

Isaiah 53:4-12  
Mark 10:35-45  
October 20, 2024

The Times

When we speak of the times, we may be thinking of the era of history in which we live; or maybe of the things we do, the times we have; or even the time of the year, and the events of the season. It is fall and it is beginning to feel like it. As the temperatures cool and the colors change we once again face the coming of winter, things associated with the end of the year.

The folks who predict the weather claim a mild la nina is on the way, which means drier than usual, warmer. We can think of the times both in cultural and ecclesiastical terms. What is going on generally in the world, what is going on at church? The times of earth, the times of heaven. Our time and God's time.

In the time of the world it is the hurricane season as well as the football season. It is the time of another election and Oktoberfest. It is the middle of the academic year. It is the time of pumpkins and Halloween.

The traditional emphasis as far as the worship of the church goes are; contemplations about the return of Christ and everything associated with it; thoughtful examinations of the past year and God's faithfulness. Gratitude and stewardship. It is the season of Thanksgiving. On the other side, a mere six weeks away, is Advent, which begins the cycle again with its hope of renewal and the anticipation of new birth.

We live in both settings at once, the city of earth, as the great theologian Augustine called it, and the City of God. Like James and John, we sometimes struggle to integrate into the times we live, both the culture of the world as we experience it and the realm of God in our midst.

Perhaps the Old Testament text for the day might help. We have not read it yet, but I am about to. There is no passage in scripture that in terms of the grandeur of its thought and poetry surpasses the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. It is the last in a series of texts in the great prophetic and theological poem, that envisions a servant, suffering on behalf of and for the sake of his people.

Jewish scholars insist that it has nothing to do with Jesus, who came along 5 or 6 hundred years after it was written. But from the beginning of the Christian era, believers have seen a connection between this tragic person and Jesus himself.

It is not hard to imagine the force of its presentation; of a person whose power has been taken away, and whose form has become hideous, whose role is not the experience of luxury and the exercise of authority, but suffering in the place of the one's who serve *him*, and the dying of a sacrifice for their well-being. That sacrifice is both the complete diminishing of his life, and the miraculous source of his power. The people marvel.

Yet, as much as it is emphasized, this idea of a servant leader who suffers, is hard to accept. It is contrary to the spirit of the age and the instinctive understanding of the way the world works. When Jesus is nearing Jerusalem with his disciples for the final Passover of his earthly life, even his own disciples struggle to understand, much less to accept it.

We do well to hear it again, and to listen . . . And if nothing else of value has happened while here this morning, you will have heard once again, these words;

“Who has believed our message  
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been  
revealed?

2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire  
him.

3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.  
Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

4 Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
Yet who of his generation protested?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was  
punished.

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death,  
though he had done no violence,  
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause  
him to suffer,  
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for  
sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

11 After he has suffered,  
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify  
many, and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,  
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,  
because he poured out his life unto death,  
and was numbered with the transgressors.  
For he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors.”

As inspiring as this text is, with its poetic language speaking of the servant, and though we marvel at the majesty of its ideas, that greatness is measured in terms of sacrifice, we can go on as if it has no relevant meaning.

It is easy to understand the request of James and John, who even after following Jesus for some time and sitting under his instruction, still had an inflated idea of their place in the Kingdom that Jesus is about to inaugurate, “Let one of us sit at your right and other at your left in your glory.”

They had no idea! “you don’t know what you are asking . . . Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” Jesus tries to set them straight, but at this point, fails. They have not experienced as yet the devastating disappointment of the cross, or the unspeakable joy of the resurrection. It is only after they do, that a new understanding of Jesus is possible.

Along the way, they face their times in the same way as we do ours; the same vulnerabilities and threats, economic instability, poverty, war, despair. We are told of estrangement, loneliness and isolation, distrust as features of modern experience.

The two times meet - the church’s year, and another year in the life of the world. The same truths emerge. In this world we are encouraged to be self-concerned, to be proud, to seek more; (a headline this week said, “the more cash one has, the more one needs it to be

happy.”). The Christian faith encourages humility, respect, compassion, sacrifice . . . service, and gratitude.

The world presents us with superstars. I don’t want to name names because you already know who they are, and they are only human, and I am sure have to find a way to be human in the good sense. They don’t need to be bantered about in sermons as the antithesis of faithfulness. The point is even the faithful are tempted like James and John were, to follow the lead of the world, and look for superstars.

The bible presents us with the Servant of Isaiah and Jesus. Isaiah’s servant is a poetic creation, but Jesus is real, and is a person of history. What is striking about Jesus, is that for all his suffering and pain, compassion, and self-sacrifice, he seems healthy; well-adjusted, humorous, inwardly unified . . . human, the way it was always meant to be.

In scripture Jesus is presented as God’s only *begotten* Son. We are reminded that it is our place to follow his example; that we are all, as it were, firstborn children, heirs, whose job it is to serve and suffer, and to live and die sacrificially, for the sake of those who live in the world as if they bear no relation at all to the God who made and loves them.

It is not realistic to believe we can be like him, but we can trust, and follow, and among all the other options, the secular alternatives, that is *still the only way* to live in the times.

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