

INTRO

Dear people of God, we have in the death of Jesus Christ the most extraordinary and precious gift imaginable. We have the forgiveness of sins. Jesus taught in Luke 7 that a person who has been forgiven little, loves little, but the person who has been forgiven much, loves much. How much do you love Jesus? It depends. How much you need to be forgiven of?

In our Gospel lesson today, which indeed was quite long, we see a few different groups of people who contributed to the death of Christ. And in these people we should be able to see ourselves in at least one of them. And when we see ourselves participating in and encouraging the crucifixion of the son of God, hopefully we will be convicted of our sins. But even more so, I hope that you can come to understand just how much Jesus Christ loves you and how much he forgives you, and this, I pray would result in you loving him much.

BEFORE PILATE

Chapter 23 begins with the whole company of the Jewish Council coming before Pontus Pilate falsely accusing Jesus of three crimes. *“He is guilty of misleading our nation, forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.”*

Pilate doesn't take their claims all that seriously. He ignores the first two and mockingly addresses the third. *“You are the king of the Jews?”* He says w/ sarcasm. Jesus replies - *“You are saying so.”* He says Yes, but not in the way Pilate expected. Ultimately Pilate finds no fault in Jesus, and wants to let him go. But the Jews are adamant that Pilate find something wrong with Jesus. So they trump up another charge, saying - *“He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea from Galilee even to this place.”*

Which is ironic since it is clear that it is the Jews who are the ones who are stirring up the people. They continue the same kind of evil antagonism against the early Church all throughout the book of Acts. Wherever the Gospel of Christ goes, the Jews are there to try and stamp it out.

They do this sort of thing at Jerusalem in Acts 8 when they kill Stephen; Again in Jerusalem when Herod killed James but at the pleasure of the Jews in Acts 12; at Antioch in Pisidia in Acts 13; at Lystra in Acts 14; at Thessalonica and at Berea in Acts 17; at Corinth in Acts 18; at Greece in Acts 20; at Jerusalem in Acts 21; Everywhere the Jews go they lie and stir up the people and foment riots and try to murder Christians. Their hatred for Christ is a murderous hatred. And they love to foment social revolution in order to destroy Christ and Christianity. This is why Jesus calls them a synagogue of Satan.

BEFORE HEROD

Now Herod had jurisdiction over Galilee. And so the mention of Jesus stirring up strife in Galilee gives Pilate cause to push the case off to Herod. And Herod is excited to see Jesus. Luke 9 tells us that Herod was perplexed about who this Jesus was, for some were saying John rose from the dead, and others said Elijah had appeared, and others said one of the prophets from old had risen. And Herod said, *“John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?”* And he sought to see him.

But he was excited him just as a spoiled child is excited to have his own personal magician. Herod’s court was undoubtedly filled with debauchery and he himself was a man of debased sensuous pleasures. He always was entertained and had every pleasure at his spoiled fingertips. Herod asks Jesus to do something for him, but Jesus doesn’t perform any tricks for

Herod. In fact, Jesus says absolutely nothing. Jesus is not about to give to the dogs that which is holy.

The chief priests and the scribes accompanied Jesus to Herod's courts and continued to vehemently accuse him and oppose him and mock him there. Herod is getting bored of Jesus, but the Jews are still worked up. They are not done with Jesus yet, not until he is dead. So if Jesus is not going to play Herod's game, the Jews will recruit Herod and his guards to play their game. It is not enough that the Jews mock Jesus themselves, they must gather together the Gentiles to join in the mocking and slander of Jesus.

It's like a demonic form of evangelism, really. They do not gather the nations to worship their Messiah, they gather the nations to mock the Messiah. So Herod and his soldiers, who are always looking for a cheap thrill do what they do best. They join the crowd and mock Jesus and treat him with contempt, and laugh about it. They put a purple robe on him and feign homage. But Jesus, like a lamb before the shearers is silent, did not open his mouth. Eventually Herod gets bored with Jesus and sends him back to Pilate.

GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST CHRIST

Luke adds an interesting note here though that we shouldn't miss. He says, *Pilate and Herod became friends that day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.* Luke is showing that Psalm 2 is being fulfilled. The rulers of the world are united together in their opposition to the Lord's Christ. This of course is what the apostles declare in their prayer in Acts 4,

“Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

*“Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?*

*²⁶The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’–*

²⁷for truly in this city there 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, ²⁸to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

The kings of the earth are gathered together with its rulers against Christ. That is what gives them their new unity. Christ has become their scapegoat. Scapegoating can unite people together around a common enemy, and when two enemies join together it can relieve old antagonisms. Christ forms not just the unity of his people, but simply because he is, he forms a sort of shadowy and Satanic opposition to him. That is what Herod and Pilate are united together in, their opposition to the Savior of the world. The twisted irony of this whole thing though is that the rulers of the earth conspire together against the Lord and his Anointed at the instigation of the Jews who desire to kill their own Messiah.

