israel over all things. This leads to a central conundrum in Scripture: how can the people Israel be so thoroughly crushed if its God is proclaimed as all powerful? Gods and their people are usually related in such a way that a god's power is shown in the *prosperity* of its people. If a people is decimated – as was the people Israel – its god is proven to be weak, or nothing (see, for example, the tensions in Ezekiel 20.8f, 14, 22 and 36.22f, 32, as well as Isaiah 48.9-11)? The gods are, after all, generally a making-divine of ourselves. The humiliation of the people is the humiliation of their god. How can Israel's God be sovereign when Israel is dragged away into exile?

The only resolution of this is the one the Scriptures take up: if God *is* sovereign, and has a Servant, and then the Servant of God is crushed, this must be because God 'caused' the crushing – even *willed* that it be so. It may seem to us a perverted logic – and we use the word 'cause' very carefully here – but nothing else will make sense of the situation if God has no rivals and yet God's people suffer. (We might think here of God's

permitting that the righteous Job suffer – Satan has to ask permission of God to afflict Job). Is God powerless to prevent the suffering of the people under, say, the Assyrians or the Babylonians? All the prophets cry, *No*: the Assyrians and the Babylonians are tools in God's hand.

On the face of it, this is harsh, at the very least.

And yet a miracle unfolds out of it. In fact it is *the* miracle of the Scriptures. It is the miracle of the creation itself, the miracle of the Exodus and the Restoration from exile, the miracle of the Resurrection. There is a miracle here because gods should *die* with their people. The story of Israel's God should have ended in the sixth century BC. The crushing end of the Servant should be the crushing end of the Servant's God. Yet this God 'survives' the death of the Servant in rejection, exile, and crucifixion.

It is, however, a survival *through* death. For even this God is not immune to death. God, too, 'dies' – ceases to be God – when the Servant is lost, in the peculiar way that a father ceases to be a father when his son dies, and a wife ceases to be a wife when her husband dies. In this sense, the *relationship* between God and the Servant *is* God, so that the end of the Servant is the end of God.

*And yet*. This. Is. No. Ordinary. God. (Is perhaps not 'a god' at all). The 'and yet' – as we saw last week – is the heart of the matter: *and yet*, God comes *through* this death.

What does 'coming through' or 'surviving' death mean for God? It means that whatever God was *before* the death of the Servant, God still is *now*, after that death. It means that if God *had* a Servant – and this 'having' of a Servant was *integral* to who God is – then God must *still* have a Servant. This is the meaning of any talk of 'resurrection' of God's Servant. Something like a resurrection of the Servant is hinted at in Isaiah – although the text is quite opaque here and resurrection is not really an Old Testament concept – and resurrection is, of course, central to Christian confession about Jesus. (For the possible 'resurrection' of Isaiah's Servant, contrast 'tomb' in v.9 with v.11 'he shall see light and v.12 'he shall divide the spoil').

But resurrection-talk refers us now not merely to God's 'power' to undo death – a 'trick' God manages against nature – but to God's very being. The Servant is as much raised for *God's* sake as for the sake of the one raised. In fact, we can be stronger here – the Servant is raised for *God's* sake, *period*. The dead have no 'sake', no desires, no lack; this is what 'dead' means. Resurrection is no *reward* for righteous suffering, no compensation for a hard life. Resurrection is a gathering to God, a 'completion' of God according to God's own plan. Gods die when their servant peoples are lost. This God is no different, except that *this* God rises again, and therefore *we* must rise.

We can put this in classical trinitarian terms by saying that the Father cannot continue to be the Father after the crucifixion if the Son is not restored to life. In fact we can see now that the doctrine of the Trinity is a way of answering the question of the Old Testament: How is it possible that God can lose God's Servant – that God can, in that way, *die* – *and yet* continue to be God?

It is, then, not that God 'can' raise the dead but that God 'must' raise the dead – or at least *one* of them – *if God is to remain Godself*. The absolute sovereignty of God is not abstract free power (whatever that would actually be) but the power to be what God has promised to be and so '*is*' – the God of *this* Servant.

