

The pathway to the cross

How did Jesus discover God's will for his life?

(a talk given in Woking on 18th September 2019)

It runs east-west through the old city of Jerusalem, wending a winding course to the famous Church of the Holy Sepulchre. They call it the Via Dolorosa. Down this road Jesus carried his cross from the court of Pontius Pilate to Golgotha, where he was crucified. That at least is the claim of the tourist guidebooks and the company of Franciscan Friars, who every Friday retrace that final journey of their Master, punctuating their brief pilgrimage by liturgical commemorations at the 14 so-called 'stations of the cross' which mark the route.

And so it may very well have been - there's no major reason to doubt this particular tradition, which is very ancient and not archaeologically unfeasible. Yet in one respect, I think the Via Dolorosa is definitely misleading. From start to finish, the road is no more than a mere half mile in length. If it were to accurately represent Jesus' pathway to the cross, it would have to be much longer than that.

At least, that would certainly have been the view of the gospel evangelists, for their accounts reveal that the shadow of the cross hung over the entire course of Jesus' public ministry. In fact, they tell us that on numerous occasions Jesus tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to prepare his disciples for the grim inevitability of the violent death that awaited him.

This evening I want to ask: Why was Jesus so sure that he would die in the way he did? Where did he get his information from on this point? It is an important question for a number of reasons, I think, not least because it raises a very practical pastoral issue for every would-be Christian – namely, how do I find God's will for my life? A lot of Christians have the idea that divine guidance is about obeying mysterious spiritual promptings from above. I often hear people say 'God told me to do X', by which they mean they got a mysterious feeling about it. Now I am not here today to scorn that idea totally. I am quite sure the Holy Spirit does sometimes prompt people to do or say things. In fact, I shall mention an example of such guidance toward the end of this talk. However, I do want to suggest that such promptings are rare and not the normal mode of guidance for a Christian. No one was more in tune with the Holy Spirit than Jesus, but I hope to prove to you that the main source from which he understood his Father's will was not some kind of vertical direct hot-line to heaven, but his reading of the Bible.

When I was here last time you may recall I talked about how Jesus used the Bible in his teaching. Well, this is kind of part 2 of that study, because today I want to talk about how Jesus used the Bible to find direction for his own life. I want to convince you that it was the Bible that directed his feet onto the Via Dolorosa – the pathway to the cross.

To pursue that goal, I want to focus our attention first on an incident that is recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels. We will look at what scholars are agreed is the earliest of these accounts – in Mark 8:

On the way Jesus asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (Mark 8:27-33)

It is quite clear I think that this conversation with his disciples marked a crucial turning point in the life of Jesus. It was the first time any of the disciples openly confessed their belief in Jesus' unique messianic identity, and, significantly, it was also the first time Jesus openly spoke of his coming death.

Note first what public opinion was saying about Jesus in the Galilean villages that he and his disciples were currently touring.

'Some say you are John the Baptist (who had been executed by King Herod a few months previously); others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

It's clear then that, while the Galilean crowd were unanimous in the high regard they had for Jesus, they stopped short of identifying him as the Messiah. They agreed Jesus was exceptional – but only in the sense of belonging to the company of those inspired spokesmen of God they called 'prophets'. Why were they reluctant to hail Jesus as the Messiah? After all, there were any number of spurious messiahs around in this period of history, – and Galilee was renowned as a hotbed for such messianic hysteria. So why didn't Jesus attract the same popular verdict? Why were the Galilean crowds, who were usually so ready to jump to messianic conclusions, unwilling to identify Jesus in that way?

Well almost certainly it had to do with the style of Jesus' public ministry. His Jewish compatriots were expecting a messiah who would be a man of political action – a 'Son of David' in the most direct and literal of ways – royal in his bearing and military in his methods. And Jesus simply did not fit into their preconceived stereotype. He was a man of words – a teacher not a warrior. His spirituality seemed to have far more in common with the prophets than with the kings of ancient Israel.

