

When I was younger, I had a lot of sympathy for Pilate. And to his credit, he recognizes the truth of Jesus' innocence. But in his conduct he reveals himself a weak ruler. He is eager to pass Jesus off to Herod, or at best, seeks his input and counsel in the matter of Jesus, rather than make his own determination. Then, to try to stave off the desire for Jesus to die, he orders Him to be gruesomely whipped, and is then subject to the sadistic amusement of the soldiers. Even then, the desire that Jesus be put to death is not abated. Pilate knows, we are told this, that the hatred of the priests and scribes is out of jealousy. It is no serious accusation.

But rather than outright dismissal of the case, Pilate takes recourse to the Passover amnesty, the release of a prisoner according to the choice of the crowd. It ought be no contest, a common public thief and murderer on the one hand, and the Lord Jesus, whom the multitudes had so often followed, just a few days prior, hailed with shouts of triumph. Surely the crowd will choose the innocent man. In midst of all this, he receives word from his wife, to have no part of the accusations and malice against Jesus. Matthew seems to indicate that at this point the crowd wavers, and so here the priests and elders persuade them to instead ask for Barabbas and to destroy Jesus.

Three times in his question to the crowd, Pilate is as the parent teaching a child how to choose what is good. Do you really want that? Are you sure? Well, what about this? In the end, hateful opposition to the Lord wins out, and Pilate tries to excuse himself with a wash of his hands as he directs his soldiers to crucify Jesus.

Men are weak. Even those with all the authority and the duty to do what is just and right, often fail. There is none innocent, there is no hero here, save the Lord. We are shown here, to put no trust in men. The majority is dead wrong, their allegiance and cause fickle. Our office hymn today, and popular imagination, many of the reflections on these events, identify the crowd clamoring for the Lord's crucifixion as the very same people who hailed Him as king on Palm Sunday. But if we think about how large the population of Jerusalem swelled for Passover, and read a bit closer the description of Palm Sunday, that is not necessarily the case. It is the crowd that accompanies Jesus into Jerusalem, following before and after, some of whom followed Him from Galilee and even more from Bethany where He raised Lazarus, it is they who sing His praises.

These pilgrims would most likely not stay in the city, it could not accommodate all the pilgrims, so like our Lord and the disciples, they camped on the Mount of Olives. The locals, those in the city, would be right on hand for the early hours of the trial. It is these who live up to the history of Jerusalem as the city that rejects the prophets sent to her, always spurning the Word of the Lord. Jerusalem is glorious as the city of the king and location of the temple. The populace, especially when their relationship to God's messengers is in view, is usually anything but glorious.

Assuming this is the case, that it is not the same people so quickly shouting "Crucify" after singing "Hosanna," saying "We have no king but Caesar" just five days after shouting "Blessed is the King of Israel," we do see in this contrast the weakness of all men. We are shown broadly, this is how humanity, how easily swayed each of us is. We see the pointed and obvious failure of justice and authority. Do not put your hope in kings and princes. And throughout we see the total wickedness to which the very experts of the scriptures are subject.

Against it all, in midst of sin, weakness, ignorance, stands the Holy One of God, the Prince of Life, willing to enter into death, wrapped in utter shame and disgrace at the hands of unjust hatred. He stands as the scum of humanity, a source of mockery and loathing in the eyes of the world, a spectacle for amusement and derision. But He stands thus willingly, silently bearing it. We hear from His lips no reproach or correction.

He suffers innocently. Herod, Pilate, Pilate's wife all testify to His innocence. And through His innocent, patient, bitter suffering, He atones for all sins, every shameful deed, each crime of every sinner and evildoer upon earth. He has atoned for our sins, what we have done out of malice and weakness. Amid the cries of unjust hatred, the roaring of the ravening lion lurking in the background, the innocent Lamb silently fulfills His task of suffering and redemption.

And so the cries of the foe, the threats and accusations of the Old Evil foe by which we are alarmed must be silent. The Good Shepherd acts as our substitute and protects and defends us. Therefore we cling, we hope and trust in Him, this very Jesus who stands thus, sentenced to death. When the wicked and evildoers hate us from the sake of this Jesus, reviles and persecutes, rushing in upon us to do to us as it did to Him, we do not despair. We suffer with Him and even in great suffering preserve a good conscience, for it is sprinkled with His blood. His innocence covers us, His death is our very life.

O Jesus, Thou crucified, strengthen us and grant us faithfulness and steadfastness until our end! Amen.