

Jesus, Barabbas, and Pilate

Rising up on the northern side above the temple courts in Jerusalem was a massive citadel known as the Antonia Fortress. Built by Herod the Great and named for his patron, Marc Antony, it was the barracks and headquarters for the Roman military in Jerusalem. Its placement was intentional: the imposing structure was meant to remind the Jews coming to their sacred place of worship who was really in charge. These faithful worshippers might think that their God is all powerful, but Rome had a different idea: it was the emperor, and by extension, his governor and armies. It was to this place that Jesus was led in the early morning hours after his arrest. While the Sanhedrin claimed that they had no authority to execute someone as an official body, Jewish tradition in the time of Jesus called for stoning persons who had committed blasphemy, or claiming to be God. This was, however, a dangerous course of action for the Sanhedrin who risked the wrath of the throngs who had welcomed Jesus only days earlier as the messiah. No, it would be better to let the Roman's do it, and the charge was insurrection against Rome. This would require the sentence of the Roman governor: Pontius Pilate.

Pontius Pilate did not reside or rule from Jerusalem; he only came to this city during the festival times because of the massive numbers of people who gathered there. If ever there was going to be an uprising in Jerusalem, it would be during these times. The governor resided in the Mediterranean seaside city of Caesarea Maritima, and would come to the city in a great procession and show of power several days before the Passover. This was a procession that came from the west of the city, a military demonstration as much as a political parade. The Jews would know that the powerful hand of Rome had arrived, not that they would have forgotten this overbearing power each time they went to the temple.

But remember, several days earlier someone else had arrived in the city with a great procession: his name was Jesus of Nazareth, and rather than coming from the west, he came from the east. The crowds cheering for Jesus probably mirrored the crowds who gathered to watch the Roman governor enter the city, but with one major difference. Those who welcomed Jesus shouted Hosanna – Save us now! No one thought that the Roman governor was coming to Jerusalem to save them from anything.

Don't think that Pilate didn't take note! His job was to keep the peace, to put down potential rivals to the empire, to guarantee calm at any cost! Evidence from sources outside of the Bible are unanimous in their assessment that Pilate had little concern for the lives, the faith, or the traditions of the Jews. He was a shrewd and brutal ruler who would eventually be recalled to Rome by the emperor Tiberius for his unusual cruelty. He was only saved because on his journey home, the emperor died, and was replaced by another ruler: Caligula, who, Roman tradition tells us, most likely ordered a general amnesty upon his ascension to the throne. This man from Galilee who now stood before him on the paving stones of the Roman fortress was well aware of the man who stood before him: his name was Jesus, the son of Joseph, or in Hebrew Bar-Joseph.

Jesus' trial before Pilate was a display of competing powers: the power of brutality against the power of love, the power of violence against the power of peace. While the gospel writers are somewhat mild in their assessment of the Roman governor, it is highly likely that what seems like waffling on the part of Pilate may have been a not so subtle challenge to the Sanhedrin. A

contemporary history written by Josephus Flavius records that there was outright hostility between Pilate and the Sanhedrin; both were two power-hungry entities who represented religious versus civil authority. Why would these enemies of the governor suddenly be so concerned about someone claiming the authority of kingship?

Pilate, like the Sanhedrin, may have seen Jesus as a threat as well, but he was probably equally suspicious of his new-found allies. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asks Jesus, to which Jesus only answers, “You say so.” Had Jesus answered yes before Pilate, he would have stood self-condemned. There was only one king – it was Caesar. While Jesus avoids answering Pilate’s inquiry, it’s unlikely that the governor ever intended to let Jesus go. He wasn’t that kind. Now the Sanhedrin had provided him with the perfect opportunity to deal with this man who that previous Sunday had attracted a crowd with waving palms and shouts of joy, and the accusers would be the ones to pass judgment now.

You see, there was another Jesus who stood before Pilate that same day: Jesus Bar-abbas, or “Jesus – son of the fathers.” This day had been set for his execution, and chances are that he was a bit puzzled why he would be standing there. We don’t know a lot about Jesus Barabbas, except that he was most likely a member of the Sicarii – a group of militant Jewish zealots who practiced guerilla tactics and specialized in political assassination. He is the kind of person who trusted no-one, who found power through hatred – and in this case it was hatred of Roman occupation. While the modern reader might see Barabbas’ description as a murderer and insurrectionist as the obvious one to be crucified, to the Jews, he may very well have been seen as a hero. He had stood up against the oppressive occupiers. He would fight where Jesus would not. He would be a military leader where Jesus would not. He wanted freedom from Roman oppression, where Jesus called for freedom of the human spirit. He would defend himself to the death. He was actually the obvious choice for the populace that day: he was the one who would respond to Rome with violence – the kind of response that many people wanted. That the Sanhedrin, who distrusted Pilate greatly, urged the crowd to call for the release of Barabbas reflects both their fear of Jesus and their disdain for Rome.

So as the dawn was breaking on that Friday morning in Jerusalem, there were two men standing before Pilate: one empowered by hatred and one empowered by love. Pilate gives them the choice. The crowds chose the way of hatred and violence. Would we choose differently? We want to say that the way of Jesus Christ is the path we would take, but when we feel threatened, we often find ourselves fighting back. We want to take the way of love and self-sacrifice, but not when personal comfort or safety is at stake. We want to follow Jesus, except when we might become the object of someone else’s scorn. We want to take up the cross, but if given a way out, we will often take a lesser way.

On that Friday morning in Jerusalem, Pilate was asking a question that every generation of Christians must come to grips with: when the going gets tough, with whom will you stand: Jesus Barabbas – the son of the fathers, or Jesus Christ – the son of God? Do we choose hatred and violence or the ways of peace? Barabbas was considered faithful by the crowd. Many acts of hatred and violence have been perpetrated in the name of God and Jesus Christ throughout history. Many have been excluded by those who claim they are protecting right doctrine, by those who claim that they are exclusive holders of Biblical truth, by those who pass judgment

without proclaiming forgiveness and grace. Many have embraced a toxic faith that leads them away from the ways of God in Jesus Christ. This is the Barabbas choice.

But then there are those who choose the way of Jesus Christ, the one who proclaimed a new way of love and shalom; he was the one who offered forgiveness even to those who would crucify him; he was the one who announced a new way – the coming of God’s kingdom in our midst. He was the one who brought good news to the poor, the captive, the oppressed – to announce that the time of God had come.

God used a brutal, cruel, unenlightened Roman governor to ask a profound question that we must all answer if we are to be faithful followers of Jesus: whom will you choose? We know who the crowd chose. Who will you choose?