Yet, flattering as you might have thought it to be called a prophet, this identification clearly did not satisfy Jesus. He goes on, *'But who do you say I am?'*

That of course is the ultimate question Jesus puts to each one of us, isn't it? If we could, in good conscience, put Jesus into the pigeonhole marked 'prophet', we could safely ignore him. After all there have been many prophets, and none of them has the right to demand our discipleship – for, in spite of their divinely inspired words, they were in themselves

fallible human beings. Prophets may be interesting figures, challenging even – but we do not feel compelled to follow them, still less to call them ‘Lord’. But what if Jesus is more than a prophet?

Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ’.

To those who are not familiar with the culture of 1st century Israel, I suppose Peter’s answer may not seem particularly world-shattering. For us the word ‘Christ’ functions pretty much as Jesus’ surname, doesn’t it? He is Jesus Christ – as I am Roy Clements. But there can be no doubt that, for those who were actually there, this was a quite momentous conclusion to have come to. For ‘Christos’ literally means ‘Anointed One’ – and it is the direct Greek translation of the Hebrew word ‘Messiah’. So Peter is quite expressly identifying Jesus as ‘the Messiah’ here. And that was ground-breaking, for Peter was a Galilean – and as we were just saying, that meant he was saturated in the anti-imperialist, revolutionary preconceptions of his peers. Up until this moment, the word ‘Messiah’ for him would undoubtedly have been laden with militaristic and politicised overtones. Yet now, suddenly, it seems his whole mental construct of what the Messiah would be like had turned somersault. He saw before him one who carried no weapon – one who spent his days ministering to the sick and preaching to the poor – who taught people to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek when subjected to violent indignity. *Do not resist an evil person, he said, and pray for those who abuse you.* According to Luke, Jesus had even recently flouted the anti-colonial prejudices of his compatriots completely by commending, of all people, a Roman centurion.

Yet Peter, the aggressive, surly, patriotic fisherman of Galilee – as he looks into the eyes of such a man – Peter finds himself saying ‘YOU – are the Christ!’. Of course, it was an impetuous confession – he had not worked out its full implications. There were plenty of misconceptions still buzzing in his brain, as we will shortly discover – but a remarkable revolution had begun in Peter’s thinking. The crowd were content to see Jesus as a prophet, but Peter had come to realise that Jesus was more than that; he was unique – he was the Messiah.

And perhaps even more remarkably – Jesus did not contradict him.

‘Jesus warned them not to tell anyone’.

An unexpected response, don’t you think?

I mean, if, on the one hand, Jesus didn’t believe that Peter’s verdict was correct, he should surely have disillusioned him. ‘No, no Peter! Very generous of you to say so, of course, but you must not let your imagination run away with you like that!’ Instead, he accepts Peter’s recognition of his messianic identity but tells them all to hush it up! In fact, if you read the rest of Mark’s gospel, you find this was a settled policy on Jesus’ part. Scholars even talk about ‘the messianic secret’ that characterised this early part of his ministry.

Why on earth do that? If he believed Peter was right, surely he would want to encourage more confessions of faith in his messiahship, not silence them.

Well, I suggest the answer to that is all tied up with Jesus' own understanding of what God his Father wanted him to do - an understanding that, as I say, he did not so much receive via a direct hot-line to heaven as through a careful study of the Bible.

In that connection, I want you to notice carefully what follows:

Who do you say I am? Peter answered, "You are the Christ". He warned them not to tell anyone about him ... and then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer, and that he must be killed.

Two unexpected things to observe here:

1. The title 'Son of Man', which Jesus seems to substitute for 'the Christ', though no-one else ever does.
2. The word '*must*'. It occurs twice. Jesus speaks as if there was some inexorable necessity determining this matter. Suffering and death were a 'must' as far as he is concerned. And notice who would be responsible for this violent end: '*the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law*'.

