

The cast of characters at Calvary

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Good Friday, April 10, 2009.

And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.
Mark 15:46

This is the most somber day of the Christian year. When you enter into the drama of this day, you feel the chill and the sense of loss that the disciples must have felt. All their hopes and dreams are invested in Jesus who called the people of Israel to their original purpose of reconciling all humanity with God.

Jesus never pretended to be a conquering military hero or political leader. When he entered the holy city a few days before, he rode on a donkey, a lowly beast of burden instead of arriving triumphantly on a white stallion. Pathos and triumph rode together that day. In only a few days, the crowd turns on him and he is mocked, scorned, abused and nailed to a crude wooden cross as a common criminal.

After Jesus is arrested, the guards beat him unmercifully. When he carries his heavy cross to the place of his crucifixion, they mock him by pressing a crown of thorns down upon his brow. They stretch him out upon the crude wooden cross, drive nails into his hands and feet, and hoist his limp and exhausted body on the cross to hang there until he dies. Though it was a common sight for the people of that time to witness a crucifixion, this grisly scene is repugnant to us. We don't hold public executions anymore, even though there are those who wait outside a prison to cheer as the hearse drives off with the body after an execution.

With all the suffering Jesus experiences, we may wonder why this day is called "good." We call this Good Friday because of the good that is accomplished in our salvation from sin and alienation. His suffering and execution are the supreme example of grace and mercy.

There is something in human nature that makes troubled people resent the good people of the world. Instead of being drawn to them, they do everything they can to heap scorn on them and destroy them, thwarting any good they can do because they feel so miserable about themselves. The evil and unhappiness that lies within them cannot accept kind and loving people who reach out to those whose lives are filled with desperation and loneliness.

It is important for us here today to feel the full meaning and significance of this day of Christ's crucifixion. There can be no Easter without Good Friday. There can be no wearing of a kingly crown without a crown of thorns. There can be no triumph over death without the cross and grave. If this part of the Christian story is depressing, it shouldn't be. The events of this make possible the triumph of Easter. That is why we retell the story of Jesus' agony and death even if it seems sad and depressing. It is an important and necessary chapter in the Christian story.

Let us examine the cast of characters in this great drama of the Christian faith. Jesus had his detractors throughout his ministry, those who want to get rid of him. First, there are the Pharisees, the keepers of the law. Because they keep to a strict adherence to the letter of the law, they are regarded as the measure of goodness and righteousness. Their strict observance of the law makes them what we refer to today as "strict constructionists." They are the very measure of righteousness. When Jesus taught that keeping the spirit and intent of the law is more important than keeping the letter of the law, he was accused of wanting to destroy the law. He came to

fulfill the intent and purpose of the law in helping us love God with all our heart, soul and mind and love and respect others as we want to be respected.

The second group is the Sadducees, the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem. Influenced by Greek and Latin philosophy, the Sadducees deny that the soul can survive the body at death. Where the Pharisees promote harmonious relationships, the Sadducees are less cultivated. Where the Pharisees believe that history is divinely controlled, the Sadducees believe that we control our own fate in choosing between good and evil.

The third group is the Scribes. They are the paralegal secretaries who keep all the legal, historical and sacred documents. They are meticulous and precise in keeping everything in proper order. They take themselves very seriously as the guardians of the textual purity of the scripture.

Jesus poses a threat to the way of life for the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Scribes because they are against any change of the way things have always been. They see God's law not as a guide, but as a force to be regarded scrupulously with no regard to people or circumstances. The radical nature of Jesus' teaching is that the law is made for people and not the other way around. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes banded together as detractors to put an end to Jesus' radical redefinition of the purpose of God's law.

Another essential character in this drama of redemption is the person of Judas, the betrayer of Jesus. He wouldn't have been entrusted with the disciples' funds had he not had some degree of personal integrity and honesty. The good qualities he had are lost in his disappointment over Jesus who is not the conquering warrior hero he expected. While Judas is looking for a hero to restore the fortunes of Israel through military and political means, Jesus is a sovereign of an entirely different realm from what Judas expected. His disenchantment with Jesus is coupled with his weakness for money, thirty pieces of silver for betraying him to the authorities.

It falls to Judas to be a necessary player in this drama of redemption. In the end his betrayal prevents him from being able to live with himself. Judas stands with those who betray a friend while giving the appearance of being loyal to him. We see his character in those who profess to be followers of Christ while betraying his ideals and crucifying him all over again. Judas remains one of the most tragic figures in all human history.

Enter the character of Pontius Pilate. By all accounts, Pilate is the consummate politician and crowd pleaser. Though he doesn't see any crime in Jesus, he is not willing to stand in his defense if it means risking his power and position. Pilate is willing to compromise personal conviction by appealing to the crowd. If there were any way he can get out of it, he would because he cannot find anything wrong in Jesus. But the winds of fortune aren't blowing in his direction and the crowd wants to put an end to this radical threat to their religious and political way of life. They are fired up with the notion that such threats against the status quo are worthy of the charges of blasphemy, sedition, and conspiracy and Pilate's pragmatism makes him go along with their charges. His attempt to avoid Jesus' death sentence by offering him amnesty on the Sabbath doesn't satisfy the crowd. They want him crucified. There will be no settling out of court. In the end, Pilate washes his hands of the whole matter and leaves the final decision to the crowd. In the vain effort to save his own position, Pilate sells his soul by selling out to the crowd.

Pilate serves as a reminder of how easily we can compromise ourselves in times of moral crisis. He represents the appeal of the easy wrong over the harder right. When we attempt to sacrifice basic principle in favor of expediency, our personal integrity is at stake. To wash our hands of personal responsibility is to fracture the body of Christ all over again. Maintaining wholeness in the body of Christ must never be at the sacrifice of personal integrity.

We see a most compassionate character in this drama in Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph is a man of considerable wealth who lives in a large home with servants with a garden tomb that has never been used. He is willing to let it be used now for the burial of Jesus. Known for his modesty, kindness, and generosity, Joseph is a member of the Sanhedrin and is a respected member of the council. He appears to disagree with the findings of the court and wants to see the issue put to rest. In any case, he goes to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus to be buried in his garden tomb before the Sabbath begins at sundown.

The final person in this cast of characters is Nicodemus, the man who once came to Jesus by night to question him about the kingdom of God. He now reappears to assist in the burial by bringing the myrrh and aloes for the preparation of the body of Jesus.

It will be up to the women to anoint the body of Jesus as most of the other disciples have fled in fear. All this will have to wait until after the Sabbath. The only thing left now is to place the body of Jesus in the borrowed tomb, cover it with shroud and roll the stone against the door.

The disciples sense that they won't be seeing each other again. But there is something about this man's spirit that stays with them, even after his death.

Maybe, just maybe this isn't the end.