

April 10, 2009

**Good Friday, The Three Hours' Service**

Meditation #4: Mark 15.1-15

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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What has happened here? Just a few days ago, the crowds were shouting "Hosanna! Hosanna!" as Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem on the back of a colt.

Just a few days ago, they spread palm branches in his path to keep down the dust, they lined the roads with their shouts of joy. Just a few days ago, he was a hero.

And now, this. Now we see him mocked. Where palm branches waved, reeds beat. Where arms were upraised in joy, knees are bending in jest. Where they revered him, they now hate him. Where voices shouted "Hosanna, hail to the king!" voices now scream,

"Crucify him!!"

Crucify him.

What has turned the crowd? Why the change of heart?

This is certainly no doing of Jesus'. He has done nothing to provoke this crowd into a riotous bloodbath. He has done a lot, sure, he has stirred the pot and angered the wrong folks, but nothing to deserve this.

This is not a story marked by any kind of ambiguity. The story of Jesus, the unlikely Messiah, before Pilate, the ineffective ruler, is one of blacks and whites. There are no shades of gray here. There is no neutrality and no place to hide behind indecisiveness.

Jesus, with his pot-stirring ways, with his mandates to love and serve, commands a decision about him. There is no room for wavering, no place for hesitancy in the face of such a one.

Except in Pilate.

The ancient historian Josephus sheds a little light on Pilate's governorship. Pilate entered the seat of governor of Judea and Jerusalem in a time of great unrest, of rioting and polarizations. During his ten years as a governor, from the year 26-36

CE, had thirty-two riots. 32 riots in mere ten years. That's more than three major riots a year for ten consecutive years.

The Jews hated the Romans. They hated the Roman taxes. They hated the Roman insensitivities to their religion. The Jews of that time were constantly on the edge of rioting.

So the governor Pilate was sick of rioting. He was tired of the unrest and the anxiety. He's tired of taking the blame. And it is with this awareness that we can approach the story of what happened that Friday morning in Jerusalem.

Please note that I do not expect you to feel sorry for Pilate. Sure, it is hard to be a ruler, and many great rulers have made difficult and even bad decisions. But this is not the category into which Pilate falls. Pilate was a weak ruler who wanted to save his own skin. His sin is spinelessness, neutrality, selfishness.

Pilate did the work he was assigned to do as governor. He questioned the prisoner. Pilate questioned Jesus and found no guilt in him. Jesus was innocent of the charges that the chief priests had brought against him. Pilate saw through the sham. Pilate wanted to dismiss the whole affair as a nuisance, but faced with the threats of the high priests and the frenzy of the crowd, he caved.

When asked to act, to do the right thing, he instead condemned an innocent man to death. His indecision, his lack of willpower, led to one of the most famous violent deaths in the history of the world. Jesus' blood is on Pilate's hands, no matter how he might wash them.

So many were against him. So many "hosannas" turned to "crucify him" when faced with the dramatic claims that Jesus was making on their lives. The disciples deserted him. Those who loved him denied him. Those who hated him killed him. They didn't know, as we do, the whole story.

They didn't know, as we do, what God demands of us.

Our Messiah, our God, demands nothing less than everything, 100%, complete devotion. Our Messiah does not ride in on a donkey, humble and holy, and ask for occasional fidelity. Our Messiah does not hang on a cross to his death to engender sporadic respect.

Our Messiah, the Son of God asks that we leave behind our selves, our selfishness and egotism and reorient our lives toward God. Completely. Wholly.

Pilate did not decide.

In the shadow of the cross, there is no neutrality. There is no wishy-washy or "maybe". Throughout our passion story, people are forced to choose one way or another and we, now, are no exception. We must decide if we will walk the way of

the cross into the promise of the resurrection, if we will follow our Messiah with full devotion.

Or if we won't.

But we are compelled by the cross to decide.

The story of the passion is our story. We are part of it now as our ancestors were then. We must listen to this uncomfortable, ugly, bloody story and decide where we come down.

Will our "Hosannas" turn to shouts of "Crucify him!" when the wind changes direction? Face the cross. Then decide.