BAR-ABBAS

Jesus and the Jews comes back to Pilate. And Pilate sensed that the Jews were getting more restless. They were adamant. Jesus is a real threat and he needs to go. But now neither Herod nor Pilate have found anything wrong with Jesus. But the Jews are getting more upset, and they are

beginning to stir up the people, the very thing they claimed Jesus was doing. So Pilate sought to appease them by having Jesus punished and releasing him. But the Jews were not having that at all. Instead, they all cried out together for Bar-Abbas to be released. And who is Bar-Abbas? An insurrectionist and murderer.

The name Bar-Abbas means Son of the Father. Appropriately they are the Son of their father, the Devil, who was a liar and murderer and insurrectionist revolutionary from the beginning. The Jews wanted to exchange the life of the Son of God the Father, for the life of the Son of their father, the Devil.

Their choice of Bar-Abbas over Jesus is a perfect representation of what Jerusalem, and her leaders are, Satanic murderous insurrectionists. But they lied and said it was Jesus who stirs up the people, when in fact it was the Jews were stirring up the people. That's called Projection. When you attribute your own bad and unacceptable thoughts and behaviors on to others in order to draw the attention of those things away from yourself.

It was the Jews who were stirring people up, it was the Jews who were about to riot, it is the Jews who were crying out for an innocent man to be crucified and murdered. They do not want Jesus to be released, they want Bar-Abbas, the murderous insurrectionist. Because he is one of their own. And this is their intention.

If they were really concerned about the charges they brought up on Jesus, about him stirring up the people, they would not have asked for Bar-Abbas. But in choosing Bar-Abbas, the people choose the path of violent revolutionary mob justice, over the Prince of Peace. This is the choice in embryo form which led to Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70. Which is what Jesus was referring to when he said, "*the days are coming when people*

will say to the mountains "Fall on us." For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

In other words, if the people surrender to these kinds of behaviors when the Messiah is present with them, if the fires of injustice and mob rule and insurrection and murder govern these people when the Prince of Peace is among them, then imagine the blaze that will consume Jerusalem when the wood is dry, and God abandons them entirely, and the curses of God come down upon them in AD 70? It will be a true Holocaust.

MOB RULE

Pilate tries to release Jesus one last time, but the crowd vehemently objects, and gets into an uproar. The crowd insists that he be crucified. The actions and the descriptions of the crowd are used elsewhere of demon possessed persons (Luke 4:33; 8:28 – loud cries; the man in Luke 8 had a legion of demons that Jesus cast into the pigs. It is as if the demons had come back and filled the whole mob). They are in a sort of demonic frenzy at this point. And the driving force within the narrative at this point is the power and violence of the mob and the leaders who whip them up. And nothing seems capable of withstanding this power, even Pilate who desires to release Jesus on the principles of justice, that he found nothing wrong in Jesus, is unable to resist the mob and ultimately surrenders to it and is absorbed into it. The mob will not be pacified with any victim. Pilate is ready to use someone like Bar-Abbas, a conveniently guilty scapegoat upon which the fury of the crowd could be expended. But for the crowd, only Jesus would do.

Alastair Roberts comments: "More than any other writer Rene Girard speaks about how a victim can act like a lightning rod for the violence of society. All the stored up anxiety and social energy get released upon this

one person. The energy of the mob is like a social avalanche, it captures people up into it, it crushes all who stand in its way. And those who are caught up with in it, are in the grip of a greater power, and they are unaware of what they are truly doing.”

“The behavior of the crowd surrounding the trial and condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus is similar to that of a possessed person. The many individuals in the crowd sort of fuse together into a single entity, driven by a demonic frenzy that those within it cannot withstand, or truly understand. That sort of social contagion is an intoxicating and powerful force. It gives a sense of unity, purpose, and an intoxicating sense of morality. And all end up bowing before its impulses. Principles of justice are abandoned, they fall by the way side. Mob justice is the only law of the land at that point.”

Well, Pilate completely capitulates. He tries to reason and then 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.”¹ And so he delivers Jesus over to be crucified.

