**Condemning the Innocent to Free the Guilty**

Based on [Matthew 27:11-54](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt27.11-54)

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Passion / Palm Sunday ~ Palmarum

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Our sense of justice is upended when we consider the means by which God pardoned our sins. He punished an innocent man in order to free the guilty. It seems foolish, but then again, the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

In the United States, in certain states, the Death Penalty is still legal. But there is one person in the state with the authority to pardon a convicted criminal on death row. That is the governor. Evidently, this power resided with the governor of a region at least as far back as the Roman empire. Pontus Pilate was the governor of Judea. Jesus was found to be guilty of blasphemy and inciting rebellion, not by Pilate, but by the Jews. Pilate didn’t believe their verdict, and was also advised by his wife to have nothing to do with Jesus because he was righteous.

Nevertheless, Pilate was cautious to contradicting the Jews. So he tried another political tactic; he maneuvered another possible solution. By pardoning Jesus, he would not deny their verdict and offend them, but would also free this innocent man. A politician’s win-win...find a way to please everybody. Pilate had a tradition to release one criminal every year. To pardon one, and the choice was given to the people...to release Jesus, or the notorious criminal Barrabas. But, to Pilate’s surprise they chose Barrabas to be released and Jesus to be crucified. Finally, throwing up his ***hands***, he washed his ***hands*** before ***handing*** Jesus over to the Jews.

Just to be clear, when I say “the Jews,” I am just repeating the term that John uses in his Gospel. He means not all Jews...John himself is a Jew. But he means the Jewish rulers and those other Jews whom they sway against Jesus. It would be like saying “Ottawa upheld the carbon tax.” That doesn’t mean every single citizen and politician in Ottawa voted and approved of it. It means that Ottawa, the seat of the Canadian government and authority, upheld it.

Back to the gospel...not only did “the Jews” convict Jesus...they regarded him as worse than a worst offender of their people at the time. The gospel writers describe Barrabas as a particularly disgusting criminal. Matthew describes him as a “notorious prisoner”. Mark and Luke describe him as a rebel who had committed *murder* during an insurrection against the roman occupying forces. Jesus was charged with inciting rebellion. Barabaas committed actual murder during a rebellion. Yet they cried for the pardoning of Barabbas. Clearly, it wasn’t about justice, their hatred of Jesus was personal as it was irrational.

The Jews cried out for Pilate to *release a guilty man* in order that they might see to the *execution of an innocent man*. It is foolishness and malice and blindness. It is irrational...if justice is your goal.

It is difficult to understand why people act as they do, so irrationally. But then again, it’s not. Emotions and desires often cloud intelligent and sober judgment especially in matters of justice. But knowing the rest of the gospel, we can see that--though many of the Jews were evidently stirred into a fervor--the religious leaders were very rational. Caiaphas and the other rulers, they calculated that if Jesus were not handled, they would lose their positions of religious and social privilege. Their goal was not justice, but peace under the current administration. So Caiaphas says, “It is better for one man to die than for the whole nation to perish.” That isn’t justice, that’s just practical wisdom.

But God foolishness is wiser than men. And Caiaphas’ statement, we know, was actually a prophecy of the Holy Spirit. Caiaphas meant it for evil, God meant it for good. Caiaphas meant that to kill Jesus would ***bring peace to the nation***; the Spirit meant that the death of Jesus would ***bring peace to the souls of men***.

There are, I believe, two other such prophecies of the Spirit. They show up in the fervor of the crowd calling for Jesus death. The people, shouting in mantras “Crucify him, Crucify him. Release Barabbas”...this indicates a type of madness. It is madness to think that *freeing the guilty is a justified means to executing the innocent*...but this too is a prophecy. The crowds mean that they would prefer let a guilty man go free so long as they can crucify this innocent one. But God means, “it is better to crucify His son than that all men perish in their guilt.”

It is foolish to think that executing the innocent is an appropriate way to free the guilty? But the foolishness of God is wiser than men. That is exactly what he has done. He has made it so that, through the execution of one innocent man, all those who are guilty of sin and deserving of death--from the beginning to the end of the world--may be free and inherit eternal life. This is the scandal of the passion of Christ. This is what scripture calls a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. This is the centre of our faith...christ crucified of which we preach.

One other Mantra the crowds shout in their act of condemning the innocent Christ...they say “His blood be on us and our children.” This too is a prophecy of the Holy Spirit. What the Jews mean is “Let us bear the accountability for Jesus’s death.” What God means through a sort of prophetic reversal is “Let Jesus bear the accountability for our life”.

And that’s what Jesus is doing, bearing the accountability for our life. There is a divine accounting of things, a balancing of accounts. We don’t deserve to live, but neither does Jesus deserve to die. Therefore, when he willingly sheds his blood for us--and that blood is upon us and our children--it means that justice is balanced. He takes an unjust punishment for our sake, and by his sacrifice he has the authority to give us life.

Christ paid the price for our sin, that we might reap the wages of his perfect life and atoning death. His innocent death is our eternal life. This is Passion Sunday, and that’s what the passion is all about, Charlie Brown…

But wait...there’s more! In Exodus, God’s people were spared death by literally smearing the blood of the unblemished lamb over their doorposts. So too, Christ's blood was literally placed on us and on our children in baptism. And we literally eat his body and drink his blood in the Holy Meal, Christ applies his sacrifice to us...really and truly, through faith. For as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.