If Peter's confession that this humble son of a Galilean carpenter was in fact the Messiah represented an extraordinary shift in conventional ideas about what the Messiah would be like, this prediction of his suffering and death must have shaken those conventional ideas with the force of a major earthquake! Alright, the Galilean crowd's opinion of Jesus may have been inadequate, but at least they honoured him as a prophet. Yet Jesus here is predicting that one day soon the leading figures of the Jewish religion would pass their opinion on him too, and without exception their verdict would not be simply to damn him with faint praise, they would damn him good and proper ... as a heretic, as a criminal, as worthy of death. And this not as the result of some tragic accident or political misjudgement on Jesus' part, but by virtue of a compelling necessity. *The Son of Man must suffer.*

To get to the bottom of all these unexpected words, we have to realise that there are in fact three distinct strands of messianic expectation in the Old Testament – three strands which had not been clearly identified by the Jews of Jesus' own day, but which I want to suggest to you Jesus himself had discovered and fused in his own self-understanding.

1. The Son of David (first half of Isaiah)
2. The Son of Man (Daniel)
3. The Servant (second half of Isaiah)

The first and most obvious prophetic strand went with the royal title 'Son of David'. As we've already mentioned, this was the one that the vast majority of Jews in Jesus day associated with the word 'Messiah'. Historically it begins in the book of Psalms – many of which had been written by David himself a thousand years before Jesus – for these ancient spiritual songs often celebrated the Davidic monarchy in such highly exaggerated terms that not even great Solomon could claim to have fulfilled their lofty aspirations literally. Take Psalm 2 for instance:

'He said to me: You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance.' (Psalm 2:7-8)

This is a coronation hymn - God declares to the Davidic heir as the crown is placed on his head by the high priest – *'You are my Son, this is your birthday!'* – 'Son of God' then - an extraordinarily lofty title for the new king, and it is coupled with an extraordinary offer: *'Just ask me and I'll place every nation on earth under your feet!'*

Such exaggerated aspirations of course bore no resemblance to the actual historical experience of the Davidic monarchy in ancient Israel – in fact, the later kings proved more and more disappointing. By the eighth century BC (two centuries after David), the nation had been divided into rival kingdoms, only the smaller of which was still ruled by a Davidic heir, and both of which were seriously threatened by the vastly superior military might of the pagan Assyrian empire.

Yet it was at precisely that low point of frustrated expectation that a prophet arose in Judah with (as the first Star Wars film was famously sub-titled) *a new hope*.

The prophet's name was Isaiah - taking his cue from those unfulfilled dreams of royal success that were celebrated in the Psalms, he looked to the future and saw, on the distant horizon, the advent of a better king - a perfect king.

'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.' (Isaiah 9:1-7)

'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him... He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.' (Isaiah 11:1-10)

This new king would be descended from the genetic stock of David's dynasty then – *'a shoot from the withered stump of Jesse'* - so Isaiah is thinking of a human figure who arises from within the normal flow of history - but this future 'Son of David' would be so supernaturally 'anointed' by the Spirit of God that his royal achievements would far exceed those of any king that Israel had ever known – just as Psalm 2 had predicted, this new Son of David would worthily be called the Son of God – for he would be crowned as king, not just of Israel but of all the nations and, under his sovereign rule, the whole earth would be full of the knowledge of Jehovah – the Lord God of Israel.

Isaiah's stunning messianic vision was very influential, and went on to be developed by later prophets, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as they struggled with the continuing political decline of Israel.

And it was this same ancient prophetic dream (which I will call Strand 1) that still fired the Galilean crowds in Jesus' day. When a demon-possessed man cries out to Jesus in Mark 5 *'What do you want with me Jesus, Son of the Most High God?'* it is those ancient messianic prophecies that he is alluding to – in 1st century Galilee, 'Son of God' was not the trinitarian title it later became in Christian theology - it was a royal messianic title, powerfully redolent of Psalm 2 and those lofty, but so often disappointed, aspirations for the Davidic monarchy.

