

We have become used to what is called the 'ghost writer' who listens to the thoughts and ideas of a would-be author – often writing an autobiography – and turns them into the sort of written work which the author would not have been able to accomplish. This is uncannily similar to much of the work which became accepted as our scriptures: both the Old and New Testaments are extensively made up of oral (spoken) tradition, passed on by word of mouth and eventually written down.

It is probable that the books of the Prophets were also written down not by the prophets themselves but by scribes who either became disciples of the prophets or were employed to write down what the prophets said. Jeremiah, for instance, uses Baruch, who in turn becomes a prophet himself, to write down what he has to say, and in the case of Jeremiah and several others of

the prophets, relevant parts of the prophet's life story are written down too.

In other cases, we can see that there is more than one hand – and sometimes more than one prophet – at work. This is the case with Isaiah, where we see at least three different sections from identifiably different periods, and with styles that vary considerably from one another.

During Holy Week, it has been a tradition – for obvious reasons – for the focus to fall on the second of these Isaiah figures, the one known as Second Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah: Is 40-55), simply because his work thrown so much light on the theme of suffering.

In my address on Sunday I referred briefly to how the prophets of Israel had begun to point the way to a New Covenant, and how we Christians see that New Covenant finding its fulfilment in Jesus. The evidence in

Second Isaiah places him with the people in exile in Babylon. So there is no Temple, and the people are not able to serve the LORD in the way they wish to, though ironically the prophets see their failure to serve the LORD properly when they could, as being a reason for the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Exile.

Second Isaiah picks up on the suffering of the people and speaks of the way in which God suffers with them, introducing what will become in later history the very common theme of redemption through suffering. It makes sense of what the people are going through, and it also gives them hope. And in four separate passages he offers a suffering figure as the one who will redeem Israel and bring them back to God.

These passages are known as the Songs of the Suffering Servant, and they are very familiar to us. Here are some well-known passages: *'He will not cry or lift up his voice,*

*or make it heard on the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.'* (Is 42.2-4) *'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations; that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'* (Is 49.6) *'The LORD God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word... 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. 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; he who vindicates me is near.'* (Is 50.4-8a)

*‘See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals – so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.’ (Is 52.13-15) ‘All we like sheep had gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ (Is 53.6) ‘He bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.’ (Is 53.12b)*

All of this is actually quite revolutionary in prophetic terms. Prophets, whose job was to speak the truth coming from God, would criticise and praise, set forth the prospect of future triumph or tragedy, and would

also have a good moan about the way they were being treated, but these Servant Songs are strikingly different. Several centuries later, they would still form a striking and unexpected image when used of Jesus in the gospel writings. It’s obvious that Jesus knew his way around the Hebrew scriptures, and when presenting himself as the Messiah he *could* have drawn on much of the later imagery surrounding judgement and glory from the tradition of the prophets, or indeed the more colourful imagery from apocalyptic writings, yet he chose to major on the suffering theme. Often to the dismay of his disciples, he persists in teaching that the Christ must suffer, and to their greater horror, he lives out this theme of redemption through suffering as he goes to the cross.

I think it is true to say that we are still horrified by suffering. To some extent we have ‘tamed’ the Passion

through meditations, writing and teaching, and through the imagery we use. To some, the artwork by the noted Welsh artist John Selway that we exhibited in Saint Michael's, Abertillery, which depicts appalling modern-day events causing human suffering in the key of the Passion events – to some it was several steps too far, for it is openly horrifying to look at, yet what Jesus actually underwent was vile and inhuman, and cannot I think be overstated, even if it can sometimes seem too much for us to take in.

In this age, when we kid ourselves that we have gone a long way toward eliminating suffering, it is even more something that we shrink from. In the final years of Pope John Paul II we saw this once fine and strapping figure reduced to a spectacle through Parkinson's Disease, yet he saw his suffering as a witness to his suffering Master, and accepted and endured it gladly –

indeed it is one of the aspects of his ministry for which he was canonised.

Suffering is one of those negative aspects that are symptoms of the deep sickness in the world often described (as I mentioned yesterday) as Original Sin. It is thus not to be sought out, and it is our duty to try and alleviate it in others. In Jesus, though, and illuminated by the figure of the Suffering Servant, we can see how to embrace inevitable suffering and bring not just any good but the greatest good from it – the redemption from sin and suffering and the new life that takes us beyond the limitation of sin.

Pointless suffering is one thing those people who support Dignity in Dying seek to end, and I have a great deal of sympathy with them. But the example of Jesus, and countless others, suggests that we have it in ourselves to make necessary suffering meaningful and

even redemptive – to change lives through suffering, and perhaps even our own. This can be a way in which we participate in the sufferings of Jesus.

I'll conclude this evening with the reflection on Christ's suffering from 1Peter 2.21b-25, sometimes known as the New Testament Song of the Suffering Servant, and as it's a song I will sing it in the setting by the late Father Alan Rees.

'Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips; when he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but he trusted in him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed, for you were straying

like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.'

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