

Proper 24B – *I will apportion to him the many and the strong he will take as his spoil. (Is. 53.12)*

After a preacher died and went to heaven, he noticed that a New York cabdriver had been given a higher place than he had. "I don't understand," he complained to St. Peter. "I devoted my entire life to my congregation."

"Our policy is to reward results," explained St. Peter. "Now what happened, Reverend, whenever you gave a sermon?"

The minister admitted that some in the congregation fell asleep.

"Exactly," said St. Peter. "And when people rode in this man's taxi, they not only stayed awake, they prayed."

Our policy is to reward results. There is nothing quite like a strong incentive to get people's attention. Much debate goes into whether positive or negative reinforcement is more effectual, but there is no debate about incentive. Our policy is to reward results. Indeed, the economic principle of Capitalism has spilled its shores and takes in everything from education to athletics. Study hard - you get good grades. Play hard – you win the game. Work hard – you make a

million dollars. It is so fundamental to our existence, to imagine some other way of living seems as impossible as breathing underwater. Some may try to remind us of the virtue of patience and delaying gratification. But we would all prefer our reward as quickly and richly as possible.

So there should be much to our liking in our passage as it was read this morning from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, for the Lord says, “Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong.” I would prefer this translation, “Therefore I will give him as his portion the many, and the strong he will take as his spoil.” Here the Lord promises great reward to his Servant for the great sacrifice he makes in order to save his people. For you see the people had wandered far from their covenant God. They had resisted his demands and had only given lip-service to his covenant. So he had sent them his prophets to call them into repentance, but they would not listen. So Isaiah proclaims to them, that because of their rebellion they would go into exile, enslaved to a foreign people. But the prophet builds them up in their despair, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is

pardoned.” But the desolate people, far from home cry to the Lord, how can this be, we have lost all, both land and kindred alike? And the prophet reveals the instrument of the Lord’s salvation, his mighty arm. Isaiah says, “Behold, my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” It is the Lord’s servant who will bring the people back from exile, he will be the instrument of salvation, he will bring healing in his wings. Such great service deserves great reward! Such a mighty victory demands mountains of spoil and plunder.

So St. Paul rightly says of Jesus the Messiah, “Because he emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and was obedient, therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.” Jesus, the Messiah, came as Isaiah had prophesied and obeyed the Father’s demands. Jesus is victorious and has received great reward because of his suffering and death in the place of sinners. So then let us consider Christ’s reward, the mighty acts that won his reward and finally what reward is ours.

So Isaiah says of Jesus Christ, I will apportion to him the many and the strong he will take as his spoil. It is God Almighty, the Father who gives the reward. He was the one who sent the prophet to tell the

people of their impending doom. It was he who would send them to their exile and he who would bring them back. The Lord says, “Where is your mother’s bill of divorce, with which I put her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away. Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver?” Who is it who saves from sin and brings back from destruction? It is God alone. There is none who can be saved who are not redeemed by the eternal love and forgiveness poured out by the Father. It is he who rewards his servant Son with a gift.

Isaiah says that the Father gives him the many as his reward. Who are the many? They are the Lord’s rebellious people. For the prophet writes, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.” And they went their way even unto destruction and displaced in far away lands. Gone was the land of milk and honey. Gone was the city of Jerusalem and the Temple as sign of God’s presence among the Israelites. They like silly sheep had wandered away from their shepherd. But the Father would call the sheep together and give them as reward to his shepherd Son. For Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I

give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." They were wicked sheep! They had wandered away. But Almighty God had saved them, had called them, and had given them as a reward to his victorious Son. What comfort is here my friends? How often we wander, making sheep look attentive. We follow after our own lusts and desires and yet it is our powerful Father who has given silly and wayward sheep into the care of his Son, Jesus Christ. But Isaiah adds that it is Christ who will take the strong as his spoil. Ah, yes the strong. It is not enough that the sheep be bestowed as reward upon the victorious Son. His redeemed and rejoicing people, the sheep, are certainly in his train. They follow him wherever he may go, and they love his very voice. Yet a victory over sheep is but a small victory. But it is the mighty and the strong, who care not for him nor for his kingdom, that he has overcome in his might and his strength! For Paul writes the Colossians, "Christ disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him." Oh, can you not see them now, smug in their power over the Christ? For the chief priests and Pharisees had arrested him