Let us pause for a moment to notice what has happened. With a bit more insight into the theological dynamic with which Isaiah is working, we have moved from what, on the face of it, is the *ghastly* proposal that God ‘willed’ the suffering of the Servant, to the resurrection gospel.

In view of all this, we might reconsider our opening assertion, now as a question: Did God cause the coronavirus and the crushing effect it is having around the world? The answer now *might* be not an unqualified ‘No’ but, ‘Maybe, depending on how “big” we think God is, and on how “small” we think God is’. This is because Isaiah’s God is so *big* that only God could ‘cause’ such pain to God’s own Servant, and is so *small* that the suffering and death of the Servant is God’s own suffering and death.

*Selah*

We can – and must – push further by asking how *we ourselves* are caught up in the good news of the God-Servant relationship. What has what happens between God and God’s Servant got to do with what is happening between God and us, now? Put differently, how are we related to God’s Servant, that *we* might be healed, as the Servant is? This hinges on the *identity* of the Servant, an identity which is built out of two relationships.

The first relationship is that between the Servant and God. This is what we’ve just been considering: the *inextricable mutuality* of God and God’s Servant, to the extent that the one is lost without the other.

The second relationship which forms the identity of the Servant is that between the Saviour-Servant and Servant Israel. This is the ‘flickering’ we have seen between the *one* who is the Saviour-Servant and the *many* who are Servant Israel. This flickering is not an imprecision around the Servant’s identity but *constitutes* it. If we ask ‘which’ of the two Servants is crushed according to the will of God, the answer has to be ‘both’, or the one *in* the other. If we ask which of the children of God is hung on the cross, the (capital C) Child or all the children of Israel – even all humanity – the answer is ‘both’. The Saviour-Servant ‘points to’ Servant Israel and vice versa; Jesus ‘points to’ us, and we to him. This pointing-to is a mutual ‘containment’: we are within each other. What does God see when looking at Jesus? Us. And what does God see when looking at us? Jesus.

To ‘believe’ in *this* God is to hold that, in the end, God cannot tell which of the Servants – the Saviour or the People – God is addressing. As Christ was once hidden in our humanity, and God’s address to him was God’s address to us, so now are we hidden in Christ’s humanity.

The hope of the church is that when God looks at us and looks at God’s righteous Servant, he cannot tell us apart. Our hope is that when God raises the one God loves in order to raise herself, God raises the many – *even us*: one for all, all in one.

*Selah*

What does this mean for our impious question, ‘Did God cause the coronavirus and the crushing effect it is having around the world?’? On Isaiah’s terms, as we have unpacked them, and *only* – *ONLY* – on those terms, we might have to answer not a strong ‘No’, not a cautious ‘Maybe...’ but – in fear and trembling – ‘We *hope so*’.

For *this* to be our hope is to say that our hope is in a God whose future is a future *with us*, and in a God who has *no* rivals – not even death itself. Faced with what is insurmountable, our only hope is a God who takes all obstacles and threats – even death – into Godself, and does this in such a way as to become the source and goal of all things, even these.

To declare, as we did a couple of weeks ago, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God, is not to say merely that God blasts away all threats but that all such things are *taken up* by God and worked towards God's healing purposes.

This does not change the suffering of God's servants, righteous or unrighteous; we might still be crushed with pain. The 'not yet' remains.

*And yet*, the God we have described is a God with us, even 'by' us, and in all things *for* us: a God so small as to suffer all things with us, a God so large as to make *all* things God's own, so large as to make all things – even great suffering – means of bringing us home.

To talk of a resurrection wrought by this God, then, is not merely to look forward to a happy release from all which binds us. It is to expect to look *back* and see that, from the beginning to the end, as cause and purpose, God was in everything with us all the way along.

Let us, then, open our eyes, that – from the perspective of a Servant crucified and risen – we might begin to see this, even now in all this.

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