

clearly has a mission **to** Israel, while the community speaking in the Fourth song is meant to be Israel **itself**.

In addition, with the exception of the Servant Songs, Old Testament classical prophecy is always concerned with the situation facing the prophet **at the time of his calling**. He is God's mouthpiece to the people to warn, admonish, call to repentance and/ or give hope. Where hope is offered it is usually in the form of a renewal of the Covenant relationship, accompanied by a return to general happiness and good fortune. The Servant Songs **depart significantly** from this formula

### Jesus as the Suffering Servant

With Christian hindsight, the Servant Songs point **directly to Jesus** with extreme accuracy. Within the Songs are descriptive elements that mirror the mission and sufferings of Jesus.



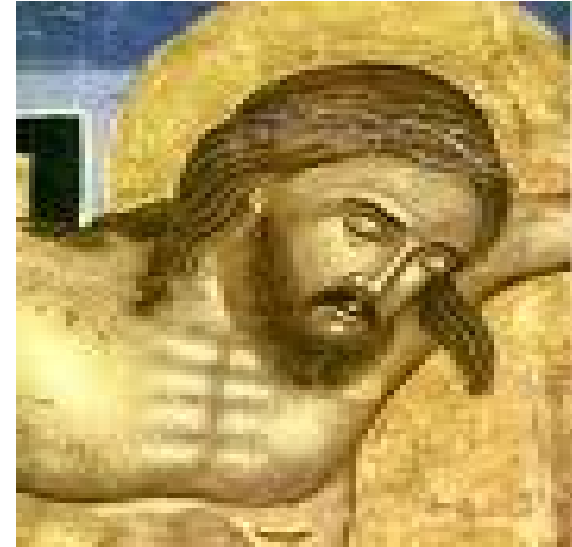
The personality, teaching and miracles of Jesus gave hope to many Jews that He was the expected Messiah. This did seem to be realised when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but in reality it was to signal that 'other' Messiah, the one portrayed as the Suffering Servant. Jesus failed to realise the traditional image of the conquering Messiah, so many of those who had welcomed him into Jerusalem became despondent and deserted him. The scene was then set for his death: **"Forcibly, after sentence, he was taken"** (Isa.53:8).

Jesus was clearly identified with the Suffering Servant in the early Church (e.g. **Acts** ch.3 and 4). The Gospel of **Matthew** quotes the entire First servant song (ch.12) and part of the Fourth (ch.8), and **Luke** quotes part of the First (ch.2), with both indirectly using 'servant' quotations in their Passion narratives. **Matthew and Mark's** Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism interestingly quote the first verse of the First song, but replace the word 'servant' with 'Son'.

The Gospel of **John** (ch.10) alludes to the Fourth song with his image of the Good Shepherd laying down his life for his sheep.

## Our Catholic Faith Prayer and Spirituality 2010-2011

### 22. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah - A New Messiah, A New Prayer



1. What is particularly unique in Jewish belief about the Fourth Song of Isaiah, that of the Suffering Servant?
2. Why do you think that the Jews did not accept the new revelation of God, that of the Suffering Servant?
3. Is there any significance in God calling his servant 'the Upright One'?

## The Servant Songs of Isaiah

There are **four Servant Songs** in Isaiah.

- Chapter 42: 1-4 and 6
- Chapter 49: 1-6
- Chapter 50: 4-9
- Chapter 52: 13, to 53: 12

The Book of Isaiah covers **3 distinct periods** of Jewish history each of which has a **separate** author. The Servant Songs occur in the second part, whose author is termed Deutero-Isaiah, when the Jews were in exile in Babylon (587-538BC) after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Although the songs appear separately, it is generally accepted that they are a unified literary composition.

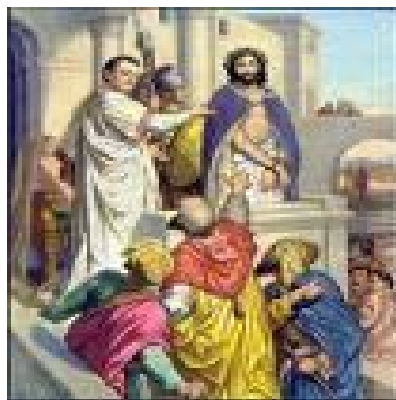
**The First Song** has God as the speaker. He expresses his pleasure at a special servant chosen by Him to judge **the world** and bring it into righteousness. Significantly, the servant is described as a **Covenant**.

**The Second Song** has the servant as the speaker. He recognises his unique position, being called to serve God before he was even born. He also realises he has special talents to preach God's Word to Israel but, after initially considering his mission as a failure, is revitalised by God who reveals to him an even **wider mission to all nations**.

**The Third Song** again has the servant as the speaker. He tells how he has readily followed God's calling as a teacher although this has led him **to be mocked and insulted**. He has confidence that, with God to help him, no-one will be able to oppose him.

**The Fourth Song** is the **most exceptional** and inaugurates a completely **new** understanding of what the Messiah will be. It is the prayer of the **Suffering Servant** and, as such, is a **new form** of Jewish prayer "**Who has seen in it a revelation of Yahweh's arm?**"

The Fourth Song begins with God as the speaker, continues with a community response, and has God ending it. God foretells how His



servant, now dead and disfigured, will be exalted before all nations:

**“My servant will prosper, grow to great heights .. many kings will stay tight lipped before him”.**

The community then accepts God's **revelation** given through his dead servant. It does so in the form of a **Prayer of Penance** (53:1-10) that recognises its own guilt in rebelling against God's will, a guilt it now knows was expunged by the servant's death:

**“Yet ours were the sufferings he was bearing  
He was being wounded for our rebellion,  
crushed because of our guilt, and we have  
been healed by his bruises”**

God himself reveals that his plan was for his servant to bear the sin of all others, in order to reconcile them to himself:

**“By his knowledge the upright one, my servant, will justify many  
by taking their guilt in himself .. He was bearing the sin of many”**

N.B. Psalm 22 bears a striking resemblance to the Fourth Song.

## What is the Significance of the Songs?

The Servant Songs are some of the most fascinating passages in the whole of the Old Testament for several reasons:

- A. They can not be identified with any contemporary historical person
- B. The Servant's mission represents an **innovation** in Jewish belief
- C. The Suffering Servant contrasts to the expected nature of the Messiah as a **victorious military king**. It is a new **revelation**.
- D. The Servant is revealed as a sacrifice to God, an **offering for sin**.

There are many occasions in the Bible when people are addressed as servants of God, particularly Moses and David. The term is also often applied in a collective sense to Israel itself, even in Deutero-Isaiah, and once even in the Second Servant Song. However, the subject of the Servant Songs can not be Israel itself: This particular servant