And when impetuous Peter answered Jesus' question with that startling confession *'You are the Christ'*, it was, without doubt, that royal first strand of messianic expectation that he had in his mind, as every Galilean Jew of that day would have done.

And, I suggest to you, that's why Jesus had to warn them all so strictly not to repeat it! For, Messiah though he knew himself to be, he had come to the conclusion that that first strand of messianic expectation was only part of the story. And it was emphatically NOT the strand that was most immediately on his personal agenda. He had not come to win a military victory over the forces of pagan empires, like some new king David. In fact, such politicised ideas could seriously jeopardise his real mission – that's why immediately he goes on to drop his theological bombshell on their burgeoning messianic enthusiasm:

'The Son of Man must suffer and be killed.' - he tells them.

So depressingly emphatic is he about this that Peter tries to shake him out of it.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

It was an understandable enough reaction. Haven't we all tried to jolly along a friend when we sense he or she is bowed down by some morbid foreboding. In Peter's ears, Jesus' premonitions of imminent doom were completely incompatible with the messianic identity he had just a moment before confirmed. *'You are the Christ!'* Peter had confessed. How could the Messiah be troubled by thoughts of pain and death? Nothing like that could possibly happen to you Jesus – you are the Messiah!

But Jesus' reaction to Peter's well-intentioned rebuke is to turn upon his disciple with uncharacteristic venom.

He rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God.'

Was the issue then so serious? Clearly it was! When Jesus said, *'the Son of Man must suffer'*, he was not expressing the hopelessness of a depressive with a death wish, nor even the premonition of a clairvoyant – he was expressing the determination of a man who knows he has an absolutely essential mission to fulfil - something quite literally 'crucial' was at stake – something of such divinely ordained significance that any influence that weakened his resolve in regard to it amounted to demonic temptation. As innocent as Peter's well-meaning attempts at dissuasion may seem, they had

to be uncompromisingly repudiated. His sufferings were a very personal 'must' that God himself had placed on his shoulders.

Where did this sense of divine necessity in Jesus' mind derive from? I want to suggest to you that the gospels provide us with a conclusive answer to that question. Jesus' understanding of the will of God for his life was drawn from the Bible. Look at this text from Luke 18:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again. (Luke 18:31-33)

This is the record of a slightly later occasion when Jesus once again tried to communicate to the reluctant ears of his disciples the tragic events that would soon engulf him. But this time he adds an explanatory detail which he did not make explicit on the earlier occasion: '*everything that is written by the prophets will be fulfilled*'. Here then is the source of Jesus' certainty on this matter. This '*must*' is the '*must*' of prophecy. Jesus was convinced that the Bible predicted that he would have to suffer.

But which prophecy in particular is he talking about? For, as Peter was so clearly aware, suffering did not feature at all in the first 'Son of David' messianic strand.

Could Jesus be referring to the second strand I mentioned – the one associated with the title 'Son of Man'? This was certainly a much less well-known strand of biblical prophecy. It arose during the Babylonian exile, three centuries after Isaiah's ministry. The only reference to it in the Old Testament is in the book of Daniel and, consequently, it was familiar only within a very limited and esoteric Jewish circle – the apocalyptic circle. The apocalyptic writers were around from the time of the exile right through to the end of the first century AD. They were marked by a very idiosyncratic literary style featuring all kinds of bizarre symbolism - a style that influenced only two books in our Bible to any large degree – the second half of Daniel and the NT book of Revelation – but there were many non-canonical books that developed apocalyptic ideas and imagery, and Jesus was not only clearly familiar with them but felt relaxed about identifying with them, for the title, 'Son of Man', which he uses of himself here in Mark 7 and in numerous other places, is drawn from the seminal apocalyptic text in Daniel 7.

