

Who is this?

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009.

Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?"

Mark 15:14

It all happens in just one short week. That's all it takes. Jesus goes from being a savior and hero welcomed into the midst of a troubled people to a common criminal given the death sentence. It doesn't take long for everyone to turn against him. In just a few days the shouts go from "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" to "Crucify him." It is tempting to talk about the fickle nature of the crowds gathered in the Holy City that week. It is easy to assume that they don't know what they want and in their disappointment they want to get rid of this man whom they had hoped would be their hero. It makes us wonder if those who welcomed him into the city on Sunday were the same ones calling for his execution on Friday.

According to the accounts by eyewitnesses, the whole city is astir in expectation of a heroic military and political ruler coming to restore the fortunes of Israel to former glory. This is their hope and expectation. What they get is something else. The disappointment must be very great. Along with his physical and emotional pain, we see the grace of God in Jesus' forgiveness of his persecutors as his understanding that his friends have abandoned him. And not only do his closest friends and companions flee out of fear, but the government that is supposed to protect innocent victims fails him. We may wonder how anyone can bear all the pain of disappointment, abuse and injustice.

At this point, people are wondering who he is. We know that those who think they know him and have traveled with him and heard his teachings are still not clear on who he is or about his purpose and mission. I think of campaign staffers who follow their candidate day and night for months. They feel a certain excitement about his fresh new ideas and feel compelled to support him. They know his stand on issues and can speak for him. Though the disciples have been with Jesus and know his stand on the issues some are still asking, "Who is this?"

There is something in human nature that wants to kill off heroes and prophets. Some people can't stand popular public figures and have as their mission to destroy them. In this drama of Christ, the crowds are given a choice to release one prisoner and condemn the other. Both are named Jesus. One is Jesus Barabbas. The other is Jesus the Christ. Both are revolutionaries. The first seeks to revolutionize by insurrection and terrorism. The other believes in converting people one at a time. The crowd has no trouble choosing whom they want to save and it isn't going to be the man called Christ. The crowd chooses Jesus Barabbas over Jesus Christ. To ask for Barabbas to be spared is to kill off those who give hope for a better world. They go for the anti-Christ over the true Christ. This drama is played out everyday. Each time we knowingly do what we know to be wrong, we choose Barabbas the terrorist instead of Jesus the Christ. When Pilate releases Barabbas, Jesus releases us.

This Holy Week, walk with Jesus through the Holy City. Do a random act of kindness for someone. It doesn't matter if they never know you have done it. Join us here this Thursday evening to share in the commemoration of the Last Supper and take part in the sacred meal that has been going on for the past two thousand years in remembrance of Christ. Join us here on Good Friday to remember what Christ's sacrifice really does for us.

A very practical thing to do is to make two lists. The first is a list of those who have hurt you and then pray, 'Father, forgive them.' Then make a second list of those whom you have hurt and go to that person and say, "Forgive me." That is what makes this Friday "Good." It is good because we are saved from the burden of our guilt and sin. On Holy Saturday, take some time to be part of the quiet of that day. Think of how the disciples must feel the day after his death as all their hopes are buried with him in that borrowed tomb.

Then on Easter morning, the Day of Resurrection, throw open the windows of your soul and let the light of Christ shine through and illumine your whole life. Give thanks and praise to God for the ways in which Jesus is really alive in you and in those you love. I hope by then you will have a better idea of who Jesus is. I hope that you will come to know that he is the infinite become finite, that he is really God present with us. Each time we fall, God is there to help us go on our way again. That is God's nature. No longer need we ask, "Who is this?"