

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF OUR LORD – YEAR C

First Reading at Mass Isaiah 50: 4–7

Up until the eighteenth century, Biblical scholars believed the Book of Isaiah to be the work of a single author. However, it is now generally accepted that there were at least two different writers named Isaiah: the first responsible for Chapters 1–39; the second for Chapters 40–66.

‘Second Isaiah’ wrote his text during the Babylonian exile (586–539 BC), around 150 years later than First Isaiah. Some scholars also suggest a Third Isaiah for the Song of the Suffering Servant Song (see below) and the last ten chapters of the book, supporting their argument with historical, doctrinal and literary evidence.

The passage we read this week forms part of the Third Song of the Suffering Servant. (There are four songs in all: I: Isaiah 42:1–4; II; 49:1–6; III; 50:4–7; and IV: 52:13–53:12) The tone of this Third Song is much darker than the others. It is the Servant who is speaking.

Isaiah addresses people who have been exiled in Babylon for many years and are totally despondent and weary. Surrounded by symbols of their own defeat, they despair that they will ever be in charge of their own future. The main role of the Servant here is to provide encouragement and support to the ‘wearied’. He is a good listener.

In a culture where honour is all-important, some of the aggressions that the Servant is subjected to are listed – striking, beard-pulling, insults, spitting. All are designed to bring about shame and humiliation. However, he will not be disgraced or discouraged because, as he says: ‘The Lord comes to my help’.

Although it is unclear who the Servant represents, from the outset Christians have seen in him Christ, and the suffering he endured during his Passion.

Gospel Luke 23: 1–49 (abridged version)

The whole assembly then rose, and they brought Jesus before Pilate.

Only the Roman authorities had the power to carry out the death sentence, so the Jews brought Jesus before Pilate, then governor of Roman Judea, the southern half of Palestine. Initially Jesus had been accused of blasphemy, a religious matter (Luke 22: 66–71).

Now the charge is a threefold one, political in nature and totally untrue. Pilate did not want to gratify or offend Jesus’s accusers and passed Jesus (as a Galilean) over to the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas.

Herod and his guards treated Jesus with contempt and made fun of him

Herod regarded Jesus as a joke, clothing him as a king and mocking him. Another translation of verse 11 could be: ‘Herod with his soldiers behind him, thought that Jesus was of no importance’. Seeing Jesus as no threat, he sent him back to Pilate.

Pilate was anxious to set Jesus free

Pilate tried four times to avoid condemning Jesus; he referred the matter to Herod, offered to scourge Jesus and then release him, told the Jews to settle the matter themselves (John 19: 6–7) and asked the Jews to release Jesus at Passover time (Mark 15:6).

Pilate, an experienced Roman governor

Pilate had made some serious mistakes in his government of Palestine, having deeply upset the Jews by allowing his troops to carry standards topped with a bust of the reigning emperor who was, at this time, officially a god. The Jews pleaded with him to stop this practice and were threatened with death. Pilate had also brought a new water supply into the city, funding it with money taken from the Temple treasury. Had these incidents been officially reported it seems certain that Pilate would have been dismissed. The Jewish officials had implied there could be trouble in store for Pilate in saying ‘*If you set [Jesus] free you are no friend of Caesar*’. (John 19: 12)

They seized on a man, Simon of Cyrene

Palestine was an occupied country and any citizen could be made to serve the Roman government. A criminal was marched to the place of his crucifixion by the longest possible route. When Jesus was no longer able to bear the weight of his cross, Simon of Cyrene would have been tapped on the shoulder with the flat side of a Roman spear and forced to carry the cross behind Jesus.

‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’

It is said that Jesus was deliberately crucified between two known criminals, to identify him with them, and so humiliate him before the crowds. When Jesus promised the penitent thief Paradise (a Persian word for a walled garden), he promised him a place of honour. A Persian king bestowed a very special honour on his chosen subject by inviting him to be his companion in the garden.