In my vision at night, I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all people, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:9-14)

But, once again, we have a problem - what are we to make of Jesus' exposition of this apocalyptic title? For he insists: *'The Son of Man must suffer'*. But according to Daniel and the apocalyptic writers, the Son of Man does not suffer any more than Isaiah's Son of David does. The difference between the two is that, while the Son of David is a physical descendant of David, the Son of Man is a totally transcendent, supernatural figure who does not arise from within history at all, but instead descends direct from heaven, coming in the clouds to claim dominion over the entire globe on the day of final judgement. Unlike Isaiah, you see, the apocalyptic writers were completely pessimistic about human history. They had given up on the dream of some new king of Israel arising to turn the clock back to the glory days of Solomon. No – in their view, deliverance for the people of God from the succession of pagan 'beasts' that had dominated their history would have to come by virtue of a supernatural stroke from heaven. And Daniel's prophecy of final judgement and the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds fitted perfectly with that millennialist dream.

Those who embraced these apocalyptic ideas were not part of mainstream Jewish culture in the first-century. They were theological oddballs that sought to prepare themselves for the coming day of judgement by living away from the urban centres in isolated monastic communities – the Essenes, who compiled the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were just such a group. They knew all about the Son of Man strand of messianic expectation. And some scholars believe that both John the Baptist and Jesus in their early years had had some contact with them – it is highly speculative but not impossible. Be that as it may, the rank and file peasants of Galilee were largely unfamiliar with apocalyptic - which is why Jesus could adopt the title 'Son of Man' without the risk of it engendering a political uprising. Of course, anyone better informed about recent developments in Jewish literature - in the corridors of power in Jerusalem for instance – would understand the implications of that Daniel prophecy all too well.

Which is why part of the interrogation of Jesus at his trial is so significant. Mark tells us the high priest asked him a direct question:

"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"

And Jesus replied: *"I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming in the clouds of heaven."* (Mark 14:61-64)

It was that confession that led the High Priest to tear his robes crying blasphemy. It seems, with the cross so near, Jesus felt there is no further need for secrecy. On the contrary, Jesus made clear to the Jewish court that would order his execution that he had fused messianic strands 1 and 2 and identified himself with both. He was the royal Messiah, the Son of God, and he was also the Son of Man.

But it's important to note that he saw the fulfilment of these first two strands of messianic expectation as something that still lay in the distant future. In fact, this is just one of many occasions in the concluding days of his ministry when

he spoke of a second advent – a day when he would come again in glory at the end of the age as Judge of world. That was when the kingly and glorious expectations associated with both messianic strands 1 and 2 would be fulfilled.

But before that, in the much more immediate future, something very different had to happen: *'The Son of Man must suffer'*. So we ask yet again, where did Jesus get that idea from - the idea of a suffering Messiah?

The answer lies in the third strand of messianic expectation in the Old Testament. A strand which as far as I can discover, nobody else in his own day had identified – and a kind of messiah which, as a result, absolutely no-one in first-century Israel was expecting.

Let me point you to two points in Jesus' life that provide unmistakable evidence of the influence of that third strand on his self-understanding. The first comes at the very beginning of his ministry - his baptism and what happened immediately after it.

'When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased (Luke 3:21-22)

When you read those verses about the voice from heaven that greeted Jesus as he was baptised, perhaps you are moved to say, 'Aha – so Jesus did get his sense of divine direction via a heavenly hotline!'. And up to a point of course, you would be right – though it's worth pointing out there are only two occasions recorded in the gospels when Jesus heard such a voice – this one at his baptism, and a very similar one at the transfiguration. So I think I'm justified in my claim that voices from heaven were rare even in the experience of Jesus, and certainly not his normal mode of guidance. But in any case, a deeper examination of the actual words spoken from heaven I think support my thesis rather than challenging it. – for they are words drawn from the Bible!

Notice how they begin: *"You are my Son!"*

Does that remind you of anything? – yes, of course – it is the coronation declaration from Psalm 2 addressing a new Davidic king – so we expect the heavenly voice to continue the quotation: *"Today I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance"*.

