

The Death of Innocence

[Luke 23:13-25](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, March 17, 2002

[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

Nothing will drive you to despair quite like trying to pay for your sins. You're in too deep. You know it. And so does the Savior, Jesus Christ, who is dying to set you free.

During the Sundays of Lent we have followed Jesus through his arrest and his three trials as depicted in the gospel of Luke. The first of these trials was with the religious leaders. Then came his trial with the Roman official Pontius Pilate, and the third with King Herod.

The political leaders, Pilate and Herod, didn't believe Jesus had done anything wrong, other than get on the wrong side of the religious leaders, which both of them had done on a number of occasions. But the religious leaders were pressuring the political leaders to do something about the Jesus problem. Imagine that -- religious leaders presenting themselves as the moral authority to the political leaders. Isn't it interesting how some things never change?

Pilate had tried to get rid of this sticky problem by handing Jesus off to Herod. But not even the vile, lecherous king wanted responsibility for sentencing Jesus to death, so he sent him back to Pilate. When Pilate received word that Jesus was back in his hands, he called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people. He again tried to plead Jesus' case, which is fascinating because now the judge had become the defense attorney. And he was pleading in front of the people, making them now the judges who will determine if Jesus lives or dies.

This is the first time "the people" appear in the passion narratives. It is almost a fourth trial that Jesus has to face. As with his trials before the leaders, we will discover the deep yearnings of those Jesus faces. Now we will learn about our own yearnings, for we are the people. So as Pilate pleads Jesus' case, take your place where you belong among the people.

Three times Pilate comes before us to claim that Jesus is innocent. The first time he says, "Neither Herod nor I have found this man guilty of the charges you've brought against him." Trying a plea bargain, Pilate says, "I'll just have him flogged and release him." But we the people cry out, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us." A second time Pilate tries to release him, but the crowd keeps shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" This is the first time those words are mentioned. A third time Pilate protests, "What evil has he done?" But no one in the crowd is interested in Jesus' guilt. They just keep crying out for the crucifixion of the innocent man.

Later, Luke tells us, one of the crucified thieves will also declare Jesus' innocence. So will one of the centurions, who witnessing his death, said, "Surely this man was innocent." Why does Luke, of all the four gospel writers, make such a relentless point about Jesus' innocence?

Some have suggested that it is because we have spent much of our lives searching for the innocent man. This is the one in whom there is no guile. It is the man who could be trusted not to hurt you, the boss who would do more than use you, or the mentor who was worthy of following. But everyone to whom we have given ourselves is just as needy and guilty as we are. So the search continues.

A while back, the New York Times ran a series of articles on the increasing number of pilgrims from the West who have traveled to Northern India to visit a community of exiled Tibetan monks. They were hoping to learn something about life in a purer form than they have known from these men who appear innocent. But in the interview, the leader of this monastic community said, "The visitors see us as

creatures from another planet.... But deep inside every one of us is carrying a very heavy load.... As human beings it is natural that we feel anger at the Chinese and frustration and even hatred." In other words, this monk is telling us that if you want to maintain this sentimental notion about an innocent man, you're looking for someone from another planet. Everyone down here is guilty.

Is that Luke's point? Is he just saying that Jesus is the person from another place who is innocent? No, he is telling us a lot more than that. Actually, we are not really all that interested in finding an innocent person. If that is all we wanted, we wouldn't have sacrificed him so easily after he finally arrived. What we are really searching for is a way to find freedom from our guilt. I believe that the key to understanding Luke's insistence on Jesus' innocence is found in the people's insistence, our insistence, that Barabbas be released.

Barabbas, we are told, was in jail because he had participated in an insurrection against the Romans and because he had committed murder. There were many small insurrections against the Romans in those days. The Jews hated having Roman soldiers patrol their streets, Roman taxes stealing their money, and Roman authority usurping the power of their kings. Small, disorganized bands of men would strike out against a Roman outpost of soldiers. Inevitably innocent bystanders would be killed. Barabbas was a part of one of these bands of the resistance movement. He wanted so much to get rid of the oppressor, but maybe he couldn't do that without hurting innocent people. Or maybe as a murderer and a member of the resistance, he was a mixture of good and bad, just like us. What's clear is that by the laws of both the Romans and the Jews, he deserved to die for what he has done.

