

“Christ and the Crowds”

Mark 15:1-15

On Wednesday nights for these weeks, we've been walking with Jesus, using Mark as our guide, looking at the various deeds, feelings, responses, experiences that surrounded Jesus as he moved through these days—Thursday night, Friday morning, Friday afternoon and his death.

Two weeks ago, we were with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Last week we were with him in the high priest's house, both when Caiaphas put him on trial and then when Peter had a different kind of a trial for himself. This week we walk with Jesus through the early morning to Pontius Pilate and to the Roman governor's trial.

Mark 15:1

And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes and the whole council held a consultation; and then they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate. .

Oh, my Lord, this is the dawn of your death day!

The sky is gray, the roofs of Jerusalem dark in the gray, and the street at your feet is dim.

You walk from the high priest's house to the Praetorium. Are you tired? Have you slept at all?

You ate last night—but that was last night. You prayed last night—a long, exhausted prayer. And last night you endured a malign investigation—you alone, and none beside you to support you. You suffered conventional gestures of contempt and official rejection: the death sentence, accompanied by degrading games. Did they wash your face of their spittle? No, it sticks to you still. To them you are a pariah. To them you are unclean in blasphemy. Why

should they wash you? Why should they feed you? Why should they give you something to drink? To them you are a problem about to be solved.

But to me you are my Lord.

The city scarcely stirs, but here come the rulers with you in the midst. Serious faces. Where are they going? To the governor's forum. The Romans begin their workday frightfully early, so the council is hurrying, lest they miss their chance for an audience and a quick, imperial trial. Go! Go! They prod you from behind. Go, don't drag your feet! What's the matter with you? Tired?" They themselves are filled with hectic energy. Sleeplessness has nerved them, and their purpose verges on frenzy. Go!

O Jesus, how do you feel? What are you thinking? You don't talk. Your mouth has been closed for such a long time now. Last night, before the legal machinery caught hold of you and began to grind you in its wheels, you said that your soul was sorrowful, even unto death— and then your eyes revealed the grief. I saw it! But now, in the dawn of your death day, your face is expressionless. I can read nothing in your eyes. Jesus! Jesus! How do you feel right now? What moods contend within you? What worlds collide inside your soul? O Jesus, are you hating? Are you praying? Are you screaming silently? Are you thinking about me?

You walk, step by weary step, from Jerusalem to Rome, around the world, from life to death, away, away. Away from me. Away from my knowing, into mystery! O, Jesus, it terrifies me that you go so far away from me. Please, give me a sign! I really can't stand this not knowing. Give me some sign from your solitude, Lord, please, please, that you are thinking of me!

Lord Jesus, do you love me now?

Mark 15:1-5

And as soon as it was morning the chief priest with the elders and the scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so. "And the chief Priest accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you. "But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered.

Things are changing, suddenly and then swiftly. But one thing does not change.

Look: they've changed the charge against the accused. This was the business of the early morning consultation: they needed some charge that the governor would accept as a serious transgression of Roman code. "Blasphemy" is meaningless to those who don't honor God. And since Pontius Pilate scorns the people of his province, he would ignore internal squabbles. But they need Pilate's attention because they need Pilate's decree. The death sentence is a jealously guarded right of Rome alone; and that's the thing they will not change. Jesus of Nazareth must be executed.

Therefore, the new charge is a capital offense: High treason. Seditious: "He wants to make himself the king of the Jews," they say. And to the Roman governor that means: "He's a leader of the resistance against the empire." A zealot.

It works. They get his attention. They get their trial.

The proceedings open with the indictment by the plaintiff, in this case the officials of the Sanhedrin.

There follows then an examination by the imperial magistrate, Pontius Pilate himself. He hears testimony first from the witnesses and then from the accused. Usually, this would be enough, and after consulting his legal advisors, Pilate would render a verdict, the sentence to be executed immediately.

But things are changing.

When Pilate asks the accused, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus gives a qualified assent. "You have said so," he says. Evidently, they define this title "king" in different ways, and Pilate is forced to return to the plaintiff for further interrogation.

But things are changing with terrible speed. For when Pilate questions them a second time, the chief priests blow up with a blizzard of accusations, "many things"! Suddenly, the first charge of treason is weakened in Pilate's estimate; he perceives that the real cause of the chief priests' complaint is envy. So, the prisoner's word now carries more weight than it had before, and Pilate returns to question Jesus a second time.

But whereas the chief priests rose up in noise, Jesus has descended into silence. Precisely when his word would be strongest to save himself, Jesus offers no word at all.

"Have you no answer to make?" the governor asks, marveling at the man. "Look how many charges they bring against you."

No. No answer. Rather, a resolute, dignified calm—which, in fact, inclines Pilate in his favor, for the fanatics of this province are acting fanatical again, displaying the qualities he despises, but this man remains unruffled.

Things are changing. Pilate is contemplating a verdict of innocence. The chief priests feel the wind turn against them. They need a new tactic—

But with you, O Lord, one thing never changes. Ironically, you and your accusers have the selfsame goal, and by your very silence, steadfastly, you go as it is written of you. Human beings strategize; human evil sends you to your cross. But something huger hovers over the occasion, something of your own will—something called Love.

