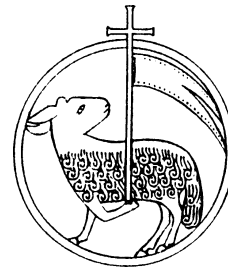


ancestors, the unending depravities which punctuate the behaviour of mankind down the ages and our own personal rebellions. Sin hurts mankind, yes, but above all it offends God: we creatures repudiating God! But God is Love. “Christ for our sake became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Wherefore God has highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name.” (*Phil. 2: 8-9*).

And our part? It was to this God called you, for Christ himself suffered for you and left you an example, so that you would follow in his steps. (*1 Peter 2: 19, 24*). We are to be suffering servants, showing to the world a self-sacrificing love which will bring hope to those who weep. Are we light to the nations, bringing true justice but at the same time not breaking the bent reed? Does the way we live show others what God is like? Do we accept suffering for doing what is right trusting that God will vindicate us in his own way and in his own time (maybe after our death)? Are we content to be despised, to suffer for the sins of others without complaint? Do we stand by those who need love and those who are broken hearted? Do we show love to those who despitely use us and forgive them from our hearts? Do we give a cup of cold water, a cup of tea, a loving look or word to those in need, or do we pass by on the other side? If we are the servants of the Suffering Servant it is our duty to do these things; the servant is not greater than his master, and even if we do all our tasks faithfully we must account ourselves merely unprofitable servants.

But thanks to the loving and generous heart of our Lord who laid down his life for his friends, we are accounted his friends and the promise is that if we follow our Lord and obey his commandments we, too, will have a share in his glory. After a life of suffering we will again have joy; the suffering is not in vain for the story does not end with Death it ends with Resurrection.



# FAITH

Praying and believing

# ON THE EARTH

## THE SUFFERING SERVANT

God invites all Christians to be the salt and light of the world. St Peter writes “You the chosen race, the King’s priests, the holy nation, God’s own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light.” (*1 Peter 2: 9*). Being a Christian is not something incidental; it is a divine reality that takes root deep in our lives. But we are not given this privilege solely for our own benefit but so that we can share in the work of Christ whom God sent into the world to reconcile all things to himself, making peace by the blood of his cross.

So we learn that the Christian pilgrimage in the world must express itself in a continuous service in all kinds of ways, varying with each person’s circumstances, but always motivated by love of God and love of neighbour. It means setting our hearts and minds on reaching the fulness of love which Jesus Christ showed by dying for us. With this in mind we can perhaps take a look at the Suffering Servant songs found in the book of Isaiah.

The first song is in Chapter 42 verses 1-9. “Here is my servant, whom I strengthen - the one I have chosen, with whom I am pleased - I have filled him with my spirit, and he will bring justice to every nation.” Here God is the speaker introducing his servant. It is a gentle description, which is a surprise because one might have expected the chosen one of God to be all powerful and a conqueror. But no, the servant is to deal gently with weak people and encourage the faint-hearted. “He will not break off a bent reed or put out a flickering lamp.” And it is in this way, not by force, that he will bring true

justice - a teaching that must have been as unexpected in its time as the Sermon on the Mount was later.

There is also the mission of the servant to the world; he is called to "bring light to the nations . . . open the eyes of the blind and set free those who sit in dark prisons." This theme is echoed in the second Servant song in Chapter 49 verses 1-9. The servant cries out "Listen to me, distant nations, you people who live far away! Before I was born, the Lord chose me." The Lord has told him "You are my servant; because of you, people will praise me . . . I will make you a light to the nations - so that all the world may be saved." At the end of this song comes another intimation that God's chosen one will not be as we imagine him to be; "Israel's holy God and saviour says to the one who is deeply despised, who is hated by the nations and is the servant of rulers." The servant who is to be a light to the nations so that they may be saved will be despised and hated by those very nations!

The third song in Chapter 50 verses 4-11 goes further into the meaning of the Suffering Servant. We find unutterable trust in God, and this trust which is put to great testing, but proves triumphant, gives him the ability to understand the suffering of others. "The Sovereign Lord has taught me what to say, so that I can strengthen the weary . . . The Lord has given me understanding, and I have not rebelled." The despised servant accepts the humiliations that are heaped upon him because he knows that "God is near and he will prove me innocent."

Finally we come to the fourth and last song in Chapter 52 verses 31 to Chapter 53 verse 12. It begins "My servant will succeed in his task; he will be highly honoured," and then it goes on to describe a man despised, humiliated and condemned to a shameful death! There is no talk, though, of the servant's sufferings being a punishment from God for his sin; rather they are a cure and it is through him that God wants all to be saved. His sufferings are neither without meaning nor without purpose and God uses them to save

the world. "My devoted servant, with whom O am pleased, will bear the punishment of many and for his sake I will forgive them."

Thus the servant would become, through his sufferings, high priest for the whole world, bearing the punishment of all mankind, "He took the place of many sinners and prayed that they might be forgiven."

Let us reread the opening of this song, "My servant will succeed in his task; he will be highly honoured." That is, the servant will be glorified in recognition of his significance for the world. All the events centring on him can only be understood in the light of their end - suffering leads through to glory which blazes a trail and enables us to follow.

The servant's mission was supremely exemplified at the Incarnation and we have only to look at the events of Jesus' life to see how the prophecies were worked out. At the time of his birth it was foretold of Jesus by Simeon that he would be a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of his people Israel. At his Baptism and Transfiguration God spoke and declared: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." He did the will of his Father, healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind; he was gentle with sinners while castigating the proud and self sufficient; he preached the good news to the poor. But the end of all this was his betrayal, passion and crucifixion; the words used in the songs to describe the Suffering Servant were accurate descriptions of what happened to our Lord. "We despised him and rejected him." - and "We ignored him as if he were nothing. But he endured the sufferings that should have been ours . . . Because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did . . . He was put to death for the sins of our people. He was placed in a grave with evil men, he was buried with the rich, even though he had never committed a crime or ever told a lie."

It was love that held Jesus to the cross. By his sacrifice Jesus gained the victory over sin and evil; the inexplicable evil of the creature whose pride leads him to rise up against God - the fall of our first