ISAIAH 53:10-11

Reading closely
1. What happens to the servant?
2. How might the servant feel about what will happen?
3. What will the servant gain?
4. Why might God subject the servant to suffering?
5. How might the many feel about what happens to the servant?

Living the word
6. When were you glad that you persevered?
7. Have you ever taken the blame? Did you accept or resent doing so?
8. Under what conditions would you suffer for someone else?

THE FIRST READING
Through Christian eyes
Catholics hear these words on Good Friday, the day we especially remember how and why Jesus was killed. For us, Jesus is the servant. This passage, however, was first proclaimed over 500 years before the time of Christ. What did it mean to those who first heard it?

Divine punishment
In 587 BC the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, forced Israel’s leaders into exile in Babylon and ruled the region for about fifty years. Prophets like Isaiah spoke of this terrible time as God’s punishment upon his people for breaking the Sinai Covenant.

If the Babylonian exile was God’s punishment, then someone needed to accept it and repent of past sins in order for God to save his people. Many Israelites, however, doubted God would save them, and some lost faith altogether.

For many
In the face of this seemingly hopeless situation, one person, the servant, acknowledges the sins of God’s people and accepts the punishment of the exile. The servant’s willingness to honor God is enough to bring an end to the punishment of the entire nation.

We don’t know who Isaiah meant by the servant or if he even had a particular person in mind at that time. This is the only text in the Old Testament in which one person atones for the sins of others.
Although Jesus repeatedly explains that God favors the lowly, his disciples still yearn for glory and prestige. James and John ask to be second-in-command, and the other disciples resent the fact that these brothers beat them to it. Even when Jesus tells James and John that they don’t understand what they’re asking for, the two disciples confidently claim that they do.

**The cup**

To drink from the cup means to participate in. The metaphor is used in the Old Testament (examples include Psalm 11:6 and 16:5, Isaiah 51:17, and Jeremiah 25:15f). A person’s cup might be full of joy, but sometimes it’s full of suffering.

In this passage the cup also alludes to the Eucharist. By drinking from this cup a person pledges to follow Christ, come what may.

**Baptism**

Baptism is from the Greek word for immersion and refers to drowning. Jesus uses the term to refer, once again, to his forthcoming suffering and death. Baptism also recalls the Christian ritual in which believers are immersed into the death of Christ.

**High and mighty**

Roman military strength was feared throughout the region. Anyone who opposed the empire was dealt with swiftly and severely. Roman officials pledged loyalty to the emperor. Some tried to gain his favor in exchange for more power and prestige.

Jesus contrasts these fearsome and self-serving tactics with the language of service. In God’s kingdom those who hold positions of authority work only to bring others into his kingdom. Such leaders don’t care about power or recognition.

**Servant leadership**

Jesus assures James and John that they will share in his suffering, but he makes it clear that only God assigns people places of honor. As it turns out, the “honor” of being to the right and left of Jesus is reserved for the two criminals who are crucified alongside him (15:27).

**THE GOSPEL READING**

**Scrambling to be first**

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**PRAYER**

*by St. Teresa of Ávila*

Lord, grant that I may always allow myself to be guided by you, always follow your plans, and perfectly accomplish your holy will.

Grant that in all things, great and small, today and all the days of my life, I may do whatever you may require of me.

Help me to respond to the slightest prompting of your grace, so that I may be your trustworthy instrument, for your honor.

May your will be done in time and eternity – by me, in me, and through me. Amen.