

"The Humiliation of the Son of God" Isaiah 53:1-9 March 23, 1997
[No. 3 in a Series on the Text]
(Keep a finger in Philippians 2:6-11)

Text Comment

v.1 I told you that I was reading, for this series of sermons on Isaiah 53, the classic work of our Reformed Tradition on the passage, the 17th century Scot James Durham's *Christ Crucified: or, The Marrow of the Gospel Evidently Set Forth in LXXII Sermons on the Whole 53rd Chapter of Isaiah*. Well, the first sixteen sermons, and almost the entire first quarter of this large book, are devoted to the first verse of chapter 53. Among other things, he demonstrates from this single verse: 1) that the great errand of ministers is to bring the glad tidings of Jesus Christ the Savior to sinners; 2) that it is the great duty of people to believe and receive the offer of Jesus Christ in the Gospel; 3) that it is **the** great sin of people that hear the Gospel that they don't believe and receive Jesus when he is offered to them; 4) that it is the great and heavy complaint of faithful ministers of the Gospel that this good news is not received and that there is but one here and one there that closes with Christ; 5) that, while people generally think it is a very easy thing to believe in Christ and the Gospel -- though they think it difficult to pray, to keep the Sabbath, and to be holy -- they think it easy to believe, while, in actual fact, unbelief is so common precisely because faith is so difficult, so difficult that it is actually impossible but for the grace and help of God and the working of his Spirit in the hearts of men and women [pp. 29, 45, 68]. And that is just some of what Durham draws from this single verse!

Now, I made some point of summarizing the many sermons-long consideration of verse 1 in Durham's great work, the great emphasis he places upon what he calls "the rarity and scarcity of believing the Gospel and receiving Jesus Christ" because he argues, correctly I believe, that verse 2 begins an explanation of that lamentable but undeniable fact. Why do so few believe? Because Christ had a low, unimpressive appearance and is still today unimpressive to men. He is not attractive to them. He does not seem to them to offer them what they want. Oh, they may admire Jesus in a certain way, but he is not compelling to them, they do not find him worthy of the great loyalty of their lives. They certainly do not see him as the key to their existence and happiness. They would rather worship themselves than him. What Durham calls "the itching humour of men" [p. 95] is not satisfied with such a one as the Servant of the Lord. They loved him when he entered Jerusalem that long ago Palm Sunday, but only because they thought him to be someone else than he was.

And that is true and the whole Bible attests to it in many ways. But especially it is true in one way, and that is what I want us to consider together this morning.

This is, as we said, the fourth and last of the "Servant Songs." We have not yet, however, considered the sense and the significance of that word "Servant" here used to describe the Messiah, the Second Person of the Godhead, now come in the flesh, now also a true man.

God identifies him in 52:13 as "my servant." This is also what the Apostle Paul will also call him in his great commentary on Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in Philippians 2:6-11. There we read that Christ, who being in the form of God -- the NIV interprets the word "form" accurately and renders Paul's phrase, "Who being in very nature God" -- made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. The word in both cases is the same. He was in the form of God, he took on the form of a servant.

This is "form" not in the modern English sense of the term -- as if Paul might mean that Christ **only looked like** a servant, or, he had the outward form of servant even though he was not in fact one. This is rather "form" as the term is used in Greek philosophy, in the LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT that Paul frequently used, and in the Greek world of his day. Here "form" means the real nature of, the real status, the essential quality of a thing. In this case, it means the real position or essential quality of a servant, just as before he had the real status and the essential quality of God.

That is, Jesus was really a servant. The Bible draws attention to this in many ways, but especially in two ways.

I. First, Jesus was a man on assignment.

He came into the world in order to fulfil a particular mission that he had been given to do. He was obligated, by his own willing submission to his Father, to complete a particular task on his Father's behalf. He says to his Father in his great prayer in John 17: "I have finished the work that you gave me to do." His death itself was part of his assignment. We read in John 10:18: "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life.... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." In this sense Jesus was a servant. He came into the world to do the will of his Father in heaven. He was a man under orders.

