

Four times the book of Isaiah sings a song about a mysterious figure known as the Suffering Servant. The first reading on Good Friday every year is the fourth of these songs. It opens with the voice of God saying that the servant shall prosper and be greatly exalted. It continues with the voices of Israel realizing that they have misjudged God's servant.

We don't know too many details. The servant never speaks or does anything, and his silence makes his suffering more mysterious. His appearance is so marred that people won't look at him. They think he's guilty of something, as if you only have misfortune if God is angry at you for something you did. But the people were wrong. The servant was innocent, and God used the servant's affliction to call Israel to repentance. By suffering the servant won pardon for others.

The first Christians loved this passage because they believed it prophesied the redemptive suffering of Jesus Christ. In Acts of the Apostles, this text appears in the hands of an Ethiopian. Philip so eloquently explains the passage to him as a Christian prophecy, that the Ethiopian asks to be baptized on the spot.

On Good Friday we look at the suffering of Jesus. We imagine his appearance marred by scourging. We understand how unbelievers assumed he had to be guilty of something, and his death would justly wipe out his memory. But they were wrong. In our prayer today, we affirm with pride the innocence of Jesus, but we stand speechless knowing he endured all this to win our pardon. The extent of his suffering uncovers the weight of our sins.

Sometimes our sin is precisely the kind Jesus endured. We judge people by their appearance. We make life difficult for the poor. We avoid the needy.

Jesus suffered to awaken within us a confession of our own sin.