

Luke 23:1-25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 23 verses 1 to 25. Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate, and they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.

And Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered him, You have said so. Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, I find no guilt in this man.

But they were urgent, saying, He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea from Galilee even to this place. When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was Galilean, and when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer.

The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate.

[1 : 09] And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people, and after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him.

Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him. But they all cried out together, Away with this man and release to us Barabbas, a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder.

Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus. But they kept shouting, Crucify! Crucify him! A third time he said to them, Why? What evil has he done?

I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him. But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed.

So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

[2 : 22] Luke 23 begins with the assembly of the elders, after their hearing, delivering Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. They accused Jesus of forbidding paying tribute to Caesar, and of calling himself the Christ, or a king.

Pilate questions Jesus concerning the charges against him. The charge that he claims that he is the king of the Jews is the messianic claim seen from a Gentile perspective. Perhaps we should understand Pilate's question to Jesus as one that has a sarcastic tone.

You are the king of the Jews? And Jesus' response to the question is also an edgy one. You are saying it. One could imagine such an answer antagonising Pilate. But Pilate seems to know what's going on, and he openly declares that he finds no guilt in Jesus.

But the leaders of the people are even more insistent in response. They claim that he stirs up the people throughout the land, which is ironic, because that's exactly what they have been doing.

When Pilate discovers that Jesus is a Galilean, he sends him to Herod, who was in Jerusalem at the time.

This isn't because Pilate is suggesting that Jesus isn't in his jurisdiction. Rather, he sends him to Herod because Herod, governing in Galilee, might have more insight into the Galilean aspect of the case.

[3 : 36] He would also relieve Pilate of some of the pressure and responsibility of judgement in the matter. It is quite clear to Pilate that there is more to the situation than the leaders of the people are saying. So he's probably very glad to relieve himself of some of the responsibility of the judgement.

Herod, for his part, was very eager to meet Jesus. He'd been speculating who Jesus was back in chapter 9, verse 7-9. Now Herod the Tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen.

Herod said, John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things? And he sought to see him. Herod questions Jesus at great length, but Jesus gives Herod no reply, as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

However, the chief priests and the scribes are all the time loudly accusing him throughout the hearing. Herod and his men end up mocking Jesus, the impression being given that they were influenced by the religious leaders.

Jesus is dressed in a gorgeous or shining robe, maybe an ironic parody of the transfiguration or some other sort of kingly enthronement. Herod is caught up in the spirit of the mob.

[4 : 53] He ridicules Jesus with his own soldiers. And Luke makes a passing statement here that Herod and Pilate became friends that day, whereas formerly they had been at odds with each other.

The rulers of this earth are united by their opposition to the Lord's Christ, as the apostles declare in their prayer in Acts chapter 4, verses 26 to 28. The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed.

For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

There is something further going on here, I think, about human psychology that is important, something explored in great detail in the work of Rene Girard. Scapegoating unites people by a common enemy and, as a result, can relieve or dissolve old antagonisms.

Christ forms not just the unity of his people, but a sort of shadowy, satanic unity in opposition to him. All the kings of the earth are gathered together with the rulers against Christ.

[6 : 04] That's what gives them their new unity. When Jesus is sent back to him, Pilate gathers the chief priests, the rulers, and the people and declares that neither he nor Herod found anything deserving of death in Jesus.

He expresses his intention merely to punish and then to release Jesus. But the priests, the rulers, and the people all cry out to do away with Jesus and to release Barabbas to them.

Throughout the trial, it is clear that the chief priests and the leaders of the Jews are the instigators and the drivers of everything. They are the ones that are pushing things ahead, the ones that take the great responsibility for what has happened.

Were it not for them, Jesus would not have been crucified. However, they successfully get the crowd on their side and end up cowering Pilate into submission. The reference to Barabbas seems to assume what is mentioned in the other Gospels about the custom of Pilate at the time of the feast.

And Pilate is clearly rolling the dice here. He sees that he has an angry crowd and the Jewish leaders against him and doesn't want unrest. Barabbas serves as a foil for Jesus.

[7 : 08] He's a murderous insurrectionist, yet they prefer him over Jesus. And this is revealing because if they truly cared about the sedition that they claimed to be delivering Jesus to Pilate for, Barabbas is precisely the sort of person they wouldn't want to go free.

And so in choosing Barabbas, the people choose the violent revolutionary over the true Messiah and Prince of Peace, this choice in Embryo was the larger choice that Israel made, a choice that ultimately led to its destruction in AD 70.

Pilate tries again to calm them down and to release Jesus, but now they insist that he be crucified, and he tries a third and last time, stating that he found nothing in him deserving of death.

But the crowd gets even more vehement. The actions and the description of the crowd here is similar to the descriptions that we find elsewhere used of demon-possessed persons. They're in a

sort of demonic frenzy at this point.

And the driving force within much of the narrative is the power and the violence of the mob and the leaders who whip them up. Nothing proves capable of withstanding this power. Even Pilate, who desires to release Jesus, is unable to resist it and ultimately surrenders to it and is absorbed into it. [8 : 21] The mob will not be pacified without a victim, and Pilate is prepared to use someone such as Barabbas as a conveniently guilty scapegoat upon which the fury of the crowd could be expended.

But for the crowd, only Jesus would do. More than any other writer, René Girard has explored the dynamics whereby a victim can act as a sort of lightning rod for the violence of society. The energy of the mob is like a social avalanche. It catches people up into it and it crushes all that would stand in its way. And those who are caught up in it are in the grip of a greater power. They are unaware of what they're truly doing. The behaviour of the crowd in the period of the betrayals, the trials, and the crucifixion of Christ is akin to that of a possessed person. The many individuals within the crowd fuse into a sort of single entity and actor, driven by a violent frenzy that none within it could truly withstand or understand.

[9 : 19] That sort of social contagion is an intoxicating and a powerful force. It gives a sense of unity, purpose, and an intoxicating sense of morality.

And all ends up bowing before its impulses. Principles of justice are abandoned. They fall by the wayside. The governor entirely capitulates. He tries to reason and then to bargain with the mob, but he completely fails.

And the result is that Jesus is put to death with the full sanction of Rome, but a sanction that has been wrested from Pilate on account of his fear of the crowd. Pilate ends up underwriting mob justice, instigated by the religious leaders who are envious of Jesus.

It might be worth contrasting the unity of the mob with the unity of the church. The unity of the church is of a completely different spirit, literally, to the unity of the mob.

And the unity of the mob is characterised by violence, but the unity of the spirit is characterised by a witness to peace. A question to consider.

[10 : 23] What are some of the roles played by the crowd in the Gospel of Luke and in the Book of Acts?