II. But, still more, Jesus was a servant because he was a real man, and this manhood constituted for him a real "lowering" of himself, a humiliation. That is what a servant or a slave is -- he is someone who is below someone else. And, in Jesus' case, he seemed, at the last, below everyone else!

Now, for you and me there is nothing remarkable about being men. That is what we are, human beings. But for Christ this was a lowering of himself unlike anything that has ever been imagined by

human beings. Indeed, even when we speak of this, what the Christian Church has long called "the incarnation," we hardly know what we are talking about. This is Paul's point in his Philippian's commentary on the teaching of Isaiah 53. Jesus Christ did not begin to be when he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, **he only began to be a man.** He had always been God, the Son. He had, from eternity past, dwelt in the perfect communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He had created the world. He had revealed his divine glory -- or a small reflection of that divine glory -- to Moses, to Israel at Sinai, to Isaiah himself. He had always had before him the host of angels worshipping him as the Holy God he is.

But, he did not consider this divine glory that was his as the living God to be something to hold on to, Paul writes in a most mysterious sentence, but emptied himself, taking upon himself the form of a servant. He became a mere man, one of his own creatures. If the nations are a drop in the bucket before the high God, as Isaiah says they are, what must one single individual man be? But this is what he became, in order to fulfill his mission in the world, to save the people his Father had given to him. As Paul put it in Galatians 4, the Father sent his Son into the world, to be born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those who were under the law.

This is the great mystery of the incarnation -- God becoming a man, taking to himself a true and complete and authentic human nature. This is the central affirmation of the Christian faith, that this really happened and happened for our sakes.

But we must grasp this, the meaning of it. We often do not. We do not understand how completely and genuinely the Son of God became a true man, and so do not fully appreciate, therefore, how much of a servant he really was. We know of course that he had a human body and a human psychology. We see that everywhere in the Gospels. He acts like a man, thinks like a man, chooses like a man, and feels like men feel. There is sorrow and fear and anger and joy in his life; there is weariness and weeping and strong affections -- all in the truest human form. There is a full emotional life, volitional life, intellectual life.

But still that does not make the point for us, because we still imagine that his manhood was not like ours -- even excepting the fact that he had no sin, that he never committed a single sin -- we still almost universally assume that his manhood was unique, very different from our own and superior to it, a kind of supermanhood for a superman.

This has long been a failure in the thinking of many Christians and not of laymen only. Hilary of Poitiers, one of the most eminent of the early fathers of the Christian church, taught that Christ's body was not subject to pain nor his soul to fear. His fear of death in the Garden of Gethsemane was only concern for his disciples. When he was crucified, Hilary taught, when the nails

were driven into his hands and the spear thrust into his side, it was as when a dart pierces the water, or punctures fire, or wounds the air; the dart retains its power of piercing but it is not in the nature of water to be pierced, as it was not in Christ's nature to be subject to such suffering and pain.. And so it was during his life with hunger or thirst or weeping. Even when he took food and drink he was simply accommodating himself to custom, not actually satisfying the need of his body. [In Bruce *Humiliation of Christ*, pp. 237-238]. There is that idea that Christ's manhood was different from and far above ours.

Now, we know **that** isn't right. But, do we fully appreciate the servanthood of the Lord, his menial status and stature as a man?

For example, do we appreciate the extent to which this Servant was not able, in himself, to do what he had been sent to do, but required the help of his Father and the Spirit, that he was, as a man, dependent upon God for all that he did?

It is interesting that in the very first Servant Song, Isaiah makes exactly this point about the Servant. Isaiah 42:1: "Here is my servant, **whom I uphold...**" It is not a mere picture that we have at the Lord's baptism, when the Spirit descended upon him as a Dove. He was filled with the Holy Spirit -- perhaps at that time in a special way; or perhaps the Dove may be only an affirmation of an already existing reality -- **but, do you see that he had to be filled with the Spirit.** The dependent humanity of the Lord was ministered to constantly by the Holy Spirit and upheld by the Spirit. The Lord's understanding of the Scriptures, his receptiveness to the teaching of the Word of God, his embracing of God's will for his life, the spiritual profit he received from his trials and sufferings through life, the resoluteness, the nerve he showed in facing the great obstacles to his calling as the Savior, all of this resulted from the Spirit's work within him. In everything he was the Servant whom God upheld.

But this did not mean that his work was easy for him, exactly the reverse. This divine upholding made things infinitely more difficult for the Lord. John of Damascus, the Great Greek theologian of early Christianity, wrote that Christ "repelled and dissipated the assaults of the enemy like smoke" [in Bruce, *Humiliation*, p. 268], but that is exactly the wrong idea!

In a wonderfully profound and perceptive comment, in a sermon that was taken up by another scholar into one of the great works on the incarnation, the Scot, James Maclagan, said this about the dependence of the Servant of the Lord, in his manhood, upon the upholding of God:

This upholding of the man by God, Maclagan said in this noble passage, was "not to raise Christ's suffering nature to such a height of glorious power as would render all trial slight and contemptible; but to confer upon it such strength as

would be infallibly sufficient, but not more than sufficient, just to bear Him through the fearful strife that awaited Him, without His being broken or destroyed, -- so that He might thoroughly experience, in all the faculties of his soul and body, the innumerable sensations of overpowering difficulty, and exhausting toil, and fainting weakness, and tormenting anguish, though by the Holy Ghost prevented from sin, -- and might touch the very brink of danger, though not be swept away by it; and feel all the horror of the precipice, but without falling over." [In Bruce, *Humiliation*, p. 269; on Maclagan see Macleod, *Scottish Theology*.]

Do you see the point? In other words, he was so much a man, that apart from this upholding by God he could not have endured what he had to pass through for us and for our salvation; he could not have carried the weight of the penalty of our sins. But, upheld by that power, he was able to bear that weight and suffer those sorrows and that anguish and never find relief from it as another man would through unconsciousness or suicide or sinful abandonment of the struggle. Being upheld as he was, he was made able to suffer it all and there was no relief such as his natural human weakness would have provided him -- the oblivion of a soul and body overwhelmed by more than it could stand. He had to bear and suffer it all for God was upholding him. He was, by this upholding, capable of the fullest measure of pain and sorrow and anguish such as would have destroyed any other man. It was as if he were being held upright by strong arms, not allowed to fall, while others beat him slowly to death!

So he was a Servant, both because he was obligated to complete an assignment he had been given by his Lord and Master and because he was lowered so completely in his incarnation as to have become a true man, completely dependent upon the assurances, the help, the assistance, the support of others to fulfill his assignment.

This is the problem. This servanthood was not what men expected at all. It is not what they are interested in; it is not what they are looking for in a deliverer. They do not think themselves needing a Servant such as that -- God's errand boy, and one who required the constant aid and support of the Spirit of God. And one who fell so low in his servanthood. That was not the one the Jews wanted or expected on Palm Sunday. They wanted a conqueror to lead them in triumph, not a sufferer who would not even resist the death thrust on him. What is more, because they do not want to be servants themselves -- because they do not want to subject their wills to God -- they don't want a savior who does just that and shows them how to do the same.

And this is the point that Isaiah goes on directly to make in vv. 2-4.

The great step down that our Lord took when he came into the world, his taking upon himself the form of a servant, was not yet as far down as he would go. No, step by step, he went down still

further. He chose to take one step lower after another until finally, on the cross, he had reached the bottom of that terrible abyss.

There he was finally the cursed one! Not only a man, but, in the opinion of those who rejected him and crucified him, not even a good man. As Isaiah prophesied long before, in vv. 3 and 4, they thought him a bad man, a man God was punishing for his sins. Little did they know that he was being punished not for his sins -- for he had none -- but for theirs. They thought him forsaken by God -- and he was! -- but not for anything he had done; but for what they had done.

The creator of heaven and earth and of all men, came into the world as an ordinary man, indeed, not even a particularly handsome or impressive man, as we read in v. 2. A perfect man, who loved all men and served them more faithfully than they had ever been served by any man, he was rejected by men as their enemy. Though innocent of any crime, he was condemned to be executed in the cruelest way imaginable. He was disgusting to men. They hid their faces from him, in that terrible image of v. 3. The death he finally gave himself up to die was the death of a common criminal.

