

THE SUFFERING SERVANT HEZEKIAH AND JESUS¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Evensong on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 6 April 2025

I seized the opportunity to preach at Evensong this Fifth Sunday in Lent because of Isaiah's Song of the Suffering Servant. This poetic passage is one of the high points of the Hebrew Bible, quite apart from providing a sizable chunk of the libretto for Handel's *Messiah*. This is a rare opportunity.

I will ask two questions. First, who is Isaiah talking about? Second, how can we apply the text to Jesus?

We are not alone in asking this question. In the Acts of the Apostles, the deacon Philip spoke to the Ethiopian eunuch about this passage. The eunuch asked who Isaiah was speaking about.² Scholars suggest that Isaiah was speaking about King Hezekiah of Judah,³ who reigned from about 716-687 BCE. The Rabbinic tradition says that Hezekiah was married to Isaiah's daughter, Hephzibah. He was the son of the wicked King Ahaz,⁴ which allows Isaiah to express surprise, "who has believed what we have heard", that such a one comes from such bad stock. Hezekiah contracted an illness that disfigured him, leading to comments about his marred countenance, his sufferings and rejection. Although suffering, he did not complain.

With the encouragement of Isaiah, Hezekiah's prayed for deliverance from the army of the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib while they were besieging Jerusalem, occasioning in modern times, Lord Byron's poem, "The Destruction of Sennacherib", which I had to learn at school:

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.⁵

In response to Hezekiah's intercession, the Lord promised victory and the angel of the Lord smote the Assyrians in their camp, killing them all. Hezekiah saved Jerusalem without a fight. On his return home, Sennacherub was assassinated.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Thus, Hezekiah was the saviour of his people, at least for the time being. The sins that Hezekiah had to bear were those of his father and the Jewish people who worshipped gods other than the God of Abraham. Such worship was the main reason why Jewish kings were declared to be

¹ Readings: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Luke 23:26-49

² Acts 8:26-40

³ 2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chronicles 29-32, [Isaiah 53 and the afflicted Hezekiah – Judith heroine of Israel was prophetess Huldah](#)

⁴ 2 Kings 16:2

⁵ [The Destruction of Sennacherib - Wikipedia](#)

evil. Despite his near fatal illness, Hezekiah lived another 15 years and was able to produce an heir, “he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days”.

If Isaiah was speaking about Hezekiah, how do we come to apply this song to Jesus? There is no doubt that the authors of the New Testament believed that prophecy in the Hebrew Bible contained an element of prediction. In the story of the Ethiopian eunuch that I have already mentioned, Deacon Philip did just that. This is also apparent when they say that events in the life of Jesus happened to fulfil the Scriptures, by which they meant our Old Testament. The foretelling had several aspects. There was first the idea of a Messiah, of one who would deliver the judgement and justice of God. Jesus was, in the view of the early church and, indeed, now, that Messiah. That is what “Christ” means. Second, there were specific items that were thought to be exact predictions. For example, the idea of the Virgin birth arose from Isaiah 7:14, “the young woman shall bear a son” and the Greek translation that used the word “virgin” for “young woman”.

The problem with this view is that it depends on identifying specific old passages with later events. Passages that do not match up may be neglected. Those that are chosen might fit events other than those selected.

Later scholarship changed the focus from “foretelling” to “forthtelling”. This approach takes events contemporary to the prophets seriously in their own right. But, while doing that, it looks deeper, seeking to understand the principles that the prophets tell forth. That is, while the prophets are totally immersed in their own time, they also discern the purposes of God.

If we take the Servant Song of tonight’s reading, we will begin to learn something counter-intuitive both in their time and in ours. In his account of the life of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI suggested that our Suffering Servant story is the key with which Jesus unlocked a new interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.⁶

Jesus unlocks the idea contained in the suffering servant songs that strength is to be found in weakness. This is a recognisable theme in the whole of Jesus’s life, from his birth as a dependent infant to his death as the victim of an oppressive empire. As St Paul said, “he emptied himself”⁷ At his trial, Jesus said:

My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.⁸

If that was counter-cultural in the time of Isaiah and in the time of Jesus, it is still demonstrably counter-cultural today where strong men seek to enforce their rule. Can we exemplify this counter-cultural life in our lives? I do not know; but listen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer writing from a Nazi prison.

Who am I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I step out from my cell

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (p. 17). Ignatius Press.

⁷ Philippians 2:7

⁸ John 18:36

calm and cheerful and poised,
like a squire from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me
I speak with my guards
freely, friendly and clear,
as though I were the one in charge.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bear days of calamity
serenely, smiling and proud,
like one accustomed to victory.

Am I really what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,
struggling for life breath, as if I were being strangled,
starving for colours, for flowers, for birdsong,
thirsting for kind words, human closeness,
shaking with rage at power lust and pettiest insult,
tossed about, waiting for great things to happen,
helplessly fearing for friends so far away,
too tired and empty to pray, to think, to work,
weary and ready to take my leave of it all?

Who am I? This one or the other?
Am I this one today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? Before others a hypocrite
and in my own eyes a pitiful, whimpering weakling?
Or is what remains in me like a defeated army,
Fleeing in disarray from victory already won?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest me; O God, I am thine!⁹

⁹ [Deitrich Bonhoeffer. Who Am I? by Deitrich Bonhoeffer](#)



Isaiah
Michelangelo
Sistine Chapel



King Hezekiah
unknown artist in the choir of St. Mary's Church, Åhus, 17th century
Wikipedia



Crucifixion
15th Century
Wikipedia



Dietrich Bonhoeffer