



## A Reflection

### Three Good Reasons for Reading the Old Testament Prophets

The Old Testament prophets are not an easy read. Their world was very different from our world today. When they speak they assume things they and their hearers would take for granted, but which we may not know about. What they say is often poetry, and as with much good poetry you can read it three or four times and discover new layers of meaning each time. The prophets are not an easy read, but there are very good reasons for reading them..

First they are part of the Scriptures which Jesus knew and loved. They helped him to understand who God is and what God is like. They shaped his faith and his vision of the Kingdom of God, and the Good News he came to announce.

The prophets help us to understand God more deeply, to enter into God's feeling. Hosea 11.1-9 is a poem. It is an appeal to the people of Israel to change their ways. It is an attempt to break through their denial of any need to change by offering a wonderfully imaginative picture of what God feels. God loves Israel as parents love their children. There is a beautiful picture of a parent picking up a child and holding it lovingly, cheek to cheek. But the child is now an adult, and the parent feels a mixture of love, and anger and despair at his behaviour. It reminds me of friends whose son has let his life be taken over by his addiction to drugs, and how badly he has treated them. God's feelings swing between love for his children and understandable anger at the way they have treated him.

Thirdly the first followers of Jesus struggled with the question : why did Jesus have to suffer an ignominious death ? They faced the challenge from people who argued : "Jesus was condemned by the leading authorities of his own people. He was executed as a criminal by the Roman authorities. Now you say he was the Saviour of the world. That is ridiculous." They found the Old Testament prophets offered a way of understanding Jesus' suffering and humiliating death. He suffered for others like the faithful servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53..

If you would like to start reading the prophets – or restart if you have tried before, start with some selected passages. The "What is prophecy?" leaflet that is attached to the weekly Notice sheet has seven suggestions to get you started. If you want to read a whole book, find out about the background before you start. We will be offering this in our Old Testament series later this year, or you can get hold of a commentary on the book you would like to read.

David Durston

## HYMN REFLECTION FOR PASSION SUNDAY

Were it not for Coronavirus, today's hymn would be sung all over the English-speaking world [see last line of reflection] this week or next. Many of us will remember being at performances, very likely by Salisbury's own St. John Singers, who do it most years. The hymn comes from Sir John Stainer's *The Crucifixion*. This is a sort of mini oratorio about Christ's Passion, performed by a choir, but which has five hymns for the congregation to join in, of which *Holy Jesu, by thy passion* is the second, otherwise known as *The Litany of the Passion*. It is a perfect piece of Victoriana, as it were preserved in aspic, not a syllable or a note changed since it first appeared in the year of the Good Queen's Golden Jubilee, 1887. The libretto is by The Rev. J. Sparrow-Simpson, who lived on until 1952, outliving Stainer by fifty-one years (Sir John died on Palm Sunday, 1901, just 9½ weeks after his Queen).

There are those (thankfully not nearly as many as there used to be) who would tear down all Victorian architecture and consign all Victorian art, poetry and music to obscurity. But it is how they did it in the 19th century, and it has a beauty all its own. Old-fashioned it is, of course, maybe a bit mawkish on occasions, but still deservedly popular. St. John's College, Cambridge, posted a new performance on line in 2017, and in 2018 a Dutch choir sang it, in a starkly undecorated church, which seems so appropriate.

There are six verses altogether, but the Dutch choir only sings four of them. We print those four below, so that you can if you wish look up this performance on YouTube and follow the words here. It is beautifully and sympathetically sung (in English), with the commas exactly right. Type into Google *Holy Jesu, by thy passion*, and scroll down to a video lasting 3'33". There is a beautiful recording of the whole work, also on YouTube, dating from 1978, from Peterborough Cathedral. One of the trolls to that says he sang it in Georgetown, Guyana, quite a way from St. Marylebone Church, London, where it had its première.

Holy Jesu, by Thy passion,  
By the woes which none can share,  
Borne in more than kingly fashion,  
By Thy love beyond compare;  
REFRAIN: Crucified, I turn to Thee,  
Son of Mary, plead for me.

By the treachery and trial,  
By the blows and sore distress,  
By desertion and denial,  
By Thine awful loneliness: REFRAIN

By the path of sorrows dreary,  
By the Cross, Thy dreadful load,  
By the pain when, faint and weary,  
Thou didst sink upon the road; REFRAIN

By the Spirit which could render  
Love for hate and good for ill,  
By the mercy, sweet and tender,  
Poured upon thy murderers still: REFRAIN