

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday – Epistle

Worldly Justice Overturned For Us

Matthew 27:11-54

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday

Analysis by James Squire

11Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so."
12But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. 13Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" 14But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

15Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. 16At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. 17So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" 18For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. 19While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." 20Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 21The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." 22Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!"

23Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

24So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." 25Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" 26So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

27Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. 28They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

32As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36then they sat down there and kept watch over him. 37Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." 38Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41In the same way the chief priests also, along with

the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” 44The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

45From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” 47When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” 48At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” 50Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

51At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

DIAGNOSIS: Live by the Sword, Die by the Sword

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Defending Our World against Messiahs*

The world does not know what to make of Jesus (do we?), who perplexingly gives no answer for his actions. It matters not that there is conflict among the people on how to deal with him, or that the case against him is not unanimous. The rule of law

has to be bent a bit in order to satisfy domestic tranquility. Authorities like Pilate go against their conscience a bit, though perhaps he may be thinking that Jesus is guilty by association: Jesus may seem innocent, but after all he is one of the Jews' own, and he has provoked them to turn him in; perhaps there is something to their charge. As soon as the decision is made, after some wrestling with the issues, everyone unanimously treats him like a criminal—even other criminals. Some of their taunts are reminiscent of Jesus' wilderness walk with Satan: "If you are the Son of God, ..." (v. 40). In any case, it is up to Jesus (not them) to arrange his rescue. We will not have our world disrupted by his upside-down thinking.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Defending Ourselves against Irrationality*

Pilate's (and our?) question to Jesus represents an expectation of certain behavior. While it is possible Pilate might want to trust Jesus, it is certain that Pilate is evaluating Jesus based on a criterion he does trust, namely, the notion that innocent people defend themselves. It is the way of the world, and it's what we trust as well. Pilate's wife is certainly governed by that maxim and convinces Pilate to pull out of the case for their safety. The crowd presses its verdict upon Pilate instead of answering his pertinent question, "Why, what evil has he done?" When it is expedient that one man die to save a nation, you don't answer such questions like for fear they might derail your cause. The soldiers may have just been having a good time, but their mocking renders its own verdict: If you insist on being guilty, then you deserve to be accordingly.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Defenseless Against Our Own Corruption*

The civil authorities ultimately associate Jesus with the crowd, and officially accuse him (we accuse him as well!) of being King of the Jews; this, even though they know that the title will irk

the very same crowd they are trying to appease. Being in charge, they relish the irony. The very same worldly authority structure that so many rely on lets them down and, in the end, sacrifices their well being in the interest of power. And, as subjects of this system, we get what we deserve: corrupt government for a corrupt people; condemning the innocent corruptly. But do we deserve worse? Because, as our King, Jesus utters the cry of dereliction, that signals God's condemnation upon those who have rejected him. Finally, we are all forsaken by God, left to our own corrupt world. Jesus, our King, has uttered our own worst fear as judgment against us: "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

PROGNOSIS: Die with the Lamb, Live with the Lamb

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Rescued from an Indefensible World*

The forces of evil struggle to rip God apart, but in the process they are ripped open instead. "After his resurrection, they came out of the tombs and entered the city and appeared to many" (v. 53). The Son of God cannot be separated from his heavenly Father. The effort backfires on evil, and heaven ensues. It may seem to subside since that dramatic moment, but in fact the forces of heaven has been breaking forth ever since in ways that quietly continue to befuddle the forces of nature and worldly authorities. This messiah truly was, and is, our King, and his Easter emergence from the tomb continues to be an event with no cosmic refutation. On the cross he pronounced our separation from the Father and our condemnation by the Father, loud enough so the entire cosmos could hear it. But in the resurrection, he declared that separation (that condemnation) null and void, once and for all. Ever since then, and forevermore, God is one with humanity, and nothing can rend us asunder.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Reborn To a New Rationale For Living*

Having been joined to Jesus through our baptism, we are strengthened by the one who eternally trusted in his heavenly Father to see him through. Yes, Jesus is an example to us. But first and foremost, we know he is faithful because he journeyed through desolation on our behalf. He took us on his back and shepherded us to the Easter promised land, in spite of our lack of trust. Indeed, it was our lack of trust that he sought to reverse. By prevailing over the judgment that was meant for us instead of defending himself against it, he rescued us from the judgment we could not defend ourselves against. And for that we are thankful. We, who were not innocent, have been saved by a Savior who forfeited his innocence. And so we find ourselves standing with the centurion and gasping in awe, "Truly, this man was God's Son!"

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Bringing the Messiah to the World*

Now the world does not know what to make of us. We have left ourselves open to the very attack Jesus endured. How can we worship a God who was hanged as a criminal, and reach out in love to a world that put him to death? It is beyond rational comprehension. Guilt by association still rules the day, and although some still render Jesus guilty for being associated with us, for other perhaps more astute critics, it is we who are rendered guilty for being associated with Jesus and his upside down way of dealing with people and his illogical method for dealing with sin. There are times when the world today is still moved to render a death verdict, only this time on the whole Christian church (not that we motley sinner-saints don't give the world some plausible reasons for wanting to rid the world of us). But out there among all the critics are singular folk like the centurion who can still gasp in marvel at the splendor of the Messiah and how his resurrection is played out among Jesus' followers. Our daily lives are, figuratively speaking, lived on

the witness stand in our own communities, testifying to people who themselves feel threatened by the worlds harshness and rules of engagement. So we steadfastly cling to the crucified and risen Messiah. And such clinging may yet transform some of them into followers as well, especially when they see us, by virtue of our Jesus-connection, take all the world has to give and keep on coming back with grace.