

Today our scene from the last 24 hours of Jesus life is this: Jesus has been condemned by the Sanhedrien and is taken through the city streets of Jerusalem, and brought before the Roman Governor, because only the Roman Governor can sentence a person to death. It is early in the morning, just after sunrise, and a large crowd has already gathered in anticipation of what Pontius Pilate, will do.

When Jesus is brought before Pilate he asks, “Are you King of the Jews?” Jesus says, “You say so.” That is hardly a sufficient response, so Pilate asks: “Have you no answer?” Jesus made no further reply, and Pilate was amazed. In both his trial before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate, Jesus remains virtually silent as he is accused of crimes for which he could be put to death. Imagine that you are innocent of something, yet charged with crimes which carry the death penalty. When you are accused, you say virtually nothing. Pilate is amazed that Jesus scarcely responds. To be accused of claiming you are King of the Jews was serious. Only Caesar was considered King of the Jews, and if someone claimed similar authority they were setting themselves up against Caesar and guilty of insurrection. Jesus gives a cryptic answer: “You say so.” Hardly enough evidence to get him off the hook. Jesus seems resigned, or even determined, to die. He is not going to defend himself, he is not trying to save himself.

Jesus willingness to lay down his life so freely is the doctrine of the atonement, meaning at-one-ment with God. His suffering and death brings humankind closer to God. While he was being sentenced by Pilate, Jesus may have been thinking of the Suffering Servant prophecy from Isaiah 53:6-7: “We all like sheep have gone astray, turned to our own way. Yet the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and like a sheep before his shearers is silent, he opened not his mouth.” Christians believe that Jesus paid the price for a sinful humanity, and this is the doctrine of the atonement.

We see this vividly demonstrated when we consider what happens to Barabbas, or Jesus Barabbas, as he is called in Matthew’s Gospel. Barabbas is a criminal, an insurrectionist, and he is on death row also. In conspiring against the Romans, Barabbas has murdered those who collaborated with the Romans, he had robbed people, so he is a thief, murderer, and insurrectionist. At the time of the Passover it was a custom for Pontius Pilate to release one prisoner to the Jewish people. This was a token gesture to help pacify them and maintain the peace. So Pilate has two prisoners before him, Jesus and Barabbas, and he asks the people which one he should release—one a thief, murderer, insurrectionist, the other who appears to have done nothing wrong. Knowing that there is no proven crime that Jesus has committed, Pilate undoubtedly expects them to ask for the release of Jesus. But they surprisingly demand that Barabbas be released, and that Jesus die. By that afternoon Jesus would be hanging on a cross in his place, and so Barabbas becomes the very first person for whom Jesus dies. This sentencing before Pilate

itself becomes a demonstration of what Jesus does. Jesus takes the place of someone else who deserves to die, and he suffers and dies instead. We have all fallen short of God's best intentions for us, and yet God loves and forgives us nevertheless. Jesus suffers in our place. He did not deserve it, he was without sin, but he freely and willingly does this out of love for us.

I did not know him personally, but I knew about a man who was driving home from a bar one Saturday afternoon, when he hit and killed a 10 year old girl out riding her bicycle. It was terrible. He spent time in jail and payed his debt to society, but he spent the rest of his life punishing himself. He did everything he could to destroy his life and to deny himself any sort of happiness. By taking the life of an innocent child, he felt that he was not fit to live. He never did forgive himself. What that man failed to realize was that the price for his tragedy had already been paid. He was forgiven and loved by God, and he did not have to keep paying the price forever. But that is a hard gift to accept.

