

Hespeler, 5 April, 2020 © Scott McAndless – Passion Sunday
Isaiah 50:4-9, Psalm 31:9-16, Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 27:15-31

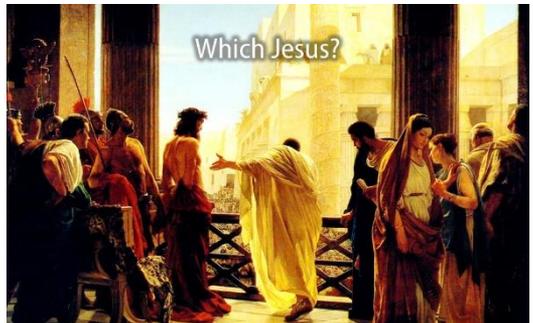
On the church calendar, this Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, is generally known as Palm Sunday. It is an opportunity to remember the time when Jesus entered into the city of Jerusalem and there was this big parade and a huge crowd that turned out and they were waving palms and all standing much closer than two meters apart. I remember when things like that used to happen.

But somehow today, Palm Sunday doesn't quite seem to capture the spirit of the moment. It is not a time for mass gatherings or for parades (which is how the church has traditionally celebrated the day). I have nothing wrong with people being happy or celebrating Jesus, of course, but it's not the time for doing that in a big gathering, is it? And so I decided that this year I'm not preaching Palm Sunday because there's always been another option in church tradition. This Sunday is also known as Passion Sunday, a day to remember, often by reading the passages at length, the story of everything that Jesus suffered as he died.

Now, I am not going to read out the entire story at length today, though I certainly do encourage you to read it yourself, but I would like to focus in on a few paragraphs from the story in Matthew's Gospel as Jesus is on trial before Pontius Pilate. For the past few weeks, I have definitely been reading scripture with a very different filter in my mind. Everything that I read seems to scream with relevance. For example, in this passage we read this morning, I was almost tempted to applaud Pontius Pilate when he begins to publicly demonstrate the washing of hands in front of the people. Wow, what a great example of civic leadership! I almost forgot that he's actually supposed to be the villain in the story! And then, when the soldiers place a crown of thorns upon Jesus' head, my mind immediately leapt to the *corona* part of coronavirus, so named because the virus seems to be wearing a crown when you look at it under a microscope.

But, while it is true that just about everything I read in the Bible these days seems relevant to the crisis we're dealing with, it is not just hand washing and crowns that makes this passage relevant to us today. This is a difficult passage for many reasons, but it does kind of remind me of where we are.

There is a strange disconnect in the middle of the story of the passion of Jesus in the gospels. On Palm Sunday, when Jesus first openly arrives in the city, everyone seems to love him. They turn out in droves and



even hail him as the son of David. But then, less than a week later, it seems as if everything has changed. When he is on trial before Pilate, there doesn't seem to be a single person who is ready to speak up on his behalf.

There was a time when I would have said that that seemed a little bit implausible, that the mood of an entire populace could change so quickly. I would have said that four weeks ago; I'm not sure that I would say that today. It has been kind of incredible to see how, in a matter of just days, the attitude of our population has changed in the face of a health crisis. I don't know about you, but I certainly saw people who one day were totally unconcerned about Covid-19, were going ahead with their travel plans or planning their gatherings, and then, almost overnight, they suddenly shifted to being totally obsessed with the spread of the virus. And it is not just individuals. In many ways we have seen the attitude of the entire society shift suddenly and wildly in just a matter of a few days. While I don't think that this is something that would happen under ordinary circumstances, obviously these have not been ordinary circumstances.

And neither, I suppose, was it ordinary circumstances when Jesus was arrested in Jerusalem that Passover season. And the extraordinariness in both cases can be summed up, I think, in one word. That word is fear. People are afraid today and they had a lot to be afraid of on that Passover too. And people who are afraid tend to lash out. We see that today as some people lash out at those who act inappropriately and fail to practice social distance, those who hoard things that other people need and people who are in authority.

People were afraid in Jerusalem because they understood that Jesus had acted in a way that was going to attract entirely the wrong kind of attention, especially from the Romans who excelled at punishing entire populations. In their fear, they didn't hesitate to turn on the one that they had hailed as a savior only days before. Better to offer him up to the voracious imperial beast than to suffer the worst that the Romans could do to the whole people.

We're told that Pilate offered the people a choice. There was apparently a tradition that the governor would release one prisoner each year as a Passover present, so he said that they could either have Jesus, whom he sarcastically called their king, or they could have a bandit named Jesus Barabbas.