The Gospels tell us that the last great stop in the Lord's humiliation, in his becoming so absolutely and completely a servant, was that when he was nailed up on the cross his clothes were taken from him. He was hung up naked. We tend to pay much more attention to the clothes in which the infant Jesus was swaddled when lying in the manger in Bethlehem than those that were taken from him before he was crucified. But these last clothes, these clothes he is not allowed to wear, are a more important sign of his humiliation. The disrobing of Christ is a powerful symbol of the depths of shame to which he had lowered himself as the punishment for our sins.

Remember, man was naked before the fall, but without shame. After sin entered the world, Adam hid his nakedness because he was ashamed. Over and over again in the Bible, being stripped naked is a sign of humiliation and shame. And here it happens to the Son of God in full view of the passers-by who stop to gawk at the men bleeding their lives away in agony at the Place of the Skull. The Son of God hanging naked between two naked criminals. Unlike Adam, He couldn't hide, he couldn't conceal.

He died with absolutely nothing to his name -- not even his clothes were left to him. And, as Isaiah will tell us in v. 9, even his grave had to be provided for him. The authorities would have buried him in a common grave reserved for criminals. As it happened Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, provided a place for his body to rest.

This was how far down he went, he chose to go, for our sakes. No insignia of his divine glory are left. No one thought that this one hanging naked and being made sport of by the rough and cruel

soldiers who performed these executions and had been hardened by them had once been in the form of God. His divine glory was completely hidden. It escaped everyone, as Isaiah said it would in vv. 2-4.

As one writer has put it,

"There was no place in the whole world on the morning of the crucifixion which the human mind might have thought less likely to be the locus of the concentrated presence of our Redeeming God than the place called Golgatha." [MacLeod, *The Humiliated and Exalted Lord*, p. 34]

No one thought then that this one was God's beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased. "Only he who has faith can find his God and his Lord in this extreme shame." [Schilder, vol. 3, p. 169]

Now, then, here again is the point of these verses 2-4. They explain why it is that so few have believed the report that was made about the Messiah when Isaiah made it; when Jesus himself gave it; and in the ages since when it has been proclaimed to the world. This is not the way men conceive of themselves being saved. They don't imagine that someone subjected to such ignominy, someone so powerless, someone so humiliated could be the key to their existence and the only way for them to find eternal happiness through peace with God. And they don't want to be servants themselves and so don't want a Savior and salvation that glory in such servanthood.

But, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is -- this naked, shamed, undistinguished, unimpressive figure -- is the one who lived in eternity past in the form of God and came to this **only** because nothing else but his, the Son of God's, humiliation, suffering, and death was sufficient to pay the price of our sins.

The Jews in Jesus' day were not interested in a Savior like this and most of the world is no more interested today. They didn't want then and most people do not want now a Servant for a Savior, especially a Servant who stoops as low as this servant stooped. They think they need and they think they deserve something more than that! And **that** is the greatest, the most damning mistake men ever make.

On the wall of the ruins of the quarters of the imperial page boys on the Palatine hill in Rome, there is a third century picture, drawn in a youthful hand, of a boy in a worshipful posture before a cross upon which is crucified the figure of a man with a donkey's head. The inscription below reads: "Alexamenos worships his God!" One of the pages was a Christian and unashamed of it and his fellows were mocking his faith. In another hand, another inscription nearby reads, "Alexamenos is faithful." Perhaps that was Alexamenos' own response to the mockery; perhaps it was that

of one of his friends who had come to see the truth that Alexamenos had taught him. The world may think Christ a donkey -- so shameful and so servile his death -- but he was there on assignment and that assignment was nothing less than paying for the sins of his people -- sins so great that nothing could ever pay their price short of the complete humiliation of the Son of God.

If God should bring anyone here now or soon to the knowledge of your own great sinfulness and need of forgiveness, remember this: even a debt as great as yours to a holy God can be met! It was met! And in what a terrible and totally unexpected way.

Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?