

# **Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion**

## **A SERVANT CHURCH**

### **Isaiah 50:4-9a**

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### **Analysis by Bruce T. Martin**

50:4 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. 9a It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

[9b All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. 10 Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts the name of the Lord and relies upon his God? 11 But all of you are kindlers of fire, lighters of firebrands. Walk in the flame of your fire, and among the brands that you have kindled! This is what you shall have from my hand; you shall lie down in torment.]

Author's Note: This third Servant Psalm (vv. 9b-11 is an early

commentary), along with the other three (42:1-9; 49:1-6; and 52:13-53:12), is interpreted here as a series of faithful servants in view of (1) Israel's exile to Babylon and return to the Land c.587-530 BCE; (2) Jesus' messiahship and the Temple's destruction c. 30-70; and (3) Israel's Holocaust and return to the Land c.1933-1948. The twisting theological contours presented by this interpretation, which applies to each of the Servant Psalms, were outlined a few weeks ago in regard to Is 49:1-6, and so will not be repeated here, except in summary: "God is faithful to his Children, both Israel and Church (fulfilling the promise in Gen 12:3), and is continually at work bringing salvation into the world, even now chastising and redeeming us—let the one who has ears to hear listen well!" In this interpretative context, the third Servant Psalm addresses those persons and communities in the Church who trust that God is faithful to his promises, both to Israel and to the Church, even or especially in the face of God's rightful judgment against them. As an address to the Church today, the Servant Psalms call us to accept our servanthood to the world while proclaiming God's judgment against us, in order to make a credible witness to a cruciform Gospel, both to historical Israel and to the world. For their sakes, the burning question to us becomes: *How is this congregation of saints* being conformed to God's unfolding history of salvation?

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Privileging Ourselves against the Promise**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Disgraced***

The Holocaust, in a long line of murderous persecutions, could not have happened without the consent of the Church. The Church disowned Israel almost from the very beginning, and with relentless theological and cultural justifications continued to

scapegoat her until God—at great cost—shocked us into sensibility. Many of us are not yet “awakened” to Israel’s crucifixion for us, not just in the Holocaust but in their entire history. In our “rebellion” against God we deny our sisterhood with her, pretending instead, against the Promise (Gen 12:3), that Israel is passé and that nationalism or individualism trumps the family of God. We, not Israel, are thereby “disgraced” (v. 7; from the Greek root for “shame,” but the English translation here is poetically apt), dis-graced from Israel and from Israel’s God. Our disgrace, however, is only symptomatic of a politically motivated triumphal stance towards religion and society. Even in America, we have yet to take seriously our own calling to servanthood, even as we have failed to recognize the servanthood of Israel.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Asleep**

Our ears, once opened to the Gospel, have not remained open. We have been asleep for so long that we have taken our privilege as children of God, indeed as the body of Christ, for granted. We have forgotten that our ears need to be opened “morning by morning” (v. 4), that is, every day and at every moment. Century by century we have been listening only to ourselves, to a religious chorus of our own composing. We have put ourselves to sleep by our self-indulgences. Enough! Time to be awakened! But of course we could not do *that* ourselves. We needed an act of God—one so horrific that, in its shadow, everything we had done to Israel before then has become an equal nightmare. But it is hard to listen when that very act—by the hand of God—is also God’s judgment upon us! The Church’s unapologetic stance after the war still deafens our ears; but to Israel and the world our sleepy silence is heard loud and clear.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Put to Shame**

The Church, like the “adversaries” (v. 8) who opposed the Lord’s servant, can rightly expect to face the wrath of God as vividly

expressed in vv. 9b and 11. We faced a similar crisis during the Black Death of the 14th and 15th centuries but have learned little. Worse is yet to come! We who have “insulted” (v. 6, another word with the same Greek root for “shame”) God’s servant Israel (vv. 6 and 10) for millennia have ourselves now been “put-to-shame” (v. 7). We may already be facing the demise of our power on the world scene, which may prove to be a blessing “for God’s power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Nonetheless, before God and at the hand of God, being put-to-shame is worse than death itself. The Scriptures know of no stronger word to convey God’s displeasure, and now it is directed to us.

## **PROGNOSIS: Conforming to Christ according to the Promise**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Redemptive Servanthood**

The faithful servant suffers for others (see Isa. 52:13-53:12), *accepting* (vv. 5 and 10) their adversaries’ “insult [shame] and spitting” (v. 6) *as from God himself*. This is the privileged calling for which the servant’s ears are opened, and the basis for a final “vindication” (v. 8) before God. This strange combination of “disgrace [shame]” (v. 7) and “help” (vv. 7 and 9a, indicating a final judgment of innocence before God), in the selfsame act, is a hallmark of servanthood. When innocent suffering is understood as the will of God, it can only be in some way redemptive, that is, *for others*. We see it at important junctures in Israel’s history. We see it especially in the life and death of Jesus who, by trusting his Father in the midst of the “darkness” (v. 10) of God’s wrath, saved the very ones (that is, all of us) who crucified him. Jesus was judged and put to shame in our stead, by the world and by God, in order that we would not be so judged and put to shame. What a mega-blessing to be included among the Children of God (Gen.

12:3) and to have our sins forgiven! Therefore Jesus was raised from the dead and glorified, the seal and vindication of his redemptive servanthood (Phil. 2:6-11) *for us*.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting the God of Promise***

If by the Holy Spirit we have our ears opened to the redemptive servanthood of Jesus, then we are trusting that his crucifixion and resurrection was *for us and for others*, thus fulfilling God's promise to Abram that, *in Christ*, "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). But we have not been redeemed in isolation. We have been redeemed, not as solitary individuals, but *in Christ* as Gentiles among Israel. It is unthinkable that Jesus, the "king of the Jews," died and was raised apart from God's promise to historical Israel. Although Israel as a whole has not yet believed, Israel—which God has declared *holy to him*—cannot be spiritualized out of existence or somehow exempted from the Promise. The Holocaust and the new State of Israel demonstrate otherwise—"For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). Faith in Christ is therefore a trust that God will, in the course of history, bring both Israel and Church into one family of faith. Awaken! Israel is *holy to God*; the Church is *holy to God in Christ*. Any other faith than faith *in Christ* is not faith-in-Christ.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Privileged to Love Our Sister Israel***

For the Church, this means that Israel is our sister. We are indebted to her as the first of many nations to have received the Promise. But it also means that, like her, we are a "servant of the Lord"—servants to each other and servants to the world. As God insists on having it, Israel and Church are locked in a symbiotic dance of judgment and mercy. Having been put to shame by God for our faithlessness towards Israel, we again have the privilege of becoming a cruciformed community for the benefit of

others. Call it servanthood or call it love. Only let it be done faithfully and joyfully (else not at all); and let it be a reminder of why we were redeemed in the first place.