

The Suffering Servant
Prior to the reading of the Passion of Jesus
Good Friday, 2 April 2021
High Street Uniting Church Frankston
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Bible reading: Isaiah 52:13-53:12

O gracious and holy God, give us wisdom to perceive you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you, and a life to proclaim you. Amen

We have just heard an extraordinary piece of poetry, one of the so-called Suffering Servant passages written hundreds of years before Christ, but with words that we now immediately associate with him. It is worth hearing Isaiah's words just for themselves, for their own meaning and impact, before we turn to how Jesus relates to them – it's worth pausing here, before we go on to the account of Jesus' passion and death, and reflecting on what Isaiah's words have meant through the centuries.

The poetry has rich cadences: from the majestic

"See, my servant shall prosper:
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high",

through to

"he had no form or majesty that we should look at him...
he was despised and rejected by others"

The servant described here suffers, but even within this passage it's recognised that suffering can be framed in many ways. On the one hand, we hear that "by a perversion of justice he was taken away". At the same time though, we hear that "he poured himself out" – a victim, and yet somehow willing; and through it all runs the theme of God's will being found in both the stricken-ness and the exaltation – for it was God's will to have suffered, and God's plan to 'give him a portion with the great'. For in the end, "he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; out of his anguish he shall see light," bringing to fruition the majestic opening words of the servant "exalted and lifted up".

As we first encounter this passage the identity of the Servant is ambiguous. Setting aside for a moment our identification of the servant with Jesus, the poetry as it stands invites us to consider what else it means.

It is worth reflecting that this was written for the people who had been ripped away from Jerusalem and were in exile in Babylon. The people of Israel knew that they had been called to be a blessing to the world, and yet they were cut off from the land of their living; they were taken away, led off like sheep to Babylon; their graves were made by the rivers there; they were crushed – to use some of the language of the poem itself. To a people who felt

that they were of no account, people of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, Isaiah writes these words.

Are the words supposed to inspire those people? Are they supposed to inject the exiled people with hope that *their* suffering is on a path of redemption, startling to the nations? It's so hard to know – the poetry remains ambiguous, as so much suffering is.

There's one thing clear in it, though: in the suffering one, in the rejected one, the one held to be of no account, the one feeling forgotten - actually, in them God is working healing and redemption.

So the poetry might challenge *us* to ask: who do we not notice, because they are 'of no account'. Because in this world there is no lack of exiles, no lack of people seeking asylum with nothing in their appearance that we should desire them - accounted as "struck down by God"; wounded for (or by) the transgressions of others.

As a church, do these words call us to notice when it would be easier to forget; and to reconsider those whom God is lifting up and without whom we can never be complete? Or do we feel ourselves in that space – do we ourselves identify with the exiles, as broken people.

I haven't seen the movie *Penguin Bloom*, but I'm struck by the central dynamic of it. It's the story of how a broken magpie brings healing to the broken mother, Samantha Bloom - or it could be the story of a broken mother who brings healing to the broken magpie, named Penguin? In the story, one character encounters the suffering in another, and in the exchange there is healing and redemption.

Today we encounter the suffering in another: the suffering of Jesus, in faithfulness and vulnerability. God does what can only be done vulnerably, caringly, at enormous risk, encountering our suffering in hurt and pain. We, too, can only hear and approach this vulnerably, caringly, and at enormous risk.

So brace yourself, and open yourself, as we enter the story of the suffering one – our story, God's story.