But instead, and I think most significantly, the voice of God substitutes an alternative predicate:

"... whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Where do those words come from? Making allowance for the translation from OT Hebrew, into 1st century Aramaic, and then into NT Greek – I'm convinced those words are an allusion, not to the Davidic Psalms, but to the second half of the prophecy of Isaiah - specifically Isaiah 42 – a text which begins not *'This is my Son ...'* but *'Here is my servant...'*:

'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations... I will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, and free captives from prison and release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.'

(Isaiah 42:1-9)

Here then, in the words given to Jesus by God at the very outset of his public ministry, is the first allusion in the gospels to that third strand of messianic expectation – not the Son of David, not the Son of Man - the Servant.

'The Servant' is a most mysterious figure that dominates what scholars call Second or Deutero-Isaiah. Although it is not accepted by some very conservative scholars, almost all modern scholarship recognises that the second half of the book of Isaiah, from chapter 40 onwards was written by another hand and at a considerably later time – the time when Cyrus conquered the Babylonian empire in 539BC.

It includes a cycle of lyrical poems – songs - all of which in some way or another describe the ministry of this mysterious figure that the prophet designates simply as *'the servant'*. In the earlier songs, 'the servant' seems to be a collective metaphor for 'Israel', the people of God. But as the cycle of songs proceeds, it becomes increasingly apparent that Israel had failed to fulfil the 'servant' role for which she was chosen. What is God's solution to this? Well, about half way through the cycle of songs, the prophet begins to glimpse another 'servant' figure, complementary but different, for this 'servant' is yet to come, and is no longer a corporate metaphor but a distinct individual. His mission will be to bring Israel back to God: to reconstruct the people of God in his own person so they become the 'servant' people they were always meant to be. And significantly, he would do this not just for the Jews – the prophet anticipates that this new initiative from God will include all the nations of the earth.

And now the Lord says – he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honoured in the eyes of the Lord and God has been my strength – he says: 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.'

(Isaiah 49:5-6)

In Isaiah 61, a final song is placed on the lips of the Servant himself; his messianic mission is recapitulated in the first person singular:

'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.' (Isaiah 61:1)

With those words in mind, just notice will you what happens in the aftermath of Jesus' baptism.

'Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit ... He went to Nazareth ... and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" ... Then he rolled up the scroll ... and the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."' (Luke 4:14-21)

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus felt inwardly compelled to spend a lengthy period in solitude in the desert – a response perhaps that might have come naturally to someone who had spent time with the Essene monks – but which also might be a deliberate parallel to the 40 years Israel had spent being tested in the wilderness after the Exodus. We are told Jesus was tempted by the Devil – do you remember the words that prefaced each of those demonic tests?

'If you are the Son of God ...'

If you are identifying yourself as the long-expected royal Messiah of David's line, in other words. Remember the voice from heaven had just declared in the words of Psalm 2 that he was – but the Devil's temptation forces Jesus to explore what he understands by that title - what kind of messiah exactly does he intend to be? Would he be the kind who uses his supernatural powers to seize the kingdoms of the world, for instance?

As Jesus emerges from the desert, we are left wondering, what has he decided in that respect? We do not have to wait long for an answer. He returns to Nazareth – it is the Sabbath, so he goes into his home synagogue and asks to read the lesson. He requests, you notice, for a very specific scroll from the library of OT scriptures – the scroll of Isaiah – and he chooses, you notice, a very specific section of that book – not Isaiah 9, with its prophecy of the messianic Son of David – no Isaiah 61 – the song of the Servant:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.'

Luke tells us the eyes of the entire congregation were fastened on him as he put down the scroll and said:

'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

This scripture – not those misleading texts with which the Devil had been trying to fill his mind – but this one. This is the scripture that defines God's will for my life. I am to be the servant Messiah.