Mark 15:11-14

After Pontius Pilate had offered to the people a choice between his releasing Barabbas or his releasing Jesus.

The chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews? And they cried out, "Crucify him!" And Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!"

It is morning. The sun stands at the eastern horizon, hard and hot; the entire eastern sky is white with its shining. The wind is out of the northwest, but it comes uncertainly and sometimes turns back on itself. Little clouds like human hands are rising in the west.

Jerusalem is near the end of the rainy season. It might—but it might not—rain today, the sun is solid, but other elements in heaven are troubled and unpredictable. Animals all over the city stamp and shiver. They twist their ears to a distant sound. It is a roaring. Thunder, perhaps? The onset of a storm? No, it is a human noise. A hundred throats are roaring at Gabbatha. There is a mob there demanding its will of the governor—humanity is making its choice.

Pontius Pilate stands before the crowd, confounded. He had expected to ease their antagonisms by offering amnesty. If they didn't choose Jesus for release (he reasoned), yet they

might forget him. And if they couldn't forget him, they might at least be satisfied to take Barabbas as a triumph of sorts and calm their violent temper.

Well, they did not choose Jesus.

So. Pilate asked them a question intended to test his success at cooling their mood. He said: "What will I do with the fellow you call the King of the Jews?"—and then he took three steps backward, gaping.

Whether he asked it wrong, or whether there's something deeper between the prisoner and the people than he can fathom, their thunderous answer stunned the governor. He stands now, confounded and all the beasts of Jerusalem shiver and stamp as before a storm. Such a roaring is shaking the morning! The hundred throats, all bellowing one word!

Pilate glances left at the cause of this general fury—at Jesus of Nazareth, who stands solitary on the porch regarding this foaming sea of people, hearing (surely!) the horrible word they utter—and the governor shakes his head, bewildered. How could one man—?

"Why?" cries Pilate suddenly. He seriously means the question: "What evil has he done?"

But we are now at the climax of human hatreds. This rage requires no rationale. This hatred has no reason but itself. God and the children of Adam are enemies, for the children rebelled against their God—and enemies hate. That is enough to say. Treasons and charges and blasphemies are all forgotten now. No answer is given to Pilate's question. The question is pointless in the heat of ancient enmities.

"Why?" cries Pontius Pilate, but rage redoubles itself. The storm increases. That single word is repeated merely, roared, and roared the louder: no proof, no premise, no logic to

support it. For this is the natural reaction of sinners in the presence of Holy God, and its passion alone is its validity. They scream: "*Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!*"

Mark 15:15

So, Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

The crowd is a power to be feared. In fact, its power is the fear that it inspires in rulers who know its quickness to riot.

People lose individuality in a crowd. At a certain flashpoint they fuse into one simple bellowing brute, passionate and huge. A rioting crowd, an insurrectionist crowd, then, can destroy a ruler's schemes, good or bad, a ruler's authority, and the rule and the ruler together. Therefore, rulers satisfy crowds before they riot or inspire crowds before they riot.

Jesus' enemies fear the crowd. That's why, as rulers, they would not arrest him in public. But they also appreciate the power of the crowd, and that is why, as citizens, they whip it to a frenzy in front of another ruler, the Roman governor. They have no personal care for the people who compose the crowd. To them it is a beast of a hundred throats, which they might ride to their own advantage.

And Pontius Pilate fears the crowd. He sees the brute swell louder and huger. It's beginning to eat him up: it has ravaged justice and now devours whatever virtue this ruler might have had, spitting him out as a man of expedience only. To prevent a riot, Pontius Pilate satisfies the crowd. He releases Barabbas. He orders Jesus scourged. He delivers innocence to be crucified.

Thus, the power of this brute: it swallows the soul of a Roman; it feeds on the body and the blood of the Son of God.

Clearly, neither the high priests nor Pilate ever see the crowd as anything but a brute. Rulers do not find precious what they fear; they avoid it, or else they use it, or they feed it, and that is all.

But the dear Lord Jesus, even when he is food for the Many, sees the crowd as persons after all—individuals to be redeemed, sheep in need of a shepherd, captives to be freed, children, little children, lost—whom he came to seek and to save. If there is a brute about, that brute is Lucifer. Sin is brutal. But even the swollen-throated bellowsers in the crowd are people to Jesus, whom he regards one by one by one, whom he does not fear, but whom he is serving right now—right now—by giving his life to ransom them from the very brutishness they are displaying.

Ah, who can believe the paradox of our report? The crowd would destroy Jesus by crucifying him. But Jesus would destroy the crowd— by naming its persons one and one, by calling them out of the brute-slavery of sin, by loving them and renewing one by one their right spirit and their personhood.

Where there is a divine relationship with each individual soul, there can be no crowd. There is only a holy communion. But first, he has to die.

There is a fine irony in those moments when Jesus stands before the crowd, between two separate sets of rulers: The Roman and Jerusalem rulers. The irony is this: it would seem that Jesus is under everyone else's control. Either he's under the control of the Sanhedrin or Pontius Pilate, or of the crowd in front of him. In fact, this is the beauty of Christ's love for us. What's

happening is exactly what Jesus knows should happen— and exactly what Jesus chose. In one sense, Jesus is the only one there who is in control. For that we thank him.

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