Most of us don't set out to hurt someone else. Our goals are good, but in the reckless pursuit of them we don't see how many people we hurt along the way. Some of us just wanted to climb up the ladder at work, but our families paid for our success with hurt. Others wanted to fix injustice or do something good like getting rid of the Romans. But no one is as dangerous as a person who has messianic illusions. Some of the meanest people in this town are trying to do good. Even terrorists think they are doing good, but they create so much hurt along the way. Still others just want to be happy. But it is amazing how many people we can hurt just trying to find happiness.

Do you really have to think hard about the people you have hurt so far? You can try to stay busy enough to outrun the memories. But late at night when you are too tired to keep running, or when a small child wanders into your home office to plead for time, or when a grown child struggles still because of the mistakes you made, or when an aging parent asks why you haven't called for so long, or when a spouse or friend points again to one of the wounds of the past, it hits you. You are clearly not the innocent man or woman. Somewhere there is someone who is hurting because of what you did. Even if it happened a long time ago, you still feel like you cannot escape the sentence of guilt.

This guilt is also manifested on a larger social level. The pope is still trying to apologize for the church's complicity in the holocaust. The bishops are apologizing for the terrible abuses of some, some, of its priests. Our previous president apologized to Africa for enslaving its people. We will never get over what we did to the Native Americans. Even Billy Graham has had to apologize about an unfortunate statement made about the Jews.

All of these apologies reveal something about the guilt that is simply everywhere. And that is when we are at our best. The alternative to apologizing over guilt, and protesting our innocence leads to coverups at best and armed conflict at worst.

So it has always been. The name Barabbas means "Son of the Father." We are our parents' children, and as the Bible claims, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children and the grandchildren. We are born into sin. It is our terrible inheritance. We didn't invent prejudice, or pride, greed, sloth, wrath, and the rest of the deadly sins. But we certainly have been infected by it all, and the virus has run deep into our souls. This is how we best understand the doctrine of Original Sin. It means that sin is a spiritual contagion that we catch like a disease. And the only way we can manage it is with more sin and more guilt. We are amazed by the things we are capable of doing. And we are amazed to discover that Barabbas is our man.

So when the crowd is confronted with a choice between Barabbas the guilty, or Jesus the innocent, are we really surprised that they screamed out for Barabbas' release? Like Barabbas, we would love to be released from our sentence of guilt. We would love to think there is some way to go free after what we have done and left undone.

Remember you are in this crowd with everyone else. And in Barabbas you see yourself up there on the platform next to Jesus. Now you are confronted with a choice about who you will set free. What are you going to say? I'll tell you what you had better say: "Give us Barabbas. Set us free from our guilt." That can happen, but only if Jesus takes your place on the cross.

"So Pilate released the man they asked for, the one who had been in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed over Jesus as they wished."

If we had cried out for the release of the innocent man, his purity would have continued to be our judgment. There has been enough judgment. You're doing pretty well on that point by yourself, aren't you? The Son of God did not come to add to your judgment. He came to free you from it.

Jesus didn't die just because we chose Barabbas. That would make him a victim of our desperation. He died because from the beginning this was his mission from God his father, the one whom we have sinned against.

Do you know what that means? It means that you are forgiven. And to be forgiven is to be freed from the sentence of guilt. If you believe this, and if you take this gift of forgiving freedom to heart, then you can stop trying to pay for your sins. Nothing is a greater offense to the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross than for you to keep trying to atone for your own sins. You'll never make it. Your only hope is to do the hardest thing a guilty person can do -- accept forgiveness and be free.

We don't know what happened to Barabbas after Jesus took his place on the cross. History is silent about him. Maybe that is best, because it means that as a free man, anything was possible for him. Such is the freedom that now stands before you as well.

We keep asking God to tell us his will. Should we turn left or right in life? Take this job, or that job? Stay single or marry? Move or stay put? I wonder if sometimes when the risen Christ hears these prayers he doesn't shrug his shoulders and say, "You know, we have the big stuff taken care of now. You are forgiven and freed. So take responsibility for your freedom, make a choice, and surprise me."

O God set us free to accept the freedom we¹ve had from the day your Son walked to our cross. Amen.