

March 8, 2015

St. Mark 15:6-15: ***“Those Who Wanted Jesus to Die:
Barabbas”***

- I. Issue of Character.*
- II. Barabbas Is . . .*
- III. Jesus For Us.*

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Dear Friends in Christ,

A Pastor by the name of Craig Brian Larson wrote:

“According to the Chicago Tribune, on June 22, 1997, parachute instructor Michael Costello, forty two...jumped out of an airplane at 12,000 feet altitude with a novice skydiver named Gareth Griffith, age twenty-one.

“The novice would soon discover just how good his instructor was, for when the novice pulled his rip cord, his parachute failed....he faced certain death.

“But then the instructor did an amazing thing. Just before hitting the ground, the instructor rolled over so that he would hit the ground first and the novice would land on top of him. The instructor was killed instantly. The novice fractured his spine in the fall, but he was not paralyzed.” (Larson, Choice Contemporary Stories & Illustrations, Baker Book House, 2000, p. 57)

And then, Larson noted: “One man takes the place of another, takes the brunt for another. One substitutes himself to die so another may live.” You see the point? We’re considering this Lent “Those Who Wanted Jesus To Die.” There’s no doubt that the person we’re examining this morning definitely wanted that. The surprise is that Jesus actually sought to do so. Dies that another might live. We’re looking at....

BARABBAS

I. Issue of Character.

Over the years you have heard insights here from the commentator R. C. H. Lenski. A couple of months ago I was re-reading his introduction to the Gospel of John. In that introduction he wrote, “For more than a hundred years there has been controversy regarding the author of this Gospel...to say nothing about many of the important details...”. (R. C. H. Lenski, Interpretation of John’s Gospel, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1941, p.5) And then he made this most crucial observation for our consideration this morning:

One may well ask why so much learned investigation does not end in agreement concerning the vital pertinent facts. Happily, we are able to reply that the disagreement is not caused by the nature of these facts but by the character of the investigators. For some of them the results are predetermined in their own minds...(Ibid).

His thoughts are on the mark. But the words that pop out are “the character of the investigators.” And that’s what echos throughout our text for this morning: The character of the people involved with Jesus and, most specifically, Barabbas.

Webster offers these two pertinent definitions of character: “...the complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often individualizing a person, group, or nation (and this)... moral excellence and firmness.” With the exception of Jesus, what we see in this text is a group of men - leaders and followers - with what we would call low, or despicable, mental and ethical traits.

There’s Pilate the judge who haphazardly allows the rabble to judge. There are the leaders of the Jews who have poured out their vehemence as the result of jealousy, unbelief and ignorance of the Scripture. There’s the crowd which responded in an atmosphere of ignorance and high emotion! Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? And there’s Barabbas, a criminal. Luke calls him “a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder.” (Lk. 23:19) In addition, John notes “Now Barabbas was a robber,” or, more specifically, an insurrectionist. (Jn. 18:40) Matthew says, “they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.” (Matt. 27:16)

II. Barabbas is . . .

And then the stunning reality of our text:

Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he **perceived** (my emphasis) that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for him Barabbas instead. (vss. 6-11)

Incredible, isn't it? Pilate knew Jesus was guiltless. The chief priests were fueled by envy and jealousy. And the crowd was fueled by stupidity. And a man guilty of gross crimes is set free. "So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas..." (vs. 15a)

Who is Barabbas? He's a breaker of the law. Who are we? Those who have not and cannot keep the law of God as God demands. The Scriptures say, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" (Gal 3:10) Well, we can't! Who is Barabbas? An enemy. Who are we? The Scriptures say "we were enemies" (Rom. 5:8b) Who is Barabbas? A murderer. Who are we? John writes, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer..." (I Jn. 3:15) Ever been there? Who is Barabbas? A man in need of mercy. Who are we? David writes, "The Lord looks down from heaven...to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one." (Ps. 14:2-3) Who is Barabbas? A man, by nature sinful and unworthy of any goodness. Who are we? Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." (Matt. 15:19) Anything there sound familiar? Anything - in this litany I've just put in front of us??

Barabbas is us! Left to himself, guilty of offense against humanity and, even worse, guilty of offense against God. Left to himself, nothing left but death and eternal loss.

III. Jesus for Us.

And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. (vss. 12-15)

God in the flesh stands in front of Pilate, the priests, the crowd and Barabbas. God! He could have spoken the words, "All disappear off the face of the earth!" And it would have happened. But, He says nothing. Allows everything to take place.

Looming there in the background are these words; words we find in Isaiah regarding the Lord Jesus:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. (Is. 53:4-7; portions)

The Christ willingly suffers and dies - willingly! - for sinners such as Barabbas; such as you; such as me. For people with sometimes questionable character. For people who often see others as something less. For people in need of God's forgiveness, mercy and eternal love. As He stands before Pilate and others, His silence is not a sign of weakness or an inability to defend Himself. He stands there for the sake of Barabbas and everyone else - everyone then and everyone now.

Please listen to these words of David; words which shut the door on the condemnation that stands against us because of our sin - silence Satan's accusations - comfort us in our moments of fear and guilt: "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him." (Ps. 103:12-13) That's what is being poured to such as Barabbas. To such as you and me.

And, again from David, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide (that is, accuse) nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." (Ps. 103:8-10)

Yes, Barabbas wanted Jesus to die. And Jesus would. But not just to save Barabbas' skin, so to speak. But to save him forever. Just as He has done for us.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott