

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The Servant's Humiliation and Vindication

⁴ The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

⁷ The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
⁸ he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
⁹ It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

John 13:21-32

Jesus Foretells His Betrayal

²¹ After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. ²³ One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; ²⁴ Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Two very significant readings. Isaiah prophecies how it will be for the Messiah. At a time when expectations of a warrior king, like David, were beginning to grow, Isaiah speaks from God about the nature of his Servant - the humble suffering servant of God.

We can understand from our knowledge of what happened to Jesus, that this suffering servant and Jesus the Messiah are one and the same.

God had given him the tongue of a teacher to tell others what his listening ear has heard from God - and it is because of this mission the servant suffers.

Yet He is not rebellious to those who insult and strike him. He bears it "like flint."

He is not disgraced, he is not shamed, because God vindicates him, and ultimately the servant says, "It is the Lord God who helps me."

A powerful prophecy of Jesus during his passion.

But on this Wednesday in Holy week, the worst is yet to come, and it begins at this last supper Jesus has with his friends.

In John's gospel we hear of Jesus' humility shown as he washes the disciples' feet. John gives us no account of the symbolic giving of bread and wine - possibly because his account is addressed to congregations who know this part of the story from the other gospels.

But he does record so much of Jesus' last words to his disciples - "the last discourses."

He predicts his death again; he predicts his betrayer - which horrifies his disciples.

After the incident in our Bible reading John records how Jesus comforts his disciples with words about the coming Holy Spirit, the wonderful picture of Jesus the true vine, and gives hints of the coming time for his disciples when the world will hate them, when he prays for them and all believers, before they go out to the garden of Gethsemane. Read chapters 13 -17 of John, sometime this week.

But back to our passage we hear of this intimate moment with Judas whom Jesus must have known was the betrayer, and yet he shared bread with him, a mark of respect.

Had Judas previously also taken bread and wine of Jesus' life and death too?

Betrayal of this kind is one we can all recognise as a terrible crime, and a sin.

How could Judas, who had seen what Jesus did for others, having heard what he taught about a loving God, still plot to deliver him into the hands of those who wanted to get rid of him?

There are loads of questions.

Did Judas do it for the money?

Or to create a situation where he thought Jesus would have to gloriously inaugurate this kingdom he talked about. Did he do it to stop a rebellion that, after Palm Sunday, could look like it was going to happen.

Jesus was human, so it must have been God who revealed to Jesus something of what was going to happen. But, as someone who understood people very well, he would have noticed little things that indicated Judas was uneasy, edgy perhaps, not relating to the others very well. But Jesus does not try to dissuade Judas's protest or run away.

And it's almost as if Jesus' humility and God's patience comes to the fore, giving Judas permission to do what he has to do, as he says quietly to him – "Do quickly what you are going to do."

Then the most devastatingly suitable words in the gospels:
"and it was night."

John talks a lot about light and darkness in his gospel and these words are symbolic as well as physical of the darkness outside.

Judas' betrayal wasn't the only one in that 24 hour period. Peter let Jesus down by not admitting he knew the man, Pilate betrayed Jesus when he, with many doubts, condemned Jesus to death.

Betrayal takes many forms; we let people down, we sometimes do not show we are Christians, or stand up for God's standards in everyday life. Sometimes, when we are angry or disappointed, we blame God for our situation. It can be a "dark night-time."

Unlike Judas, however, we can know that through the pain, suffering and crucifixion, the light of God's forgiveness and love shines through, and we can walk in the light of Easter day.

[Janet Lawrence]