

Easter Meditation
Good Friday
2022

As we come to the Lord's Table on this day, we meditate on the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, which makes this table possible. Today I want to draw attention to Isaiah's vision of this event, found in what is called the Servant Passage of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, which is one of the most quoted passages in the New Testament relating to our Saviour's death.

To begin with, what makes this passage so extraordinary, is the breadth of Isaiah's vision with regard to Jesus' death. No other book or writer in the Old Testament comes even near to the revelation that Isaiah gives us here. And so, in considering this passage, it is as if we have come into the throne room of God himself, as he planned Jesus' death from the foundations of the world, as Peter puts it at 1 Peter 1:18-21 – "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him, you believe in God, who raised him from the dead, and glorified him, so that your faith and hope are in God."

In the Book of Isaiah, the fourth Servant Song is the most elaborate and poignant of them all. It is the jewel in the crown of Isaiah's theology, and the focal point of his vision. Here the servant is the key to Israel's failure, for she is but blind and deaf, and yet at the same time, the Servant here is self-effacing, for in this song, he never utters a word. He is as silent as a lamb (53:7). His presence is powerful, but it is others who bear witness to Him, and not He himself. And the first witness at 52:13 is the Lord God himself: "See, my Servant will act wisely." This first stanza is in a sense a summary of the entire Song. Further, it begins with the Servant's exaltation, in words that describe Isaiah's vision of the Lord as "high and lifted up" at Isaiah 6:1. The reason for beginning in this way is that the kings of the nations will finally come to an understanding of the appalling nature of Christ's suffering at the Cross. Such suffering will reverse the fortunes of humankind, as Christ becomes both priest and sacrifice, in sprinkling the nations with his blood. Kings themselves will be silenced by the fact that the One whom people regarded as unclean, will turn out to be the One who cleanses others. The wisdom of God displayed in the Servant will utterly confound human wisdom. Then, the next two stanzas at Isaiah 53:1-3, and 4-6, provide a second,

complementary perspective on the Servant. Isaiah 53:1 begins, "Who has believed our message?" The speaker or speakers are now witnesses, or insiders, and no longer outsiders as in the previous verses. They are Israelites who have come to understand the meaning of the Servant's sufferings, and announce it to the world. And it is through their witness that those who had formerly not heard come to see and understand at 52:15. But notice that this witness now assumes a specific form, related to God's saving power revealed in the suffering, death, and exaltation of the servant. And the witnesses begin by reflecting on their own past attitude to the Servant in 53:1-3. At first, He had shown promise. He had grown up before the Lord as a tender shoot, like a dead plant suddenly springing to life in a wasteland. But that promise did not seem to go anywhere. The more He grew, the less impressive He became. The Hebrew word for "beauty" is used of David at 1 Samuel 16:18, where it is translated "fine-looking." Christ had nothing of the bearing or trappings of royalty. He appeared ordinary, and even unattractive. Further, his course of suffering and rejection only made him less desirable to know. Yet, in verses 4-6, how right, and yet at the same time, how terribly wrong, they had been! Now the witnesses realize that they themselves deserved that suffering and death, for yes, it was God who crushed Him, but it was not because He deserved it. "Surely it was our infirmities that He took up, and our sorrows that He bore." The principle of substitution was not a new thought to the Israelites, as found in the animal sacrifices for sin in the Law of Moses, especially on the great Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, where Israel's sins were also placed upon the head of the scapegoat, and released into the wilderness, but now they could see that the Servant was also "pierced" and "crushed" for their sin (cf. Isaiah 3:15 = God's people). Their peace with God, and healing of their broken relationship with Him, was now secured through the servant's death, at tremendous cost. Then in verses 7-9 a fourth stanza begins, where a lone witness, possibly Isaiah himself, speaks. At his call, back in Isaiah 6, Isaiah was confronted with the holiness of God, and confessed that he was a man of unclean lips, who dwelt in the midst of a people of unclean lips. Immediately he was assured of his own cleansing when a live coal was taken from the altar and touched his lips, with the result that his guilt was atoned for, and his sin was taken away. But what of his fellow-Israelites, given their deep-dyed sinfulness? How could they ever be pardoned without God's holiness being compromised? Now Isaiah sees the solution in verses 7-9, especially at verse 8b. "For the transgression of my people He (the servant) was afflicted." They were like sheep that had gone astray, but the servant, like a lamb, had been slaughtered in their place. Was Isaiah's thinking here influenced by the blood of the unblemished lamb in the Passover festival at Exodus 12, when the angel would see the blood of the unblemished lamb upon the lintels and frames of the