SOCIAL ANXIETY

People of God, when we consider what the societal ingredients were that made it necessary in the minds of the people to crucify the Lord Jesus, surprisingly we see that it is exactly the same kind of atmosphere that we have today in America. As one could say, ‘There is something in the air.’ Our society, like Jerusalem of old is filled with high levels anxiety. People

¹ Alastair Roberts, Luke: Chapter by Chapter Commentary;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sLY9wwApNs&list=PLDtm5aqtLCz0NEa2rg6kW8IYb9ZKfD2zc&index=38>

are uncertain and fearful about the future, and there are social enmity between competing groups. That creates a common feeling in the air, that everyone senses. When people are highly anxious, and social pressures are too much, it is common for people to over-react to something that is very common and begin to see others as their enemy. Just like during the Corona-virus. Hyper-reactivity to common problems is a chief characteristic of our society.

When people overreact, they also tend to group together and go along with a herd mentality. But the herd operates according to the least mature members of society, and they tend to make decisions based upon the most fearful and overly dramatic people.

Once a society gives itself over to the overly dramatic and least mature, the group begins to blame shift and project the cause of their problems onto others who are not going along with their fears. The other side is responsible for the problem continuing. Rather than take responsibility and change themselves, it is much easier to point the finger at another person or another group as being the culprit behind the issue, and then claim victim status. Here is where scapegoating comes into play.

The highly anxious blame shifting immature herd tries to address the problem of the day with a quick fix mentality. They can't think beyond a single cure for their problem. Just wear the mask, just take the shot. Just crucify Him.

And of course, the key in allowing all this to happen is weak leadership that capitulates to these people and anxiety, and which continually feeds these other characteristics and keeps the social anxiety high.

The Jews saw Jesus as a threat to their national security. According to John 11:48

The Jews thought, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." Their National Identity was in jeopardy, they thought. That caused a lot of anxiety among the Jewish Leadership.

But instead of repenting, as Jesus had commanded them, they only doubled down and said, "No, clearly the best way to handle this situation is to do the exact thing that will bring about the very result we are seeking to avoid." In order to stop the Romans from coming and taking away our place and our nation, we will incite Mob violence and promote insurrection and uphold murderers in order to get rid of this Jesus, who is clearly the real threat.

Jesus becomes the scapegoat, the only thing that must happen is he must be destroyed, he must be crucified. That is the quick fix that will solve our problems. And in order to make sure that happens we need some political leaders who will capitulate to the mob violence and call it a mostly peaceful protest.

Just like during the first century, we have our own Jewish rulers who use their positions of cultural power and influence to mock Christ and destroy Christianity. We have our Pilate's who are unprincipled and who seek to keep the peace by capitulating to the mob violence.

We have our Herod's who are enslaved to the pleasures of the flesh and who are steeped in non-stop entertainment and who couldn't be bothered to take Jesus seriously. Religion is a joke to these people.

And we of course have the Crowds - the average person who is tired of the way things are and is looking for a suitable scapegoat to release their anger and sense of justice.

And I didn't mention them before, but we also have the soldiers who inflicted massive injustice upon an innocent man and killed him, because they were just doing their duty.

All this is exactly the kind of people we are. America is just like this. We are looking in a mirror, People of God.

We are exactly the kind of people that would have either called out for Jesus to be crucified, or we are exactly the kind of people who would have mocked Jesus. Or we would have ignored Jesus, or we would have caved to the pressure of the mob, joined the mob, or did our soldierly duty and hammered the nails into his hands. We are exactly the kind of people who would give in to demonic mob justice and canonize a criminal and support state sponsored persecution of the righteous. This is who the people of the United States of America are. And you may think that is not you, but you are covenantally bound up with these people who are. That is you. That is us. And we need forgiveness.

Jesus prayed on the cross, *"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."* And neither do we. We are a people under demonic oppression and blindness and willful ignorance, being led astray the by the cultural forces swirling around us. But it is precisely for people like us that Jesus died. He died to forgive us, the kind of people who would have participated in his murder.

Luke records these words for us in Acts 3

¹³The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ¹⁴But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵and you

killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

¹⁷“And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. ¹⁹Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, ²⁰that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, ²¹whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.

Repent people of God, for in Christ alone, whom we condemned to have crucified, we have the forgiveness of sins. We killed the author of life. But it all happened according to the divine plan of God to bring about forgiveness for all of our sins. God arranged it so that the greatest tragedy and injustice ever, would also be the source of the greatest blessings you could ever have. By faith in the name of Jesus Christ, and in his death on the cross, all our sins are taken away. So repent, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ that your sins maybe blotted out, and the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord. Amen.