

“Who Is Your King?”

Every day we hear accounts of people who are the innocent victims of crime, violence or injustice. And when we hear those accounts, it’s tempting to see them as evidence of humanity at its worst. And then, perhaps we think that if we could just fix the things that are wrong with our society, that these bad things could be eliminated. However, that is not always the case.

The focus of this day are the sufferings and death of another innocent victim. It did not take place when there was no order in society. Jesus was not killed by people who were outlaws, or insane, or even by extreme religious fundamentalists.

In fact, it was the two noblest pillars of culture in the ancient world— and I’m talking about the Roman Law, and Jewish piety— that determined that Jesus needed to die. And so, the crucifixion of Jesus represents not what humanity can do when it’s at its worst, but what humanity can do when it’s at best.

And that, my friends, is irony.

We can find even more irony in the Passion Gospel we’ve just heard. For death by crucifixion was considered the cruelest and most shameful form of execution, and it was reserved for the worst offenders. The fact that Barabbas— a man already convicted of murder, already convicted of insurrection— is released, and Jesus— a man for whom no charge could be substantiated— is crucified, stands as one of the great paradoxes in human history.

Even more ironic, however, is the fact that Jesus was a willing victim. Throughout the hours leading to his death, Jesus seemingly is in command of the situation.

Jesus sets the events in motion by voluntarily coming forward for his arrest— in John’s gospel, there’s no waiting for Judas to identify him with a kiss.

When Peter steps in to stop the arrest, Jesus intervenes and allows himself to be bound and taken away.

During his trial, Jesus contributes nothing to his defense.

While on the cross Jesus arranges for his mother to be taken care of by the Beloved Disciple.

And though death by crucifixion can take a long time—sometimes days if the victim is strong— Jesus decides on the moment of his death: He chooses when the time is right to give up his spirit.

When I consider some of the various players in this divine dramatic tragedy, it raises questions for me.

For example, the religious leaders who sought Jesus' death. They thought they had great reasons. Time and time again, the teaching and preaching of Jesus put him at odds with these powerful, influential men. He challenged their interpretations of the Law; he challenged their motives; he was a threat to them.

But, as a priest— and therefore a person of some influence— I have to wonder if I've ever dismissed someone because I disagreed with them? or because I was afraid they were a threat to my position? How many times have I condemned someone simply because I didn't agree with her theology, or his practices? I know that I have, and I have to wonder: Am I really any better than the chief priests and scribes, and the Pharisees who testified against Jesus?

Peter is another interesting character. When things began to look bad, when he saw the soldiers coming to take Jesus away he resorts to brute force; he draws a sword. (Why was he even carry a sword?) But when Jesus intervened and took the sword out of his hands, Peter probably felt powerless and impotent. And then, a short while later, rather than facing the inevitable, Peter resorted to denial— he denied that he even knew Jesus. And *that* gives me pause.

How many times have I down-played my Christian faith, because I was afraid of what others might think? In other words, How often have I denied knowing Jesus?

Pilate, too, is an interesting character. He tries to walk that fine line between doing what is politically correct and what is morally correct. And at first, he looks like he's the only person who knows what is right. But in the end, however, when he fears losing his political power, he throws his moral judgement

to the winds, and allows a man he has *already judged to be innocent* to be executed.

Isn't there something of a Pilate in each of us? Aren't we all caught up in our own balancing act of trying to survive in the world (on the one hand) and being faithful to Jesus (on the other)? What choices have we made with respect to our faith? Have we "crucified Jesus" by downplaying our association with him? Or have we "released him," by accepting his claim on our lives, and by letting the world know that he is our Lord. Which do we choose to do?

In the end, this man of flesh and blood— this man who came to us as the visible form of God— was as weak and vulnerable as any of us. He lived among us, he lived as we live, and he died. And the greatest irony is the fact that God died on the cross so that we— the ones who brought about his death— would have the promise a new life.

Who is your king? Who do you serve? Do you serve a king who lures you with promises of earthly power and authority? Who promises not to intrude on your precious lifestyles? The chief priests shouted, "We have no king but Caesar!" Is this our king?

Or do we serve a king who was willing to sacrifice everything for us? Do we serve a king who asks us to take up our own cross, but who insists that he be the first one atop that hill called Golgotha? Who is your king? Is it the king who will promise you everything, but deliver only death? Or is your king the one who is mightier even than death?

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