

Who is this?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015.

Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?"

Mark 15:14

It only took a short time for people to turn against him. In just a few days, Jesus went from being a savior and hero welcomed into their midst to being rejected and sentenced to death as a common criminal. In just a few short days their cry went from "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" to shouts of "Crucify him, crucify him."

We can't help but wonder if the crowd is just being fickle and really doesn't know what they want or even if those who welcomed him on Sunday are the same ones that demanded his execution on Friday. In truth, they want to get rid of him because they are disappointed that he is not who they thought he was. They had hoped that the one whom they hailed on his entrance into the Holy City could deliver on what they thought were his claims. According to those who observed the spectacle, the whole city was astir in expectation of a heroic military and political ruler who would drive out the occupying Roman forces and restore their nation to their former glory.

As Jesus is betrayed and abandoned by his friends who flee in fear, it is inconceivable how he was able to bear the pain of rejection, injustice and abuse. The people are disenchanted and begin to ask, "Who is this?" What were we thinking?" They wondered who he was then and many still wonder who he is now. Those who think they know him are not always clear on his purpose and mission. Is it too simple to say that he came to save us from ourselves by bringing us back to the way of compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation?

We elect leaders today that give us hope for the future. We anticipate fresh new ideas with the confidence that we can work through the issues of our day. In time, the people become disenchanted and begin to doubt that anyone has the answers to so many complex problems. In the same way, Christians today wonder about Jesus and ask, "Who is this?" The mockery of justice that was Jesus' trial ended in his being put to death at the hands of a mob. There is something in human nature that wants to bring down popular public figures and prophets.

It was customary in Jesus' time after a conviction to give the people a choice of releasing one prisoner and condemning the other. As it happens, both prisoners are named Jesus. One is Jesus Barabbas. The other is Jesus Christ. Both are revolutionaries. The first seeks a revolution by insurrection and terror while the other believes in converting hearts and minds one at a time. The crowd has no trouble choosing whom they want to save. They choose to free Jesus Barabbas and leave Jesus Christ to suffer and die. By going for the anti-Christ over the true Christ the crowd foolishly kills off their hope for a better future. This drama is played out everyday. Each time we do what we know is wrong we choose Barabbas the terrorist over Jesus the Christ. Each time we do what we know is wrong we get in touch with the shady corners of our soul.

During this Holy Week, walk with Jesus through the Holy City. Reflect on how this great drama is played out time and again. Like Jesus, we know what it is like to be betrayed by our friends. Like Pontius Pilate, we know the feeling of cowardice when we fail to take a stand for what is right. Like the crowd, we know when we are going along in order to get along.

This is the most dramatic week of the church year. Be with us on Maundy Thursday to share in the commemoration of the Last Supper and partake in the celebration of this sacred meal that has been shared for over two thousand years. Join us also on Good Friday to remember Christ's example of forgiveness as he was hung on the cross to die.

To do something practical this Holy Week I recommend making two lists. The first is a list of those who have hurt you and then pray for the strength and will to forgive them. Then make a second list of those whom you have hurt. As difficult as it may be, apologize and make amends. It is never too late. Forgiveness is what makes this Friday "good." Christ's sacrifice of himself serves as the best example of forgiveness.

On Holy Saturday, take some time in quietness to feel the solemnity of that day. Think of how the disciples must have felt after his death and burial as their hopes were buried with him in that borrowed tomb.

Then on Easter morning, the Day of Resurrection, throw open the windows of your soul and let the light of Christ shine in. Let it illumine your whole life as the source of such great peace. Give thanks and praise to God for the ways in which Christ is really alive in you and in those you love. Let this be an opportunity to have a better idea of the place of Christ in your life so that no longer need anyone ask, "Who is this?"