The question, of course, that haunts that cycle of songs in Second Isaiah is how exactly does this mysterious messianic 'servant' bring good news to the poor – how does he deliver the oppressed from their darkness? The answer to that is not made explicit in Isaiah 61 – but it is found in an earlier song of the cycle. The fourth song: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. If you will allow me, I'd like to read it to you.

'See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man ... He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering ... But he was pierced for our transgressions ... We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all ... He poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors.' (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 abbreviated)

In these five stanzas of lyrical poetry, the prophet reveals that the 'servant' will accomplish his remarkable redemptive mission in a startling and unprecedented manner – through suffering.

In a way not unusual in Hebrew poetry, Stanzas 1 and 5, and stanzas 2 and 4, each form a pair, supporting the central climax in Stanza 3. Stanzas 2/4 mainly focus on the 'servant' as the world sees him, so disfigured by his suffering that he is '*despised and rejected by men*' (53:3). Their verdict is that he must have done something exceptionally wicked to deserve such punishment: '*we considered him stricken by God*'. But therein lies the irony, for '*he had done no violence, nor was any deceit found in his mouth*' (53:9). This man's sufferings were completely undeserved: '*he was oppressed ... led like a lamb to the slaughter*' (53:7). An innocent man then who is executed like a common criminal by an act of monstrous injustice. It all seems like a pathetic waste of a life.

Why does God allow it to happen? Stanzas 1/5 provide the divine perspective. '*See, my servant, will be raised and highly exalted*' (52:13). Where the world sees only ignominy, God perceives a precious and beautiful sign of hope in a morally barren world: '*a tender shoot, a root out of dry ground*' (53:2). He whom the world sees as contemptible, God sees as the only attractive object in the entire universe! So we ask again, Why suffering? And the prophet replies: '*Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer*' (53:10). What an extraordinary thing to say! God's will for injustice to triumph? Can the prophet be serious? Indeed he is, for these sufferings, ignominious and contemptible though they

appear, are sufferings with a divine purpose. They are essential to the mysterious mission of 'the Servant'; for '*the Lord makes his life a guilt offering*' (53:10).

The idea of atonement through sacrifice was one which the Jews had been taught well through the rituals laid down in the law of Moses. The blood on the altar was a powerful symbol both of the seriousness of sin and the cost of forgiveness. But what the prophet is talking about here is utterly unprecedented – for he speaks not of an altar but a scaffold, and not of an animal but of a human sacrifice – an innocent man whose surrendered life God would accept as a '*guilt offering*' for the sin of the world. As a result, '*my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities ... for he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors*' (53:11-12). Out of his apparent failure would come an extraordinary vindication; '*he will see his offspring and prolong his days ... after the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied ... therefore I will give him a portion among the great ... because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors*' (53:10-12).

I want you to notice that verse particularly: for this is other text that confirms Jesus' self-identification with 'the Servant' - Jesus specifically directed his disciples to it in the bleak atmosphere of the Upper Room the night before he died.

Luke 22:37: 'It is written: "And he was numbered with the transgressors"; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.'

Here then is a direct citation of the scripture which Jesus said 'must' be fulfilled and which underlay his insistence that his sufferings were essential to his messianic mission. His sufferings and death were the redemptive sufferings and death of the Servant spoken of in Isaiah 53.

I say again – he needed no hotline from heaven to tell him what the Messiah he had to do – he found it there in the Bible.

And right up until the end his disciples were oblivious to it. So inured were they in their preconceptions about a royal warrior, they simply could not accept what he told them about his coming death. It was only when he had walked the Via Dolorosa and returned to them in resurrection glory that the pieces at last began to fall into place for them. But the risen Jesus still had to take them on a 40-day crash course in biblical studies to ensure they had really taken it all on board.

