

The scandal of the cross (IV) – The suffering servant

Which books of the OT are most quoted in the NT? A quick Goggle suggests (not surprisingly) Psalms as number 1, and then Isaiah. And which chapter is the most quoted? It has to be 53, and most notably here, in this very familiar passage from Acts 8:26ff:

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: **“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”** The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with **that very passage of Scripture** and told him **the good news about Jesus**.*

What an amazing encounter! How does God spread the gospel to Ethiopia? God uses a chance meeting. Well, the *meeting* wasn't chance because Philip had his ears open and did what God prompted him to do. The 'chance' was that the chap was reading Isaiah 53. Let's do the same – well, I'll start from the end of the previous chapter.

However, I suggest that you don't read the rest of this article now – certainly not if you're just about to dash out of the house. Wait until you have some time and are in a receptive mood – receptive to the Lord, I mean. Stop and be silent before the Lord; expect to hear from God; expect to hear from the scriptures; expect to hear good news – very good news – and absorb it in your soul.

(I'm not sure if this will 'work', but try it and if it helps you, great; if not, nothing is lost.)

*Isaiah 52:13ff. See, my servant [Jesus] will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. [Quite right too! Jesus should be totally exalted.] Just as there were many who were appalled at him [Hang on! Surely something has gone wrong here.] – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness [No, what a scandal! That can't be right!] – 15 so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand. [This passage is clearly not about 'understanding'. God's way is totally upside down, contradictory even, but the passage that the eunuch is about to learn about is for **all people everywhere**, and it has the **power** to silence human authorities.]*

Isaiah 53:1ff. Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ['You ain't gonna believe this! This is totally weird!'] He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. [A pathetic little weed?] He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. [We looked, but what we saw seemed to be totally worthless.]

*Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, [God's in the business of healing, but healing in the very broadest sense.] yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. [We got totally the wrong end of the stick: we considered that **God** was killing Jesus. Wrong! But...] 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. [...what Jesus did was 'For us and for our salvation'. He took our infirmities (sicknesses) and sorrows (loss, bereavement), our transgressions and our iniquities; he took anything and everything that spoils life and he absorbed it into himself. In its place he gave us peace and healing (wholeness)!]*

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. [Conscious of personal sin? God will take it away. Conscious of being sinned against? Conscious of institutional sin? God will absorb that too.] 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 her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. [Jesus didn't have to die; it was his settled choice to submit to the worst that humankind (the worst that we!) could throw at him. He submitted to religious violence to expose it for what it was. (A bit like the way Martin Luther-King et al. used non-violence to expose and utterly defeat racial intolerance.)]

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. [Not fair!] And who can speak of his descendants? [That's it then! This is the end!] For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave [He was dead and buried] with the wicked, and with the rich [Joseph of Arimathea] in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. [Totally unfair! Is there no justice?! Scandalous!]

*Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, [It doesn't look good. Those disciples on the Emmaus road felt that Jesus' descendants were going to be scattered.] and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring [Hang on! Maybe this isn't the end of the story; maybe there's a final twist in the story.] and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. [**Resurrection!**] 11 After the suffering of his soul, 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. [Hurrah! Aslan is in the land again!] 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. [That is contrary to reason and contrary to normal justice. We should die for our own sins, surely? It's totally unjust for an innocent person to die for us; yet that's what God did. This is restorative justice. Don't try to understand it, just trust God, and receive.]

So, what a glorious conclusion to this seemingly terrible tragedy: Jesus' life taken away by religious intolerance and religious violence. But in Jesus, God defeats the worst institutional violence. By the most awful human injustice imaginable – the scandal of the cross – God works out that incredible long-decided plan to bring the whole of humankind back into the wonderful relationship that is God, that is love, that is community, that is togetherness, that is restoration, that brings resurrection power, that is absolutely flipping marvellous!

No wonder the eunuch wanted to be baptised and then 'went on his way rejoicing'!

May you go on your way rejoicing today. Lord, let it be!

Paul Bev. 13.3.19