



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Laid on Him the Cross

Luke 23:13-26

Fr. William Klock

October 25, 2015 – Trinity 21

With Luke we've been following Jesus as he was arrested by the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews. We watched as he was beaten and mocked during the night by soldiers, and then in the morning charged with leading Israel astray, being a false prophet, and blasphemy against the temple. The Jewish elders and chief priests couldn't execute Jesus themselves, so they marched him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate didn't care about their charges of blasphemy—that was a Jewish affair and it didn't concern him. No, the charge they brought to Pilate against Jesus was the charge that he was leading Israel astray. In biblical terms, to lead Israel astray meant to lead her away from her devotion to the Lord and from her covenant obligations. The kings of Israel and Judah led Israel astray in the Old Testament when they found themselves surrounded by hostile nations and, instead of trusting the Lord to take care of them, they built altars to pagan gods, made alliance with pagan kings, and trusted in their horses and chariots. But in this case, the Sanhedrin charges Jesus with leading Israel astray by undermining her loyalty to Rome. They tell Pilate that Jesus has been teaching the people not to pay taxes and that he claims to be a king—a rival to Caesar. They hate Jesus so much that they sell their souls to Caesar just to see him executed.

As we saw last week, Pilate knew their charges were nonsense. He declared Jesus innocent, as much because doing so angered the Sanhedrin, whom Pilate despised, as because he saw no threat to Rome in the man before him. The

chief priests wouldn't drop the issue. They insisted Pilate do something. When Pilate realized Jesus was from Galilee he passed the buck and told them to take Jesus to Herod. Herod had no love for Jesus, but he hated the Sanhedrin as much as Pilate did. He and his men mocked Jesus, but no matter how much the chief priests and the scribes demanded he execute Jesus, Herod wouldn't do it. It was more important to him to take the opportunity to oppose them. To the utter frustration of the Sanhedrin, Herod sends them back to Pilate with Jesus. Look now at Luke 23:13-16.

Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him."

Pilate emphasizes that Jesus is innocent. Yes, he was motivated by cynicism and by hatred of the Jewish leaders. Pilate was tasked with upholding justice on behalf of Caesar and as Caesar's judge in Judea he found the charges against Jesus to be unsubstantiated. It helped that he enjoyed doing the opposite of whatever the Sanhedrin asked of him, just to let them know who was boss. The same went for Herod. He had sought to have Jesus killed, but now that the Sanhedrin wants him dead, Herod is just as happy to dress Jesus in fancy clothes, mock him, and send him back to Pilate just to spite his political enemies.

Pilate calls everyone together—not just the chief priests and the rulers—the Sanhedrin—but even, Luke says, "the people". All Jerusalem—or at least a representative part of her—is gathered in the court before Pilate's palace. And Pilate insists that Jesus is

innocent. He's found no reason to execute Jesus and neither has Herod. As we'll see, this is not the response the Jewish leaders and people wanted to hear. Pilate knew it. He could see it on their faces and hear it in their murmurings. But what can he do? If he back-pedals he'll look weak and he doesn't want that. He hasn't yet realized just how *serious* the Sanhedrin and the people are about this. So to placate them he offers to release Jesus after "punishing" him.

Pilate's "punishment" was a whipping. In Roman practice there were three sorts of whippings. *Fustigatio* was often a sort of warning for minor offenders, *flagellatio* was a more severe beating reserved as punishment for criminal acts, and, finally, *verberatio*, which often went along with crucifixion, involved not a fixed number of lashes, but lashings until flesh began to be torn off the victim. What Pilate had in mind was probably the "light" beating given petty criminals—a warning to Jesus to be more circumspect and to stop giving the chief priests reason to disturb the governor.

That doesn't satisfy the mob. Luke goes on in verse 18:

But they all cried out together, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas".

