

Isaiah 50:4-9aⁱⁱ

The servant of the LORD said: "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. "The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame: he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?"

ⁱⁱ About the First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a

This reading is the third of the four "servant songs" in Isaiah (the others are 42:1-4, 49:1-6 and 52:13-53:12). It is not certain whom the author intended the servant to represent: the people of Israel as the historical nation, as a faithful remnant or as an idealized body? an actual historical figure, such as the "prophet like Moses" (Deuteronomy 18:15)? a corporate personality, an individual who would recapitulate all the features of Israel's election and mission? Christians have always understood the suffering servant to be Jesus.

Today's reading presents the servant as one who submits to God's purposes, whether in a personal response to God or in acceptance of suffering. The servant knows that he is called to be a misunderstood and ill-treated prophet to a sin-weary people. Nevertheless, he is confident that God will vindicate him. The servant songs helped Israel to interpret the suffering and humiliation of the exile. The early Church found in the songs a new significance: they helped the believers understand and proclaim the meaning of Jesus' suffering and resurrection.