

# *A Crown of Thorns*

## Second Sunday after Pentecost

### June 22, 2003

#### Sermon Background Study

#### *Scripture Passages*

#### *Isaiah 53:4-6*

<sup>4</sup>Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup>But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. <sup>6</sup>All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

#### *Matthew 27:27-31*

<sup>27</sup>Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. <sup>28</sup>They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, <sup>29</sup>and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" <sup>30</sup>They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. <sup>31</sup>After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

*Today, we continue a nine-week sermon series on all the symbols in our glorious Rose Window. Our sixth symbol is that of the crown of thorns, a sobering yet comforting reminder of God's love for us.*

We want to live in a world filled with only goodness and joy and peace. But we don't . . . and today's symbol, this stark reminder of Jesus' death on a Roman cross, both challenges our understanding of the way the world works and comforts us in times of trouble.

#### *Jesus – the suffering servant*

Christians are realists. We do not see the world through rose-colored glasses. We understand that this world is not as God intended. The lives of us all are touched, sometimes shatteringly so, by tragedy and suffering. Indeed, at times, the inexplicable and unjust tragedies of life threaten to overwhelm our trust in God and turn us away from him who we need more than any other.

Centuries before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah brought to the Jews a remarkable message. Looking ahead to centuries of exile and oppression that the Jews would endure after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC, Isaiah talked of a time to come when Israel would be redeemed not just *from* her suffering but *by* her suffering. In Isaiah 53, this suffering is focused upon a single righteous servant of God upon whom all sins would be laid and through whom all God's people would be healed.

Now, we shouldn't imagine that the Jews of Jesus' day awaited some sort of suffering Messiah in fulfillment of Isaiah 53. They did not. They would read such passages as referring to the suffering of Israel or even the suffering that the Messiah would inflict on Israel's enemies. Nonetheless, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the Christians came to understand that Jesus had identified himself



#### **Crown of Thorns**

The crown of thorns and the three nails bring us to the heart of the Gospel. Here . . . we find Jesus' faithfulness to his vocation, to his people, to his Father. Here . . . we find the God who suffers with us, who knows how cruel and unfair life can be at times. Here . . . we find a gift of boundless love.

Why a crown of thorns? Because the Romans knew that the Jews hoped for a great king who would throw off the hated Roman conquerors and usher in God's kingdom. When it became clear to all that Jesus was not the sort of king the Jews were expecting, the crowds rejected him and the Romans mocked him. Crucifixion was a particularly cruel death, reserved for those who threatened the authority of Rome. Yet, in this most horrible act, God's victory over sin and death was won.

with the sufferings of Israel and that through Jesus and his death, all the sins of the world had been taken away (John 1:29). Paul and the other Christians didn't try to proclaim what had happened on the cross, they simply proclaimed that through Jesus' suffering humanity had been reconciled to God.

### *God-who-suffers*

Last week, we looked at the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian proclamation that God is inherently relational, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each fully and completely God, and yet none of them are all of God. From the first days of Christianity, the followers of Jesus proclaimed that Jesus was not only fully and completely human, but also fully and completely divine. Not merely a human enjoying a unique relationship with God, nor even God taking on the appearance of being human. Rather, Christians have always made the remarkable claim that Jesus was God himself, God incarnate, God made flesh. No other major religion on the planet makes this claim. Buddhists do not claim Buddha was God. Muslims do not claim Mohammed was God. Yet, Christians do claim Jesus was God, without surrendering any of his humanness. In the context of today's symbol, the crown of thorns, our

#### Isaiah 53

The book of Isaiah is a lengthy compilation of prophecies and poetry based on the work of Isaiah, a prophet of Israel. The NT writers refer to this book by name more than all the other writing prophets combined!

Isaiah 53 is part of a lengthy section of the book that dwells upon the Servant of the Lord. Though many Jews identified these passages with Israel herself, early Christians understood Jesus to be the embodiment and fulfillment of these passages, most of which focus on the suffering of the servant. Isaiah 53 carries the themes upon which Jesus would build his ministry. Jesus would be the servant-Messiah. He would suffer. He would embody Israel herself, taking upon himself the sufferings of Israel and, hence, the world. Indeed, Jesus' suffering would be the way in which he would fulfill Israel's vocation to be the light of the world. He would do and be for Israel what Israel had been unable to do and be for herself. As Paul would later write, the righteousness of God was revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus to his mission . . . faithful even to the cross (Romans 3:21-22).

proclamation that Jesus was fully human and fully divine points us to one of the most profound and comforting insights that Christianity offers the world - we proclaim that the great Creator is also the God-who-suffers!

We tell the world of a God who created all that is, who is all-powerful and completely good - a God who is love. Yet, we know that we live in a world often filled with pain and suffering. How can this be? Can't God stop it? Perhaps he isn't as powerful as we think - or even as good?!<sup>1</sup> I don't know that there are any fully satisfying answers to these questions.<sup>2</sup> Job wanted explanations for his own sufferings, but he never got them, not even from God.

Paul suffered terribly during the decades of his missionary work across the Mediterranean. He was flogged (at least five times!), stoned, imprisoned, left for dead, shipwrecked, beaten with rods, and so on (2 Corinthians 11:21b-29). Yet, for Paul, the life in Christ was sharing in Christ's sufferings, confident that he would share in Jesus' resurrection (Philippians 3:10-11). Later, Peter would write to persecuted Christians, encouraging them in their sufferings and reminding them that "Christ also suffered for you" (1 Peter 2:21).

God is with us, even in (especially in?) our sufferings. God, in the person of Jesus, knows suffering and rejection first-hand. Crucifixion was the most horrible and humiliating punishment the Romans could mete out. It is hard for us even to imagine the suffering Jesus endured. But beyond even Jesus' own suffering is the suffering of God the Father who allowed his own Beloved Son to suffer death on a cross. I cannot really imagine a love like this. I have three sons and there is no one for whom I would allow one of my sons to be crucified. As we contemplate the crown of thorns in the Rose window, let us also contemplate the power of and depth of God's love for us. In God's love we can learn what it means truly to love God and one another.

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the problem of evil in God's universe is only a problem for monotheists. If you believe in many gods than evil and suffering might result from the inattention of the gods or perhaps one or two gods who enjoy suffering. It is only our belief in one Creator, one God, which forces us to wonder how a loving and all-powerful God could allow a world with such suffering and pain.

<sup>2</sup> A great and very readable book on faith and the challenge of evil is *Can God be Trusted*, by John Stackhouse, Jr., Oxford University Press, 1998. Professor Stackhouse doesn't pretend that he has answers to unanswerable questions. Instead, he asks us to consider whom we will trust. Will we trust God?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> Isaiah 53 The suffering servant of the Lord</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> Matthew 27 Matthew's telling of Jesus' crucifixion and burial</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> John 19:16b-37 John's story of the crucifixion</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> Philippians 2:1-13 Christ's obedience even to the point of death is a pattern for our own obedience.</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> 2 Cor 11:16-12:10 Paul compares himself to false apostles and recounts his own sufferings.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

