

21 March – the 5th Sunday in Lent (Passion Sunday)

JESUS: THE MAN OF SORROWS (Isaiah 53:1-7, 1John 1:5 - 2:2)

As Passiontide begins, it is good for us to consider Jesus' death and what it means, not least for believers today. *'Gentle and Lowly'* says much about this while focussing on the heart of Jesus, so we will pick up some of this as we reflect on our two main passages.

1 Isaiah 53:1-7 – the song of the suffering servant

It is always good to meditate on a passage like this as we lead up to Good Friday. Its language is beautiful in the way it describes Jesus and all he endured for us. Ortlund asks, 'What happened at the cross, for those who claim to be its beneficiaries?'

At one level, it is beyond our understanding. *'How can we comprehend what it meant for God to funnel the cumulative judgement for all the sinfulness of his people down onto one man?'* (p.199). Isaiah says "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isa 53:6). *'What was it for Christ to swallow down the cumulative twistedness and self-enthronement'* – the sins of people down the ages? What was it like for God's righteous anger not just for one person's sin, but for "the iniquity of us all" to come down on a single soul? Ortlund suggests it was not just the physical torture that killed Jesus. He died of a broken heart.

'Would it not have been the withdrawal of God's love from his heart, rather than the withdrawal of oxygen from his lungs, that killed him?... It was the suffering of Christ's heart that overwhelmed what his physical frame could handle.' (p.200-1)

2 What did Jesus achieve on the cross?

Jesus had enjoyed unbroken communion with God his whole life – he was without sin. How could he survive when he bore the *‘unspeakable weight of all our sins? ... The great love at the heart of the universe was being rent in two. The world’s light was going out. ... God was splintering the Lovely One. Beauty and Goodness himself was being uglified and vilified. “Stricken, smitten by God” (Is.53:4).’* (p.201-2).

Jesus bore all those pains and sorrows in order that we ugly ones could be ‘freely beautified’, forgiven. *‘Our heaven through his hell. Our entrance into Love through his loss of it’.*

3 Jesus suffered for us

Isaiah 53 also speaks of Jesus bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows (v.4). *‘He wasn’t only punished in our place, experiencing something we never will (condemnation); he also suffered with us, experiencing what we do (mistreatment). In your grief, he is grieved. In your distress, he is distressed.’* (p.112)

4 1John 2:1 – Jesus as our advocate

A believer knows that the gospel calls us to leave sin, as 1John 2:1 reminds us. But if this was this epistle’s only message, it would crush us. We don’t just need exhortation, but **liberation**. We don’t just need Christ as our King, but as our Friend; we need him not only over us, but next to us. And that is what the next part of v.1 gives us: it tells us that Jesus is our **advocate**.

What does an advocate do? The word translated ‘Advocate’ has the idea of someone appearing on behalf of another. The term means Jesus shares with us in our actual experience; he is in solidarity with us. *‘He feels what we feel. He draws near. And he speaks up longingly on our behalf.’* (p.89)

And Jesus advocates for *anybody*. The only qualification needed is **DESIRE**. Right now, Jesus speaks on our behalf.

Why is he able to help us? Because he is *righteous* – he and he alone – not us! ***‘Even our best repenting of our sin is itself plagued with more sin needing more forgiveness. ... To be allied with an advocate, one who came and sought me out rather than waiting for me to come to him, one who is righteous in all the ways I am not – this is calm and confidence before the Father.’*** (p.89)

Christ always advocates for us in the case of all our specific sins. Writing in 1688, John Bunyan said that what Christ as advocate does is *‘to arise, to stand up and plead, when his own are clothed with some filthy sins that they have of late fallen into’*.

Jesus’ advocacy is **PERSONAL** – *it rears up when occasion demands it*. We know that we still sin even after we have become Christians. And we become more conscious of our sins after we become believers. Jesus’ advocacy is *‘God’s way of encouraging us not to throw the towel in. Yes, we fail Christ as his disciples. But his advocacy on our behalf rises higher than our sins. His advocacy speaks louder than our failures. All is taken care of.’* (p.91)

And John tells us that Jesus is the “atoning sacrifice for our sins”, which refers to him turning away the Father’s just anger towards our sins. When we sin, let’s remember that Jesus *‘rises up and defends our cause, based on the merits of his own sufferings and death. ... Jesus advocates on our behalf because of who he is. He cannot bear to leave us alone to fend for ourselves.’* (p.91)

5 What happens when we sin?

As believers, we want to grow in our faith, and Jesus calls us to deeper levels of personal holiness as we walk with him. This verse assures us that when we do choose to sin, our Saviour does not forsake us.

‘These are the very moments when his heart erupts on our behalf in renewed advocacy in heaven with a resounding defence that silences all accusations, astonishes the angels, and celebrates the Father’s

embrace of us in spite of all our messiness’ (p.92). Let’s leave our case to be made by Jesus the only righteous one.

So let’s never minimise our sin or explain it away or excuse it. Rather, let’s just take it to the one who is already at the right hand of the Father, advocating for you on the basis of his own wounds. ***‘Let your own righteousness, in all your darkness and despair, drive you to Jesus Christ, the righteous, in all his brightness and sufficiency.’*** (p.94)

A paraphrase of 1John 2:1-2

My dear children, I am writing these things to you so that you won’t sin. But if anyone does sin, we continually have an Advocate – someone who will plead for you, who is face-to-face with the Father: Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice, the satisfaction, for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Discussion Questions

1. What strikes you about the description of Jesus in Isa 53:1-3?
2. Isa 53:5 has been described as the ‘burning heart’ of the Old Testament and indeed of the whole Bible. Why do you think this is?
3. What does Isa 53:7 say about the way Jesus conducted himself?
4. How is the cross proof that Jesus set his heart to love us?
5. What did Jesus endure for you?
How might this affect your relationship with him?
6. Why do you need an advocate?
How does Jesus’ advocacy impact your life?
7. All believers sin. How do you think about Jesus’ attitude towards that ‘dark pocket’ of your life that only you know about? Who is Jesus in ‘those moments of spiritual blankness’? Who is he in the midst of it?
8. How would you summarise the good news that our two passages present?