

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

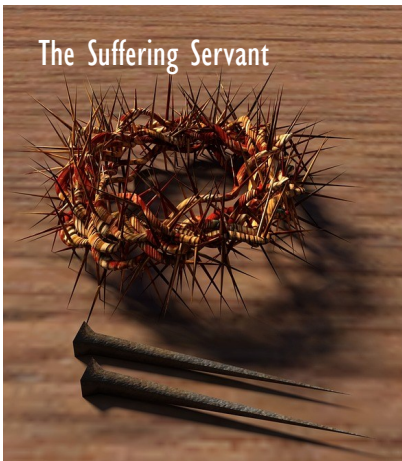
### PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD – YEAR B

#### First Reading at Mass Isaiah 50: 4–7

Up until the eighteenth century, the Book of Isaiah was thought to be the work of a single author, though it is now generally accepted that there were at least two different writers named Isaiah. ‘First Isaiah’ was responsible for Chapters 1–39 and ‘Second Isaiah’ for Chapters 40–66. The second wrote his text during the Babylonian exile (586–539 BC), around 150 years later than First Isaiah. On the basis of historical, doctrinal and literary evidence, some scholars also suggest there was a ‘Third Isaiah’, responsible for both the Song of the Suffering Servant (see below) and the last ten chapters of the book.

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. They 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 ‘wearyed’. 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 Mark 14 – 15: 39

This Sunday’s long account of the Passion of Jesus is the culmination of Mark’s Gospel. The account covers Chapters 14 and 15: some 119 verses in all. (See the Prego Plus for Palm Sunday 2021 for notes on Ch. 15.)

The passage chosen for reflection this year draws on the episode in the Garden of Gethsemane (14: 32– 41), which follows on from the Last Supper. It has a three-part structure (often used by Mark): Jesus alternates three times between praying and seeing how his close associates are doing. This three-fold prayer will later be echoed by Peter’s three-fold denial.

**Gethsemane** (derived from the Aramaic for ‘oil press’) lies to the east of Jerusalem at the foot of the Mount of Olives. The garden was a place the disciples often visited.

#### He took Peter and James and John with him

The disciples are divided into two groups, with this ‘inner cabinet’ of three allowed to stay closer to Jesus.

#### A sudden fear came over Jesus, and great distress

Mark shows us a deeply human Jesus, who is here overcome with horror and sorrow. He is very much alone as the disciples sleep. Heaven itself seems to stay silent during the first and second parts of his prayer.

#### ‘My soul is sorrowful to the point of death.’

Jesus echoes the psalmist as he expresses his torment. Compare the ‘refrain’ of Psalms 41 (42) and 42 (43): ‘Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?’

#### ‘Abba, Father’

‘Abba’, Aramaic for Father, is not simply a children’s word but always carries intimate affection and devotion.

#### ‘Take this cup from me’

James and John had both insisted to Jesus earlier that they were ready to drink this cup (Mark 10: 38–39), but when put to the test, they fall asleep.

#### They could find no answer for him

This recalls how these same three disciples were dumbstruck at the Transfiguration (Mark 9: 6), the last time this group were together with Jesus.

#### ‘It is all over. The hour has come. ... Get up! Let us go!’

By this third episode, something has happened in Jesus’s prayer. He is now composed and very much in charge once more, even gently mocking the disciples ‘You can sleep on now and take your rest’.