**Sermon Good Friday – Isaiah 52:13-53:12 –**

 **29/3/24**

Did you hear the words written in Isaiah this morning? Let’s listen again to some of them:

“He shall be exalted and lifted up … ” (52:13)
“ … his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance … ” (52:14)
“He was despised and rejected … ” (53:3)
“ … like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, … he opened not his mouth (53:7)
“And they made his grave with the wicked … ” (53:9) (NIV).

That suffering servant has to be Jesus, don’t you think? Lifted up on the cross, his appearance marred by the whipping ordered by Pilate, his face bruised from the soldiers’ slaps, and blood streaming down his head where the crown of thorns had pierced him. Despised and rejected as passers by jeered and taunted him. Like a lamb to the slaughter, he barely opened his lips to defend himself. This suffering servant sounds like Jesus.

Isaiah was a prophet and prophets do write about things God will do in the future, and this poem or song of the suffering servant is pointing forward to Jesus the promised Messiah. At the same time Isaiah was writing to the people of Judah who had been exiled to Babylon, assuring them that God had not abandoned them. In its original context the servant is not a single person but a collective. Not everyone was exiled from Judah. Mostly it was the elite members of the society. The suffering servant is those people of Judah living in exile. They have lost their country, their homes, and their future. They look God forsaken.

Isaiah tells us that these people were despised and rejected. Instead of showing compassion, people looked down on them because of their suffering. They saw the injustice these people were suffering but ignored it. Worse than ignoring their suffering, people thought they deserved their suffering. They thought it was God’s punishment for things they had done wrong. The truth was that they were suffering because of the collective sins of a nation, including the people who looked down on them.

Have you ever noticed how important appearance is? A popular term currently in usage is the term optics. Politicians, leaders of businesses and organisations, people in the public eye, are very concerned about optics. Optics was important when Isaiah was writing. People looked superficially at those who were suffering and assumed that they had brought the suffering upon themselves.

Optics was important on Good Friday too. Pilate wanted to distance himself from an unjust decision. He tried to wriggle out of the decision by offering the people the opportunity to choose between Barabbas and Jesus. When that didn’t work, he tried to pass the blame onto the crowd by washing his hands and saying, “*I am innocent of this man’s blood, it is your responsibility!”* (see Matt. 27:24). Optics is important because far too often it works and people are swayed by what things look like in the moment.

Being disciples of Jesus and knowing his full story it is hard for us to put ourselves into the place of the common folk who witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus and jeered and taunted him. All that most of them could go by was what it looked like. They didn’t have newspapers and in-depth investigative reporting to rely on. They had to rely on rumour and on what the respected religious leaders told them. Most of them probably didn’t have the time or the inclination to investigate who Jesus was, what his character was like, and what he stood for. All they noticed was the optics.

It looked like Jesus was a troublemaker, whipping up crowds, talking about a new kingdom, throwing tables in the temple. Even worse, it looked like Jesus was a blasphemer, claiming to be God. How do we respond to people who look like they are troublemakers, to people who look like they don’t respect our values or our faith? The optics did not look good for Jesus.

How often do we judge another person by the optics? We catch a glimpse of a story on TV and make judgements on the person or people involved. It is far too easy to judge others based on a small glimpse into their life. Often, without realising it we judge people based on things like the suburb they live in, their age, their racial or ethnic identity, religion and their politics. Often, we don’t even realise we do this because it is so ingrained in the way we think.

Based on the way we determine our opinions of other people, how would we have reacted to the events of Good Friday if we were in the crowd watching the events unfold. Would we have cried out, “Crucify him!” or mutter under our breath, “Can anything good come from Nazareth.”

The optics weren’t good for Jesus but hidden in, with and under the events of Good Friday. Hidden under the man on the cross was the most important event that has ever happened, because Jesus was hanging there for the people who were taunting and jeering. Jesus was nailed on that cross for the collective sins of the whole of humanity. Listen again to the words of Isaiah.

 “Surely he took up our pain
    and bore our suffering,
he was pierced for our transgressions,
    he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
    and by his wounds we are healed.” (vs 4,5).

As we fix our eyes on Jesus, God forsaken, suffering, and dying on the cross today, let us remember that he is there for us. Suffering for our personal sins and our collective sins. Suffering in solidarity with all who ever have or ever will suffer because of the injustice of others’ actions, as well as other’s inaction. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, we see him suffering and dying for all sin, in order that a new world may rise with him from the grave. A new world where justice, righteousness and love prevail.

Amen

Pastor Rolf Lungwitz