Luke finally here brings together the Sanhedrin and the people—the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes—the leaders of Israel—and the people of Jerusalem. At first it was the priests and scribes who wanted Jesus dead, but now the people have joined them. Are the Romans—represented by Pilate—at fault in the killing of Jesus? Yes. But Luke's emphasis is on the height of Israel's apostasy. Jesus' prophecy is being fulfilled: the son of the vineyard owner has come to claim what is his, but the wicked tenants are going to kill him and take the vineyard for themselves. As even God's elect rise up against Jesus the Messiah and demand his execution

Luke emphasizes just how great the need was for Jesus.

This is the high-water mark of human sin and rebellion in history. This was the point at which the Satan was at the peak of his power and influence. In the Garden he had duped humanity into questioning God's goodness, he had duped humanity into rebellion. From there our situation went from bad to worse as we, God's people, lost all knowledge of our Creator and sank into deeper and deeper sin and paganism—with each generation slipping further and further way from God. Out of that darkness God called Abraham. He called Abraham to be a light in the darkness and to restore the knowledge of God to the nations. How? By calling Abraham and then by calling Abraham's children to walk in covenant faithfulness with him. From amongst the peoples, the Lord called and created a people for himself to represent us all. The problem was, however, that Israel was afflicted with the same problem that afflicts the entire human race: sin. And so the Lord's history with Israel became a cycle of faithfulness, followed by rebellion, followed by the Lord's discipline, and then a return to faithfulness—over and over and over—yet with each cycle becoming worse, culminating in these events in Pilate's court as the Lord's own people demand the murder of their own Saviour. Something had to change. Something else had to be done. That's why Jesus was sent. That's why the Satan was working so feverishly against him. As Israel had been chosen to be humanity's representative in order to return humanity to God, so Jesus came as Israel's representative, bringing her history and her mission to its climax—to reconstitute a new Israel in order to bring both sinful Israel, and through her, the sinful nations back to God. Jesus did what neither Abraham nor Moses had been able to do: he came to deal directly with our sin and to turn

our hard and rebellious hearts back to God.

But first, Jesus had to die. To defeat sin, to defeat evil, to defeat violence, to defeat death he had to face the worst that evil and sin and death could do. And so the Lord, in his providence, turns the rebellious and sinful intentions of the people to the fulfilment of his own plan to save them. They cry to Pilate: No punishment! No whippings! Away with Jesus! Release Barabbas instead.

Mark and Matthew give us a bit of background information that Luke doesn't mention. Plenty of Jews wound up in Roman prisons and often sentenced to death, not because they'd broken Jewish law, but because they'd broken Roman law. Many of them were revolutionaries who may have been popular with the people, but who were sentenced to death for threatening Rome's authority. To foster good will, it was the custom for the governor to release one of these prisoners at Passover. The people had this in mind when Pilate said he would release Jesus. That made them angry. Pilate was supposed to release someone popular, not Jesus. To release Jesus would be a waste of this once-a-year event. And so, instead, they shout that they want Barabbas released.

We again get a sense here of how horribly the people and their leaders have turned against God. First the Sanhedrin had charged Jesus with leading Israel astray—not because he was leading her away from the Lord, but because he was leading her away from Caesar. Now Pilate offers to release Jesus, an innocent man who came to lead Israel back to her God, but the people will have none of it. They demand he release Barabbas instead. Who is Barabbas? We know only what the Evangelists tell us. Luke says in verse 19 that he was:

...a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder.

Ironically, Barabbas was guilty of just the sort of charges they brought against Jesus. The choice the people give Pilate between Barabbas and Jesus only serves to highlight the fact that Jesus was innocent. Barabbas was a violent revolutionary, he had challenged the authority of Rome. He's precisely the opposite of Jesus and Pilate knew this.

Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him." But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. (Luke 23:20-24)

Two more times Pilate insists on releasing Jesus and each time the people become more insistent. Before they cried "Away with him!" and now they cry out, demanding that Jesus be crucified. Again, Luke reminds us just how great their hatred of Jesus was. Under any other circumstances it's extremely unlikely that Jews ever would have demanded the Romans crucify anyone. Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution. (The Jews practised stoning.) There were no hard and fast rules involving crucifixion, but no matter how it was done it was horrible. The key point of it was to prolong death and to inflict as much pain as possible. Victims were usually whipped severely, then marched through the streets, carrying the crossbeam to which they would be tied or nailed, until they reached some prominent place. They would often be crucified at a crossroads or along a major thoroughfare. Romans usually reserved crucifixion for revolutionaries and insurrectionists and they carried it out where it would

serve as a very public warning to others: “This is what happens when you challenge the authority of Rome.” For the conquered peoples of the empire—for people like the Jews—crucifixion was a reminder that they lived under Roman rule and that there was nothing they could do about it. It represented everything they hated about their situation. It reminded them that they were living in exile in their own land. And yet they cry out to Pilate demanding that he crucify Jesus—not just the Sanhedrin, but again, Luke makes it clear that the people of Jerusalem were united in their demand.

This is what lies behind Peter’s accusation in Acts 3. There he reminds the people, “The God of Abraham...glorified his servant Jesus, whom *you* delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But *you* denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and *you* killed the Author of Life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:13-14). As fallen humanity’s fallen representative, Israel rejected the Messiah and demanded his brutal death. And yet Pilate could have stopped it, but seeing the solidarity of the Sanhedrin and the people he knew that he had overplayed his hand—he backed down and caved to the demands of the people. Pilate serves as a warning to us lest we blame Israel alone and refuse to take any blame ourselves. As Caesar’s representative, Pilate represents the nations. He had the authority to stop what the Jews demanded, but he refused to do so. He reminds us that Israel’s rebellion was the same rebellion common to our entire race—common to you and to me—and that we are all guilty of the death of Jesus. He went to the cross for all of us. Luke goes on in verses 24-25:

So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into

prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

And so the guilty went free while the innocent went to the cross. To emphasise the point, Luke skips over the scourging Jesus received at the hands of the Romans—the sort of whipping that left him not just bruised and bloody, but with his skin torn to pieces. Luke’s emphasis is on the cross and from Pilate’s court we follow Jesus as he stumbled through the streets to the place where he will be crucified. In verse 26 we’re told:

And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus.

As I said, the usual practice was to force the condemned man to carry the crossbeam of his own cross. After everything he’d been through: the abuse he suffered at the hands of the chief priest’s soldiers, the abuse of Herod and his court, and scourging by the Romans, Jesus was unable to carry that heavy beam. As he stumbled in the street, the Romans seized a man named Simon. Luke says he was from Cyrene—a major Greco-Roman city on the coast of Libya. Like most big Roman cities, it had a sizeable Jewish population. Simon, no doubt, travelled to Jerusalem for the Passover. He may have heard Jesus teaching in the temple earlier in the week or this might have been the first time he’d seen or heard of Jesus. Whatever the case, he was another person in the crowd, watching as Jesus was led away by soldiers, but as Jesus stumbles and falls under the weight of that heavy wooden beam, the soldiers pull him out of the crowd and force him to carry the crossbeam, following behind Jesus in his own humiliation.

That’s as far as we’ll go this morning, because I want to focus our attention

on these two characters—on Barabbas and on Simon.

First, Barabbas: Again, he was a violent revolutionary and a murderer. He was guilty of at least some of the very crimes with which Jesus was charged. We don’t know anything about him apart from what we read in Scripture, but in at least some respects, he represents the sort of messiah the people were expecting: someone who would lead them in open and violent revolt against the Romans. Barabbas’ followers may well have seen him as the next “king of the Jews” if he could only pull off his revolution. But again, he was guilty and his guilt emphasises Jesus’ innocence. Barabbas the guilty went free because Jesus took his place on a cross. The Prince of Peace gave his life for this man of violence.

