

## ***Let Us Stand Up Together***

By Dr. Dave Neale

We have two great hymns before us today in our reading. In Isaiah 50 we have the Suffering Servant Song. It is one of a series of four distinctive passages in Isaiah that give a voice to a servant who suffers.<sup>1</sup> In Christian tradition through the centuries, as Christians reread the book of Isaiah, they saw here a prophecy of the suffering of the Christ.

And in Philippians, the Hymn of Christ, the Carmen Christi, which I will talk more about in a moment.

Let's explore the meaning of these two songs for us today as modern Christians on Palm Sunday

What these passages have in common is they are both about ***persistence in the faith in the face of violent opposition***<sup>2</sup> and ***the role of humility in Christian life***.

I'll say a few words about Isaiah 50 and then we'll spend most of our time together on the Philippians passage – where we encounter the idea of Christian virtue

Isaiah 50 is about a ***teacher*** who faces violent opposition<sup>3</sup> I do think of this passage as a beautiful description of the Lord's path to Jerusalem that Sabbath day, in the week before this death and resurrection.

***The Lord God has given me  
the tongue of a teacher,  
that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.  
Morning by morning he wakens—  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught*** (v 4).

The Suffering Servant faces his hour of suffering *as a teacher but also as someone who is listening*. A teacher is one who listens. One who listens can become a teacher. This Suffering Servant has the tongue to speak and the ear to hear God. ***...that I may know how to sustain weary with a word***.

I love the thought that I might have the opportunity to bring a word to sustain the weary each week. In fact, it is always front of mind as I prepare for Sunday, knowing that our congregation, any congregation, is filled with people facing all the challenges that life presents to us week-by-week.

Please be aware that as you speak to people, you have the opportunity to ease their burden in life by blessing them with words of kindness, or love, or unconditional acceptance. There is, arguably, nothing really more important in life than taking thought for the well-being of others.

We remember from last week, and that that intimate dinner at the house of Lazarus where the drama of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet and the betrayal of Judas were prophetic of the troubles to come. And we saw that, even in that hour, Jesus sustained his weary followers with a word: ***Peace I leave with you... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid*** (Jn 14:26-27). He, to his last, sustained the weary with a word.

What is the secret to being a blessing to others? Actually... I think it is prayer – the listening life. In the first chapter of Mark, ***In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted***

**place, and there he prayed** (Mk 1:35)... and to his disciples in Gethsemane on his last day, **Sit here while I go over there and pray...** (Matt 26:36).

And so this Palm Sunday is a listening day for us as His disciples here on the border of a difficult thing to understand – why He must die, and how He conquered death – This passage is one of the more theologically significant in the NT because it is thought to be a very early hymn of the church that had been in circulation among Christians, which Paul brings into his lovely letter to the Philippians. You will notice in your Bibles that it is in verse form in terms of indentation.

It is called the Carmen Christi, Latin for the Hymn of Christ. It is a window into the very early theological interpretation of Jesus' life, maybe even the 30s or 40s. This letter was written around 50 CE.

It is also called the Kenosis Hymn because the most significant word in the hymn is *kenosis* in Greek, that is **but he emptied himself**. This is about the heroic virtue of Jesus in humility: **He humbled himself... to the point of death, even death on a cross** (v 8)

By the way, the church at Philippi was the first Christian church in Europe. Paul had travelled from Asia Minor, modern Turkey, to Macedonia, modern Greece. This church was his first and arguably his favourite church, one that he had a congenial relationship with.

I can only say a very little about part of the hymn this morning, but it is very appropriate to our place here on Palm Sunday.

The appeal of Paul to his church at Philippi is deeply emotional. Read Philippians 2:1-4 and you feel it.

**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,**

**who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,**

**but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.**

**And being found in human form, he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.**

What does this mean? He who “empties himself” is one who performs the ultimate act of humility. This “does not mean that at anytime... Christ ceased to be God...” It is that, in his humiliation, he empties himself and as the NIV translates it “but made himself nothing.” As one says, “It is in his [Christ’s] self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like and it is through his taking the form of a slave that we see the ‘form of God.’”<sup>4</sup>

None of this is very easy to digest – to bring into our lives today. But let me try with what is a highly imperfect analogy.

There is one thing the good Lord, in His wisdom, did not see fit to equip me with. And that is a half speed setting. Everything I’ve ever done in my life I do at full speed. In my work life... all in, full commitment, full speed. Work/life balance might as well have been a unicorn for me. Hobbies, work, people... all fully in.

We are blessed if we have something to give ourselves fully to in life. I can’t imagine a life where I didn’t care completely about what I was doing. And it is my observation that this is very common among homo sapiens. We are a restless, industrious, unrelentingly active species. Almost everybody I know is this way.

Think about the people you know. Oh how we do leap about in life – engaged up to our ears in whatever comes to hand. That’s my observation. Retirement on a beach is a myth invented by investment counselors. It’s not a real option for any normal human being.

In fact, I don’t know anyone who is lazy. Is anybody here lazy? Don’t be embarrassed, you can come “out” today. Raise your hand.

I do understand what it is to empty myself into life, into whatever I have done. There have been a couple times in life that it has led to a collapse in my health.

Here is the analogy, however flawed. Jesus emptied himself into life too. Being “in the form of God” the emptying for him was the path of humiliation and human suffering. He did this so that, Philippians tells us, every tongue could confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and salvation and the gracious love of God could be made known to all the nations.

And then He is a Lord who, as the people crowd around with their accolades and their songs, soon to be off to the next rally, waving their banners again and again, He says **...therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame** (Isa 50:7); The quality of flint is its hardness. Here it means “resolute determination to carry out a divinely appointed task in the face of opposition.”<sup>5</sup>

There just isn’t any way to popularize the cross as a way of life. There isn’t any way to make it attractive, or winsome.

Jesus, by his travelling this road to Jerusalem and the cross, offers us the life wherein God wakens our ears every morning, as we pray, dwelling under the gracious shadow of that cross, God will whisper in our ears the wisdom of his heart.

As the Suffering Servant of Isaiah puts it...

**Let us stand up together!** Let’s raise our hearts in humility and thanks to our suffering Lord. Let’s stand to speak to God our resolute determination to walk forward in faith in the One who gave life His all for our sake.

Thanks Be to God, Amen

### **Benediction**

- And now may the Lord Jesus, who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and a servant, be made real to you this Holy Week. And may this gracious love break out in your life, to yourself and to others.
- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

<sup>1</sup> There are four Servant Songs in Isaiah: 42:1-4, famous for its reference to a “bruised reed he will not break.” 49:1-6; 50:4-9a; 52:1-53:12

<sup>2</sup> Our passage today is best known to us for verse 6 and its description of the Lord’s suffering: **I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.** The intertextual allusions to Isaiah 50:6 are Matthew 26:67, 27:30 and Ro 8:32-33, which echoes the vindication motif, **He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.**

<sup>3</sup> “The third Servant Song most emphasizes the servant’s role as teacher, and in the face of violent opposition, to the faithful within Israel and particularly over against those who rely on their own wisdom.” *Commentary of the Use of the New Testament in the Old Testament*, p. 202, Beale and Carson).

<sup>4</sup> *Discovering the New Testament: Community and Faith*, p. 260.

<sup>5</sup> *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 556. This idea of setting one’s face like flint is picked up in Luke: **When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem** (Lk 9:51).