and charged him with blasphemy and treason. And they handed him to Pontius Pilate, the agent of the world's most terrible power, who executed him in the most public and shameful manner, used to make an example of the enemies of the Roman State. Who would not cringe before such a confederacy of influence and might? Yet the Apostle Paul says that it is THEY, not Christ who have been held up to ridicule! They, not Christ, are made a public spectacle. For there is no power stronger than death! Yet Christ is the victor over death! He is king of all kings. I will appportion to him the many and the strong he will take as his spoil.

So the Father has given his Son a people as a reward and Jesus has himself won victory over the strong of this world. But how has he come to such a great reward? As the saying goes - an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. Jesus Christ has received a kingly inheritance as his reward. What service has he performed to have received a prize? Isaiah tells us that he was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He was beaten and afflicted by God; he was wounded and bruised; he was whipped and finally cut off from the land of the living. He was buried among the wicked. Such was his suffering as the natural eye could see.

But Isaiah is concerned to open the eye of understanding to the reason behind Christ's suffering. First we see that Christ offered himself as a willing sacrifice for sin. For the first Adam had fallen from grace in the Garden of Eden as he grasped after what was not his. He had chosen to follow his own will. But here we see that it is the second Adam, Christ himself, who obeyed the will of the Father and submitted to death for his people. So the writer to the Hebrews says, "By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

Second we see that Jesus Christ receives such a great reward because he was numbered with the transgressors. Oh, how great a mystery is the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ! That he would desire to leave the bright realms of heaven and be made in the form of man? But that is not enough, dear friends. For he did not come as an emperor, neither was his birth witnessed by the great and mighty. Instead, he was born among the poor and powerless. And he surrounded himself with the rabble of his day and sat to eat with tax collectors and prostitutes. And his manner of death was no reprieve to an otherwise shameful life, for he was hung upon a cross to the

ridicule of all with bandits and rebels hanging at his right hand and his left.

Yet all this suffering would have been acceptable if he had been a wicked and confirmed criminal like the rest. But in him we find no stain of sin, neither any guilt at all. Instead, the prophet tells us he was stricken for the transgression of his people, that he made himself a guilt offering and that he bore the sins of the many. He was a substitute. He was a replacement. He took what was due to the many and he held it to himself. And what was due to them who had wandered away into sin and darkness? It was death, my friends. But not simply death, but eternal estrangement from God. So Jesus took upon himself the holy anger of God that was due to his people.

So now, having seen Christ's great reward and the great suffering by which he won such a kingly prize, let us consider our own reward. For Christ's reward was his by right. For he is the eternal Son of the Father and by him all things were made. It was of his own good will and great love that he left the heavenlies and waged war against sin and the Devil. So his reward is his, and justly so.

But what is our just reward? What is ours by right? What would be fair compensation for who we are and what we have done? Consider with me just a moment. We have agreed that our policy is to reward results! What is a fair wage for what we bring to the bargaining table? What would you give for your strife and your jealousies, your loose living and pridefulness? What are those worth? What is a fair reward for those results? Paul writes, “When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.” Oh, people, do not demand what is only fair! For if you received it you would not live another day!

No, no, do not demand what is fair, but cry to God for his mercy. Beg him for a portion of the reward which is Christ. For he has won a kingly prize by taking upon himself what should be ours. Do not demand what is rightfully yours, for it is death. Instead call upon Almighty God that he might graciously receive us into Christ’s reward. For on our own we have nothing! But if we have been converted through faith and Baptism, and cling firmly to our willing substitute, Jesus Christ, then we may receive what is his. Oh, dear friends, do not wait to love him, but give yourselves to him today! Do

not be distracted by the cheap rewards of this passing world, but fix your desire upon the glory and majesty which is Christ!

So let us offer thanks and praise to Almighty God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. AMEN,