Historians, by the way, are very sceptical about such an offer. Romans didn't do that kind of thing. They certainly didn't release dangerous prisoners to celebrate some local festival in a province. Now, presumably the people that Matthew was writing this gospel for understood that. They lived in the empire and understood all too well how the Roman government worked; they knew that no Roman governor would do such a thing.

That's why I presume that Matthew wanted his readers to take something else from this part of the story. He wanted them to think of the

choice that Pilate offers to the people, not just as something that happened once on that occasion, but rather as a kind of cosmic choice that people may need to continue making and may continue to get wrong. I think it may be a choice that we are struggling with today as well.

I mean, look at the choice that Pilate gives to the people. He asks them to choose between two Jesuses – Jesus Barabbas and Jesus Christ. And then, when you consider that the name Barabbas means “son of the father,” you might even say that the choice is between Jesus the son of the father and Jesus the son of God.

I don’t really think that it is a coincidence that the choice is framed in those terms. Matthew, the writer of this gospel, is actually asking us, the readers, to make a choice about what kind of saviour we are going to look for. Are we looking for a saviour who is a “notorious” person, someone who won’t hesitate to use violence and power to achieve goals? Or are we going to choose a saviour like Jesus who stands against power and violence as a means to accomplish anything.

And you might say why would anybody choose a *Jesus Barabbas* – someone mad for power and not afraid to use evil means to get it? Surely no sensible population would choose such a person to lead them? Well, yes, that is just the issue, isn’t it? We are not talking about sensible populations here. We are talking about frightened populations. We are talking about people who are flailing around and trying to find some reason to feel stable in times when the world is anything but stable. And what people will often do in times like those is latch onto some figure who projects himself or herself as being powerful and in control.

That is why, for example, right now political leaders around the world are seeing their approval ratings rise somewhat. This is true even in some cases where those leaders have not done very well or have even made some disastrous decisions. People are looking for stability and they’re going to grab on to whatever presents itself as stable.

And this is a good instinct, of course. Leaders are going to need the support of their populations if they’re going to have a positive impact in a crisis. But I’m sure you can also all see where the danger may lie. There are some who will abuse that automatic trust in order to serve themselves and enhance their own power to possibly disastrous ends.

The Christian gospels were written in the aftermath of one particularly tragic event. From the year 66 to 70 AD, a few decades after the time of Jesus, the people of Judea, led largely by outlaws – led largely by figures like this Jesus Barabbas fellow – rose up in an ill-advised rebellion against the Roman Empire. It was a bad idea because they were soundly defeated and the city of Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord were destroyed.

Why did they make that unwise decision? Because things were bad and they grabbed hold of a group of people who had presented themselves as

strong enough to save the people. And given that all of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were written after all of that happened, I've got to believe that the people who wrote them and the people who first read them could not read about the people being offered a choice between Jesus Barabbas and Jesus of Nazareth without thinking about the fateful choice the people of Judea had made in 66 AD.

And all of this is important because we are living in scary times. And people who are living in scary times may not always make the wisest decisions about who to trust to lead them. And I'm definitely not going to talk about specific parties or specific leaders at this moment. It is not up to me to tell you that this leader is a good one and that is a bad one. I just mean to put it out there that we need to think carefully about who we are going to trust to lead us and give us hope. Just because somebody feels safe or somebody puts up an illusion that they know what to do, doesn't mean that they are the one we ought to follow. The people of Judea did not need Jesus Barabbas, did not need some illusion of power and strength. They should have thought again.

But perhaps, rather than focussing on the kind of leader we *don't* need, maybe we need to focus on the kind that we do. The gospel writers clearly believed that, given the choice, the people of Judea should have chosen Jesus of Nazareth. Even more important, they clearly believed that we need to be willing to choose Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe Jesus' way of love and compassion, of reaching out to the poor and forgotten and marginalized of society does not seem like strength or a winning strategy as far as the world is concerned, but we need to chose that way anyways.

Even more important, Jesus was willing to take that compassion to the ultimate – to lay his very life down, when it came to it, for the sake of the forgotten and the despised and as a direct challenge to those who were only interested in their own gain and their own interest.

I get that in times of great stress or fear, that is not the instinct we usually have. We usually look around for a Jesus Barabbas at times like that. We look for the quick win – the stockpiles of toilet paper or hand sanitizer to make ourselves feel like we are going to be safe even if the whole world falls apart. But that is not where true security is to be found. In the sacrifice and service of Jesus we have a model of the way forward – a way of healing our society where we all make it through because we don't exclude anyone from the recovery and the new economy that will follow, where the survival of the weakest is something that strengthens the whole. That is the way of Jesus. That is the path we must choose.

So, what will it be, Jesus Barabbas, or the other Jesus?