

# “Who Crucified Christ?”

Mark 15: 1-39

Palm Sunday B, Boise, 2021 [after Glendale, CA 1987; Aiken, SC, 1991; Fort Collins, Cheyenne, Colorado Springs, 2004]

Who crucified Christ? Having just heard St Mark’s account of the Passion, how do you answer the question, who crucified Christ? Who was responsible for that gross miscarriage of justice, an innocent man executed as a rebel, even the Son of God Himself? Who did it?

Was it they who plotted it, the chief priests and rulers of the Temple? Or was it they who pounded the nails, the Roman soldiers, who were to blame? Surely not, you say, for it was the governor Pontius Pilate who gave the order, wash his hands though he did. Or perhaps it was the traitor Judas who played the vilest part in bringing about the death of Our Lord. But, then, what about the other disciples, the ones who fled the scene, leaving the Messiah to His plight? What about Simon Peter, the brave fisherman who was ready to fight, but soon thereafter denied Him just the same? Who was responsible for Jesus’ death? Whom do we now blame? The Romans, the Jews, His foes or His friends? Was one more guilty than another, or did each partake of His death the same?

Well, in addressing the question we should probably remember that there were some, such as Caiaphas and his father-in-law, who had wanted Jesus dead all along. They were the Jews who held offices and thus had a vested interest in not upsetting the arrangement that the nation had with the Romans. Unlike the multitude who cheered as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the Saducees and others in the Sanhedrin most likely did not welcome’s a messiah, *any* messiah — for according to their understanding of Jewish prophecy, a messiah was a political figure who was bound to upset things. We can see this attitude — the attitude of a public official — manifested in the remark made by Caiaphas after the raising of Lazarus: “It is expedient for us, that one man should

die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish” [Jn 11: 50]. That remark was made by the High Priest to his fellows who were worried that, if too many people came to believe in Jesus because of His miracles, the Romans would “take away both their place and the nation.” If those particular Jews had had their way, the Messiah would have been killed long before He was. When Judas came to them in the night, they found their opportunity.

At the other extreme, there were a few, a pitiful few, who stuck by Jesus to the bitter end. Even after most of His followers fell away or turned against Him, Jesus did not die utterly alone. There was His mother, St Mary, at the foot of the Cross; and beside her, that disciple whom Jesus loved, St John. There was a small party of women, whose custom it was to walk with the Master on His travels. Some of them, like Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Cleopas, also did not abandon Jesus. And there were a couple of unlikely supporters as well, the Pharisee Nicodemus and the rich man Joseph of Arimathea, who labored in secret to give Jesus a proper burial. — Now, whether those few friends of Our Lord remained with him in that dark hour because they, unlike the others, continued to believe in His mission, or whether they stuck by Him simply out of loyalty to their great Friend, One whom they loved because He had loved them, we are not told. We know only that, even when it appeared that God Himself had abandoned Jesus of Nazareth, not every one had.

So now we hold in view the persons at either extreme: those who, like Caiaphas, were always against Jesus, and wanted Him dead; and those saints who, like His mother Mary or the disciple John, remained with Him until the end. The rest of the people, however, were somewhere in the middle. They were the vacillating ones, the fickle multitude who cheered Him one day as the new David, riding into the city on a donkey to restore the kingdom of Israel and recapture its glory, and who, less than a week later were seen shouting hysterically, “Let Him

be crucified. We want Barabbas, not this man. Let Jesus of Nazareth be crucified.”

In this little drama that we have enacted here, The Liturgy of the Palms, with a procession through the church, our Jerusalem, we have cast ourselves in the role of the middle group, the vacillating mob. Do we really identify ourselves with those visitors gathering in the city for the Passover, who sang out on Sunday, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” but who the following Friday said, “Crucify Him, . . . we want Barabbas”? The Liturgy of Palm Sunday suggests that we should — that we should, at least for the moment, put ourselves in the place of the mob.

The unsettling thing about this is that it was that last group, the fickle multitude, that was responsible for finally bringing about Jesus’ death. Caiaphas and his party were unable to achieve it until the multitude had swung over to their side. And once the people of the city began clamoring for Jesus’ execution, no one else was powerful enough to resist them. The Roman governor yielded to their demands. The soldiers carried them out. But it was the crowd that had heralded Jesus as their king earlier in the week that was chiefly responsible for His execution on the day before the Sabbath. The Passover mob wanted a warrior-Messiah who would raise the city against the Romans. When it did not find Jesus to be such, when instead of playing that part He spent His time teaching in the courtyard of the Temple, the mob turned against Him. It was the shift in popular sentiment that finally brought about the Messiah’s death.

We know that to be true from the sermon that St Peter later preached on Pentecost. Pentecost was another of the major Jewish feasts that attracted large crowds from outside the city. Many of the persons present had also attended the Passover in the city six weeks earlier, and thus were among those who had called for Jesus’ crucifixion. Knowing that, Peter accuses his audience of having murdered the Messiah; the blood of the Lord’s Anointed was upon

them. “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly,” the Apostle concludes, “that God has made that same Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ.” — Note how Peter addresses the Pentecost multitude: “whom you have crucified,” “whom *you* have crucified.” You people right here, you who stand here listening, you are guilty of this crime. *You* have put the Messiah to death!

And how did the crowd respond to that stunning accusation? Did they turn on the preacher and chase him from the city, ready to stone him? No, this first sermon preached in the Christian Church was the most successful that has ever been preached. Three thousand Jews were converted and baptized that very day. Far from reacting in denial and anger to the accusation hurled at them, the people who heard it “were pricked in their heart,” as the KJV puts it [Acts 2: 37]. And they “said unto Peter and the rest of the Apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” “What shall we do?” They were seized with fear after having been made to understand what they had done — crucified the Christ, the One whom God had sent to save them. “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins . . . .’”

And it is that group — the multitude gathered in the city for the great feasts, the vacillating mob who one day would say, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” but on another, “Let Him be crucified,” and still on another, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” — of whom we are now asked to play the part in this drama we stage here on Palm Sunday. We are called upon, by means of liturgy, to identify ourselves with the multitude — the murderous, vacillating many who set themselves against the Messiah, yet on another occasion would accept Him as their risen Lord and Saviour. The blame is cast widely indeed. It was the

unnamed multitude who were chiefly guilty — not the faithful few and not the villains with the big parts, either. Rather, it was the vacillating middle, people like us, people whom we could identify ourselves with, people we *are* identified with. They are the persons responsible. And so too, it is the group for whom salvation is intended — the many, and not the few. In fact, none at all need be lost, because Christ died for all.

It would perhaps be easier to recognize our own guilt if we literally had been part of that frenzied throng that chose Barabbas over Jesus, and clamored for the Messiah's death. And perhaps that is why St Peter's Pentecost sermon was so immediately and spectacularly effective: there could be no doubt that it was they, the multitude, who had done it. And they knew it! But Jesus died for all men and women, not just those who happened to be present. He died for our sins as well as theirs. And we, too, are guilty. Christ's execution on a Roman cross was as much a result of the sins that we commit today, as it was the particular sin of petitioning Pilate for His death. — Christ died for all as a result of all. All are guilty, because all have sinned.

There is a bit of evangelical cunning, then, in the Liturgy of Palm Sunday, in putting us through this exercise that has us identifying ourselves with the Passover mob. But let us also make sure we finish the part, following the plot through to its end. If we are indeed guilty, then we must assemble with the multitude again on Pentecost to hear the Apostle's sermon: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you for the forgiveness of your sins."

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