So when we look at Barabbas, we should see ourselves. Not that we are thieves, murderers or insurrectionists, but we are people who fail and fall time and time again. Yet God loves us nevertheless, God reaches out to us in the most profound way through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

So we can identify with Barabbas in this story, but we can also identify with the crowd of people clamoring for Jesus to be crucified. In that crowd at 6 am on Friday there were the same people who had seen him enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday waving palm branches saying "Hosanna in the highest, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." They expected him to be their deliverer, be the Messiah who would free them from Roman oppression, so they were hailing him with great expectations that previous Sunday. But by Friday they were clamoring for his crucifixion, because Jesus was a bitter disappointment to them, in fact they considered him a joke as a Messiah. According to Josephus, 1st century Roman historian, from the time of Jesus birth until the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, there were at least 8 Messiahs, possibly as many as 13 Messiahs, people who were considered Messiahs by the Jewish people or their own proclamation. These Messiahs would gather groups of people to join them in battle against the Romans. This was the job of the Messiah, to gather an army together to fight this terrible and unjust Roman oppression. Jesus was the only Messiah who refused to take up the sword, so he was a joke to them. He told the Jews suffering under this terrible persecution to love their Roman enemies, to suffer willingly, to turn the other cheek. He told them to render unto Caesar that which is Caesars, to pay taxes willingly. This was terribly upsetting, so they are eager to put him to death. Pilate tells them that they get to select the one who lives and the one who dies. One is guilty of crimes against the Empire, and the other appears to be innocent. Oddly enough, they are both named Jesus, Jesus Barabbas and Jesus bin Joseph, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus means "God Saves" there was a choice between Savior

Barabbas and Savior Jesus. If it were up to you to decide, which one would you pick? If you were there early that Friday morning, who would you ask to be released? One is a savior who is going to lead by force and give you your freedom back. He would assure prosperity and put an end to this terrible oppression, he offers strength, wealth, and liberation. The other one is a savior who tells you to love these horrible oppressors, serve them and see what happens. Which would you choose?

If this were a Presidential campaign, (I know that is hard to imagine) with these two very different candidates for President you can select one who is running on a platform of peace through strength. This candidate wants us to be the strongest nation on earth to keep people from messing with us, and promises that we will have more money, more security, more safety through strength. The other candidate says “I think that we need to show others the superiority of our ideas and our way of life, but not with force, but by example. Our foreign policy will be to care for people all over the world. We are not going to fight, and when we have violence inflicted upon us we will bear it with grace and demonstrate long suffering and forgiveness. We will love those who hate us and express kindness to all. Which one of those candidates will be elected? There is no contest really, we would all vote for the person who makes sure our nation is strong, and secure. It would be sheer foolishness to elect a person with idealistic and unrealistic ideas. You see, what Jesus called people to then, and what he calls people to now, is so counter-cultural, so strange and unusual, that it is easy to see why the crowd would choose Jesus over Barabbas. We probably would have done the same.

So we can see how we are like Barabbas, in gaining our freedom due to the death of an innocent man, and we can see how we could easily have been a part of that crowd clamoring for the death of Jesus, and finally, we can also see ourselves in Pontius Pilate. Pilate had been the Roman Governor for several years when Jesus was brought before him. He ruled from 26 to 36 AD. Jesus was crucified around 29 or 30 AD. Now Pilate was not afraid to kill Jews, he had killed many of them already. At times Pilate was downright cruel, even killing Jews in the Temple. But now someone is brought before him who claims to be King of the Jews, and Pilate cannot bring himself to kill him. He is troubled by this man, he wants to release Jesus, he can find no reason to kill him. At one point, according to Matthew, Pilate even washes his hands of him altogether. Also in Matthew, we read that Pilate’s wife sends word to him while he is about to condemn Jesus. The message from Pilate’s wife is this: “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream.” This haunts Pilate, and he really does not want to kill Jesus. Luke tells us that Pilate is so troubled that he sends Jesus to Herod Agrippa the King of the Northern area of Galilee and he tells Agrippa to try Jesus, because he finds no crime worthy of death. Agrippa sends him back to Herod, saying that he finds no reason to kill him either. In John’s

Gospel you find that 5 or 6 times, Pontius Pilate tries to get out of sentencing Jesus to death, finally he has him beaten and abused, then brings him out before the people hoping that they will have pity upon him. He says “Here is your King, what shall I do with him?” Once more they call for him to be crucified. Pontius Pilate knows that Jesus should go free. He tries his best to make that happen, and ultimately he has the power to do just that, but what does he do? Mark’s Gospel says it all: “So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them, and turned Jesus over for whipping and crucifixion.”