And yet this has been Jesus ministry all along. Jesus has given himself for tax collectors and for sinners, for prostitutes and for gentiles, for lepers and the unclean. Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem and so he reached out to the lost sheep with the love of God and invited them into the kingdom. And here he does it again. In the last chapter he had prophesied that he would be numbered with the transgressors and here he stands sentenced to death for the crimes of Barabbas while he, himself, is innocent. Jesus was crucified with a *lestes*—a “robber”, a man like Barabbas and perhaps even co-conspirators of Barabbas, on either side of him. He took Barabbas’ place. Brothers and Sisters, Barabbas points us to good news that Jesus has given his life in the place of ours; Jesus has died the death that we sinners deserve. It’s fitting that he should die while a murderer goes free. Murderers are the worst of the worst. Murder was the first crime for which God commanded the death penalty. It was no small sin that Barabbas had committed, but Jesus died in his place. His life, his blood is sufficient to cover the guilt of

any sin, no matter how great or small. Sin and death did their worst at the cross, but Jesus returned our violence with grace, our fury with mercy, and our hatred with love. He broke the cycle of sin and hatred, he brought forgiveness, and he offers life as he takes our place on the cross. Each of us is in some way like Barabbas. We are rebellious sinners awaiting a sentence of death, but Jesus takes our place and grants us freedom. How are we to respond to that?

Here Luke turns our attention to Simon of Cyrene. Like Barabbas, he's another complete stranger. We know nothing about him other than that he was forced by the Romans to carry Jesus' cross. And yet in telling us just this one simple fact, Luke points us back to the call of Jesus. In 9:23 he said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." In Chapter 14, as he talked about the high cost of discipleship, Jesus had said, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (14:27). Luke makes a point of using the same language here that he used in those earlier passages. Jesus has taken up his cross, an innocent man going to his death for the sake of his sinful and rebellious people, but now Simon follows, bearing the cross as well. Simon shows us what it looks like to follow Jesus in faith—what it looks like to be a disciples. He had been a bystander, but bearing that cross, he was suddenly in the thick of it all. The blood of Jesus, smeared on the wood of the beam, was now smeared on Simon—on his hands, his shoulders, his face. As he carried the heavy beam, the shouts and jeering and mocking of the crowd surrounded him. Here was Simon from far-away Libya on what may well have been a once-in-a-lifetime trip to celebrate Passover, just this once, in Jerusalem. And yet here he finds himself taking part in another Passover—a grater Passover of which the one celebrated by the

Jews was only a shadow. And not just a Passover. Like the first of the Israelites, following Moses through the Red Sea, Simon was the first to follow Jesus as he led his people out of their bondage to sin and to death. In a day in which we adorn our churches with crosses and wear them as jewellery around our necks, we may not grasp what a symbol of humiliation the cross was. To the people of the Roman empire, it was an instrument of torture and death that only the lowest of the low and the worst of the worst deserved. But that was the punishment that Jesus, in a profoundly humble act, took for our sake. And now, as breaks the cycle of hate and rebellion, of sin and death, he calls us to follow him. Jesus returned hate with love. He returned violence with peace. He took the worst that evil could do to him, but rather than retaliate, rather than revile, rather than curse his enemies, he responded with forgiveness. Brothers and Sisters, we submit to Jesus lordship as we follow him, as we in the same way humble ourselves—for his sake and for the sake of the world lost in darkness. Jesus not only calls us to follow him in an exodus from sin and death ourselves, but he calls us to follow as Simon did, in humility and self-sacrifice, bearing our own crosses so that others might see Jesus in our example, in our witness and join us in this great exodus.

Let us pray: Almighty God and Father, keep before us these two men, Barabbas and Simon, to be reminders, first of the sacrifice Jesus has made for us as he took the punishment we deserve, and second, of his call to us to follow as disciples. Remind us each day, Father, that our calling is to follow Jesus as we give our lives and our all for the sake of others, to make Jesus known to them, to break the cycle of hate with love and sin with righteousness, and to manifest here and now in the midst of darkness, the kingdom of light inaugurated at the Cross. Remind us each day that we

live not for ourselves, but for others and teach us each day what it means to take up our crosses and to follow Jesus as disciples. Amen.