

March 29, 2013

Good Friday - Liturgy of Three Hours

All Saints Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Since we received a smudge of the cross on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday, we have been moving through Lent and toward Holy Week. And now that we are here and listening to Luke's Gospel as it unfolds, we come to understand that much about this week, and more particularly this day, was quite un-Holy. Today we sit somewhat uncomfortably and contemplate the overwhelming consequences of the day and further, we consider the role of human actions in the day.

As we move back into Luke's narrative, did you notice that in the discreet portion of the passage we just heard, Jesus doesn't do or say much until he addresses the women at the end and tells them not to cry. Instead, the passage focuses on what was done to him. In this part of our story we hear how the Roman authorities acted. We hear how the temple authorities acted, and we hear how the people in the crowd acted.

When we listen to Luke's narrative of Good Friday we are absolutely struck by his emphasis on Jesus' innocence. Luke almost shouts at us, "He's innocent; pay attention!" Luke is the only Gospel writer who underscores Jesus' innocence with two "trials" before the Roman authorities. Pilate found Jesus "not guilty" of the charges and then sent Jesus to Herod for a second hearing.

Herod found Jesus not guilty of the charges and sent Jesus back to Pilate. Pilate pronounces Jesus "not guilty" three times. Any lawyer who got this kind of ruling from a judge would claim a good day in court. It sounded promising for Jesus' release.

But then we experience what can be described as the perfect storm around Jesus, which sealed his earthly fate. When Pilate gathers the chief priests, the leaders and the people together to give them his not guilty verdict, they start their loud and unrelenting chorus. "Away with this fellow." "Crucify him! Crucify him." "Give us Barabbas." They don't even acknowledge Jesus by name, and reduce him to "this fellow." Instead they asked for Barabbas, a convicted murderer and insurrectionist. (If there truly was any fear or concern by any of his accusers that Jesus stirred up the people and was a troublemaker, there is no shortage of irony in their request that Barabbas, be released in Jesus' stead.)

Pilate initially pushed back with the crowds proclaiming Jesus' innocence again, but the crowds wouldn't give up. Their cries of "crucify him" "crucify him" were urgent and demanding. Despite his findings and Herod's findings that Jesus was not guilty of any of the allegations, Pilate gave into the crowd's loud demands, released Barabbas and handed Jesus over for crucifixion.

We try to read the text and parse the words to find some one or some group to blame for this grave injustice. Can we place Jesus' death on Roman authorities? Can we place it on the Temple hierarchy? Can we put it on the crowds? If we find someone is at fault, then maybe our sense of justice will be appeased and we can move forward.

Luke is too smart to give us tidy and easy answers because there are none, and he understands that it is way too easy for us to look at one group, or one faction, or those with a particular ideology, and conclude that they are the single culprit we can blame. Luke makes it difficult to implicate any one party, but in doing this, he implicates all the parties involved. If we attend to the text, we hear that the government leaders, the religious leaders and the crowds are all implicated in the death of Jesus. If we attend to the text further, we also might conclude that if that any of the three groups had taken a stand against this injustice, they could have prevented his death.

So, what about the Roman authorities, the temple hierarchy, and the people? Do we just vilify the whole lot of them and go home? Maybe not so quickly.

Pilate was not known for his kindnesses or magnanimous gestures. However, when we look at the trial of Jesus, his judgments were sound and correct. He found the charges wrong, he found Jesus not guilty of the charges, and, he found that Jesus had done nothing to warrant a death penalty against him. He even sent Jesus to Herod for a second opinion.

Pilate was reaching the right decision until he faced the unruly crowds that demanded Jesus' crucifixion. When he announced that he found Jesus not guilty of any crime, they shouted him down. When Pilate reiterated his position, he was shouted down again. When he was shouted down a third time, he relented, released a murderer and condemned Jesus to die.

Most striking here is that Pilate just yielded to expediency. He knew Jesus did nothing wrong and was being set up. However, he obviously found it easier to yield to the loudest voices than to stand on any principle. Pilate caved in to the expedient course of action even when he knew it was wrong.

Are we strangers to this behavior?

The second group we tend to blame is the temple hierarchy. If we go back a few chapters in Luke, we see that they've been scheming and plotting to get Jesus out of the picture since he arrived in Jerusalem. They kept adding to the charges until they finally got the attention of the Roman authorities. They were fast and loose with the truth and clearly thought that the end justified the means. But what was the end or the outcome that the Temple authorities were seeking?

Could it be said that they were just attempting to protect their systems, their power, and the status quo in the temple? Were they protecting what they viewed

as a system that was working just fine until this Jesus character showed up and started questioning their behavior and calling their piety into question? After all, their system had been in place for a long time and they did view Jesus as a threat, and an upstart.

Are we a stranger to maintaining the status quo and power at all costs? Is this behavior with which we are familiar?

And then comes for me the most perplexing of the three groups. Luke calls them "the people". Who are these people who show up and start yelling "crucify him, crucify him and give us Barabbas!" Luke doesn't tell us who they are. They just appear in the narrative and are vehemently against Jesus. When my research didn't provide a satisfactory answer, I cornered one of the New Testament professors at Candler and asked who these "people" were. His reply was simple: "they were the people of Jerusalem."

Are we to believe that these are the same people who on Palm Sunday welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem? They seemed pretty happy then laying down their cloaks before Jesus. If it is the same people, how did they turn so fickle in such a short time? Did they change their allegiance during the week because they thought Jesus required too much from them? Were they expecting a military leader to ride into town on a white steed and instead he arrived on a colt? Did Jesus not fit their image of a Messiah? How could they have turned against Jesus and why in this short period of time?

If these "people" were not the ones who supported Jesus earlier, where did that group of Jesus' supporters go? Are they hiding? Are they afraid and cowering in the courtyard like Peter, denying their knowledge of and allegiance to Jesus? Or, are these people an altogether different group of people, just a crowd that ignores Jesus' innocence and goes along with those that shout the loudest? Are they unthinking people who go along with the crowd?

Depending on who the people are, they are fickle, fearful or plain unthinking. Are we strangers to these behaviors?

When we hear this passage of scripture, we could choose to vilify all of those who were there, and, maybe we are justified in going that route. But, perhaps we're better off if we see that they were motivated by and engaged in behaviors and attitudes that seem all too human. As people, we may seek the expedient, when we know that is the wrong way to go. We may fight at all costs to maintain a status quo we believe in to the exclusion and harm of others. And, despite our best intentions, we can be fickle in our allegiances when they challenge us, and fearful to stand up for what we know is right. And sometimes we might simply be unthinking.

The psalmist who gave us in Psalm 51 that we heard at the beginning of this segment, seems to understand our human nature, our failings and our sinfulness all too well when he says:

"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

A question that seems worth considering is how do we avoid these too human behaviors, characteristics and attitudes that can wreck harm and instead engage in living that is more worthy of our calling as followers of Jesus.

That's a good question, but it is a question for another day. Today, we must consider how these all too human failings and sin have placed Jesus on the road to Golgatha.