'How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.' (Luke 24:25-27)

I am quite sure that the second half of Isaiah featured prominently in that post-Easter dominical crash course. And after Jesus' Ascension and the remarkable events of Pentecost, I am sure it also formed a key part of the teaching that the apostles gave to the multitudes of newly baptised Christian converts. Why am I so sure about that? Because of a delightful incident that Luke records in Acts 8.

It features one of those new converts from the Day of Pentecost of soon after – a young Greek-speaking Jew called Philip. He quickly proved himself to be an exceptionally gifted evangelist. And one day, we are told, he experienced one of those inner impulses from the Holy Spirit that I talked about earlier – remember I did say that they happen occasionally, and here was a case in point. The Holy Spirit prompted Philip to take the main road south from Jerusalem in the direction of Gaza. So he did, and who should he meet on the road but an Ethiopian eunuch! Now normally Philip would not have gone near such a person. For a start, he was almost certainly a negro – and pious Jews of the first-century were incorrigible racists. Worse than that, this man had undergone, albeit involuntarily, transgender surgery. He was a eunuch – someone who these days would certainly have sported a very conspicuous rainbow insignia. And pious Jews of the first century were incorrigibly prejudiced against anyone who was in any way sexually unconventional. Worse even than that, the guy was seated in a chariot – the first century equivalent of a Rolls Royce – so he was clearly a high-ranking officer in the Ethiopian diplomatic service – a Gentile with a lot of influence in other words. Separated from Philip then by huge barriers of race, sex and social class, I say again, this was not the sort of person with whom he would normally have ever considered trying to start a conversation.

But divine providence had set up this encounter. For as Philip, following that inner prompting, drew near to the chariot. he discovered this Ethiopian stranger had picked up an Old Testament scroll while he had been doing his diplomatic service in Jerusalem – and he was reading it as his chariot trundled along on his homeward journey. What scroll had he purchased? – why, surprise, surprise! – it was the scroll of the prophet Isaiah – and which part was he reading? – why, surprise, surprise! – it was Isaiah 53 – the servant song.

'The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?'

It was a question that a few months earlier Philip would not have been able to answer. But things had changed. He had benefited from those post-pentecostal Bible studies that the apostles, following their Master's lead, had been conducting in Jerusalem.

'Then beginning with that very passage of scripture, Philip began to tell the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus.' (Acts 8:35)

Well our time has gone – suffice it to say in closing that Jesus’ exposition of the messianic prophecies and his deliberate fulfilment of them, shapes not only the New Testament’s understanding of his mission, but also the fundamental mindset to which, according to the NT, a Christian disciple should aspire.

Let me draw your attention to an incident recorded in the gospels just a week or so before the cross. We’re told that, still obsessed with mistaken ideas of the imminent political transformation that Jesus would bring about in Jerusalem, James and John were asking to sit at his right and left hand in his glory. Jesus’ response was to try to get it through their thick heads once again that he was about to fulfil Strand 3 of the messianic prophecies; Strands 1 and 2 would have to wait. But this time, he expressed a novel implication of his identification with Strand 3:

‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. Not so with you. Whoever want to be great among you must be your servant. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’ (Mark 10:42-45)

Remember, the mission of the Servant was, through his vicarious suffering, to create a new ‘servant’ people of God – the kind of people Israel was meant to be but never was. So the pathway of humble service was not just his own mission, but also an example for his disciples to follow.

And once again, in the later teaching of the apostles, it is clear this new ethical mandate was fully absorbed.

Do you recall these words from Paul in Philippians 2, for instance?

‘Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant – he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.’

Or what about these words of Peter in I Peter 2:

‘Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect... for to this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you follow in his steps.

He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth ... he bore our sins in his body on the tree... by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd of your souls.’

So those ancient words of Isaiah 53 have flowed not just into the church's theology of the atonement, but also to its distinctive Christian ethic of humility.

A clear pointer then: if Jesus discovered God's will for him as the Messiah, by studying the Bible. You can be sure we discover God's will for our lives in exactly the same way.

