

## Introduction to the Readings for Good Friday

Old Testament: Isaiah 52: 13 – 53: 12

This is the final of four songs of the Suffering Servant. It is common to interpret this one as referring to Jesus with some justification; but we should never forget that it was written many years before him, and refers to some unknown person, or even to Israel. It describes the servant of the Lord who willingly bears the guilt of others. This reveals to us something of the nature of God, and the relationship of the Servant to God. The Servant is sustained in the midst of his suffering by the trust in God's love for him, and that in the end all shall be blessed through his actions.

Epistle: Hebrews 4:14 – 5:9; or 10: 16-25

Both readings refer back to Leviticus where the duties of the High Priest are set out. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would pass into the Holy of Holies and make the annual sacrifice of atonement for the people. This is contrasted with Jesus, the true High Priest, who made atonement once and for all, so that no longer will an annual sacrifice be necessary. Unlike the Jewish High Priest, Jesus took us with him into the Holy of Holies. We must first be washed clean through baptism (v22), then show in the way we behave towards each other the change which this new relationship won by Jesus has brought us.

Gospel: John 18:1 – 19:42

This is the reading of the Passion story from John, which differs from those in the other gospels. There is no agony in the Garden, for example, and also a number of details which add to the account, such as the cutting off of the servant's ear. Jesus is taken before the Annas, Father-in-Law to the High Priest, rather than to Caiaphas himself – why? We are never told. But before the assembled Jews and, later before Pilate, it is clearly Jesus who is in control both of himself and of the situation. There is a theme of judgement throughout the narrative – ostensibly the condemnation of Jesus, but, in fact, judgement on both the Jews and Rome, who condemn themselves by their actions. Pilate tries to release Jesus, but is thwarted by the crowds calling for Barabbas and to condemn Jesus. So Jesus goes to the Cross, where he suffers, not only the barbarity of crucifixion, but the insults and jeering of the crowd and, above all, that sense of dereliction even from God, until he realised that his mission had been accomplished and dies. Before that moment, Jesus makes sure that his mother is cared for by commending her to John's care. His death sees the birth of the Church.