Don’t you see yourself in Pontius Pilate? Haven’t you done something that you knew in your heart was wrong, because you went along with the crowd? You just abdicated responsibility because it was the easiest thing to do? We all do things we know are not right, but if everyone else says it is OK, then it must be OK. We all have Pilate inside of us.

We all have times when we wash our hands of responsibility, and give in, so we are like Pilate. And we are like those people in the crowd who would rather have what we want, than follow a Messiah who invites us to lay down our lives for others. And we are like Barabbas, because we all like sheep have gone astray, yet someone suffered and died so that we could be free.

As we continue to follow Jesus to the cross, I hope you can see yourself in these stories, and examine the ways in which you need God’s love, forgiveness, grace. And those things are vividly and freely offered to us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion that we are about to receive.

STUDY NOTES

Monday, March 3, 2008:

Read Mark 15:1-5

In the passage Jesus acknowledges the title “King of the Jews” from Pilate (echoing last weeks readings where he acknowledged the title “Son of Man”). To Pilate’s other questions, Jesus remains silent. Why do you think it was important to Jesus to acknowledge his role, but not to answer false accusations?

Pray today that God would give you the wisdom and understanding to be a good listener.

Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Read Mark 15:6-15

In this reading, we’re introduced to Barabbas, the apparent leader of an insurrection that had just been put down. In Matthew we learn that coincidentally Barabbas’ first name is also Jesus. With this knowledge, as

we hear the crowd demands for the release of Barabbas and not Jesus, it becomes clear that they are choosing a political savior over a spiritual Savior who offers a future Kingdom of God. Why do you think they made this choice?

Pray today for the strength and discernment to follow the right leaders and make Godly choices, even if it goes against what the crowd demands.

Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Read Luke 23:1-25

Only in this parallel passage of Jesus' trial in Luke are we introduced to Herod's role in the drama. The Herod referred to here was likely the son of the Herod mentioned in the Nativity stories, but he had been appointed by Rome to govern Galilee and another small province, instead of King of Judea as he had hoped. Here we see Pilate desperately trying to not be involved in condemning Jesus to death by passing him off to Herod.

Have you ever been forced to do something you felt was wrong, but had no other choice?

What would have been the consequences if you had followed your conscience?

Pray today for people in positions of political power around the world, that they may govern mercifully and justly.

Thursday, March 6, 2008

Read Matthew 27:24-26

Today we tackle one of the most difficult and misinterpreted passages in all of scripture. This brief passage has been used as justification for anti-Semitic beliefs and actions for millenia. Yet the passage's point is not the eternal guilt of Jewish people (a totally unbiblical concept), but rather is designed to remind you of your role as a member of the human race whose sinful nature rejected God among us, and instead demanded His death.

Keeping in mind that three times Pilate stated his belief in Jesus innocence, do you think he could "wash his hands" of his role in the story?

Pray today that those embroiled in conflict in the Middle East would hear God's voice and work for peace.

Friday, March 7, 2008

Read Mark 10:32-34

Today we turn back to Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem, and the final prophesy of His fate.

Have you ever had to undertake a journey that you dreaded, but felt you had no choice?

Take a few moments and read each of the following Old Testament prophecies, and see if they bring to mind Jesus and the Passion Story.

Isaiah 53:4-9

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Zechariah 13:7

Pray today that the universal church will remain faithful to its mission to seek and save the lost.

Saturday, March 8, 2008

Prepare your hearts for tomorrow's worship and sermon by reading and meditating on the text that will be used:

**Mark 15:16-23
"Torture and Humiliation"**

Pray that tomorrow's worship will be meaningful for all who attend, especially for those worshipping with us for the first time.