houses, and would pass over? In any case, Isaiah is now the first to align the Servant with the slain lamb, and this figure is only found again at John 1:29 in the New Testament, as well as at 1 Peter 1:19, 1 Corinthians 5:7, as well as in the book of Revelation. Finally, Jesus was given an unfair trial, and was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich, yet during this whole process, he remained silent, and no deceit was found upon his lips. A most appropriate comment for this section. But, at this point, was his work finished to God's satisfaction or not? The final stanza in verses 10-12 gives us the answer, with a twofold witness from both Isaiah in verses 10-11a, and the Lord himself in verses 11b-12, both affirming the same central truth. From Isaiah's perspective, even though it was the will of the Lord to crush Him, and to make his life a guilt offering for sin, yet this will not be the end of his career. God will place his seal of approval on his work by raising and exalting him, for afterward, He will see the fruit of His sacrifice, and be satisfied. That is, the Servant will accomplish His God-given mission not only by His death, but also by His life beyond death. He will be a new kind of guilt offering that will utterly surpass anything that has gone before. Finally, the Lord's speech at verses 11b -12 takes us back to the very beginning of the song, where the servant's knowledge and wisdom become important for the whole song, for now we learn that it will be by the Servant's knowledge that He will cause many to become righteous. What does this mean? The best commentary on this rather puzzling statement is found at Daniel 12:3 – In fact, we had part of this text inscribed on Cathy's grave. Here we read that "those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the Heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." The wise are those who know their God intimately, and have a profound influence upon others. They become channels by which others find the knowledge and salvation of God, and in this way, they lead many to righteousness. Righteousness, both here and in Isaiah 53, is more than acquittal; it is a new way of life, based on a right relationship with God. And Paul at Romans 3:22-23 says that it comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, for all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. And so the Servant will be a supremely wise person in this sense. He will act wisely; He will know God and His plan intimately; and in this way, He will cause many to become righteous. And so the wisdom of God will be displayed in Him in an unprecedented fashion. But there is still one more image of the Servant for us to relish before the Song is complete. And this is found in verse 12. The servant will return from His mission like a King and a Warrior, laden with spoil. His weakness will turn to strength, his dishonour into honour, his defeat into victory. The one who was despised and rejected, will take the highest place, the place of a conqueror. And all of this would only be possible, because he walked the path of the cross, by pouring out his life unto

death, and as such, was numbered with the transgressors, quoted by Luke at Luke 22:37. In this way, He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. This last comment about Jesus' intercession might refer to Jesus' prayer at Luke 23:34, when he prayed, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." But it also might refer to Hebrews 7:25 where Jesus as the permanent and perfect High Priest continues His life of intercession on earth for sinners, now in the light of the cross. In this sense, He is now able to save completely those who come to God through Him, for as with his prayer for Peter at Luke 22:31-32, Jesus continues to pray for us, that our faith might not fail.

Conclusion:-

Many facets of the Servants character are revealed in this Song, which has inspired many, and inspires us today. In this Song, Jesus wears seven mantles. He is Sage, priest, sacrifice, servant, sufferer, conqueror, and intercessor. In Him the holiness and mercy of God are perfectly reconciled. He is the key to all God's plans, for all the world, which merits today the words of the Hymn-Writer – "In the Cross of Christ I glory, towering over the wrecks of time, all the themes of sacred story, gather around His head sublime." Praise be God for his most precious gift given for us today.