

## Who Killed Jesus?

Luke 9:7-9; 23:4-11

Today as we stand on the threshold of Holy Week, I want to ask a very simple question: Who killed Jesus?

Every year on Palm Sunday, we reenact Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, waving our palms and singing our Hosannas knowing full well that the celebration will be short-lived, because by the end of the week, we will be standing before the cross watching Jesus take his last breath. The rhythms of Holy Week are very familiar to us, and we have come to expect that roller coaster ride from acclamation to crucifixion, but what if someone who had never experienced Holy Week said to us, "It sounds like the crowds loved Jesus very much so who killed him?" What would you answer?

The way you answer that question has a tremendous impact on how you understand the meaning of this week. It will affect your relationship to others in the world and it will affect your relationship to Christ, so let's think carefully about how we answer.

Who killed Jesus?

Unfortunately, for thousands of years Christians answered that question with "the Jews" as if every Jewish person in Jerusalem signed a warrant for the death of Jesus, and once Christians blamed the Jewish people for Jesus' crucifixion, it made it easier to blame them for all kinds of things like economic depressions, political defeat, and even plagues. Such anti-semitism eventually gave rise to the worst genocide in modern history when Nazi Germany marched Jewish people to their deaths in the gas chambers of the Holocaust and it remains entrenched in America today in the white supremacy movements that spread their hate like a disease across the country. As Christians, we must recognize the suffering we have caused by our careless accusations and never again lay the burden of Jesus' execution at the feet of "the Jews."

Besides, Jewish people in the first century didn't have the authority to order Jesus' execution. Only the Romans had that authority and in Jerusalem, the authority to invoke capital punishment was in the hands of the Roman governor Pilate. Pilate was known to use violent means to suppress threats to his authority and in fact it was this tyrannical personality that brought an end to his career. Just a few years after Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate sent a thousand heavily armed soldiers to Samaria to quell the followers of a man claiming to be Moses. The soldiers plowed through the crowds with their swords, and Pilate ordered all of the leaders executed, a response that was so excessive that the Roman Emperor removed Pilate from office. It is easy to imagine Pilate being just as heavy handed with Jesus and his disciples. Given Pilate's temperament, and given the fact that only he could order an execution, the only accurate answer to the question, "Who killed Jesus?" is "Pilate killed Jesus." He may have famously washed his hands of the matter in the gospels but no one else in Jerusalem had the authority to put Jesus to death.

Now, that's not to say that there weren't some first century Jews encouraging Pilate's decision, but we really need to put the emphasis on "some" because again, our understanding of who is responsible for the death of Jesus affects our understanding of the meaning of the crucifixion for us. Remember that Jesus *was* a Jew, and his friends and his disciples

and his followers were Jews and they obviously had no desire to see Jesus nailed to a cross and so it was not all of the Jews who sought Jesus' death. The Jews who were involved in the arrest and trial of Jesus were a small group of men who were on the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a Jewish court made up of Temple priests and holy men from among the Pharisees. They weren't elected to the Sanhedrin but they held their positions due to the purity of their bloodlines or their religious reputation in Jerusalem. Only about one percent of the Jewish population of the city were Pharisees and even fewer were Temple priests which means that the court condemning Jesus was made up of a tiny number of men drawn from an already tiny group of Jewish elite who were concerned about protecting their authority from this man who had criticized them publicly.

And Jesus has criticized them quite publically. It's why he came to Jerusalem in the first place. Reformers take their protest to the icons of that which they seek to reform, which is why Martin Luther King, Jr. told the nation that he had a dream from the Mall in Washington, D.C. instead of making his speech from the parking lot of a 7-Eleven in Toledo. After riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus went directly to the Temple - the center of the religious establishment - and he threw over the tables in a public act of protest. Jesus had come to Jerusalem because throughout his ministry he had seen the way in which the religious authorities had used the faith of the people as a hammer, claiming to speak for God as they condemned people for their poverty, for their illnesses, for their disabilities, for things beyond their control; as they took away any hope from people who didn't have much hope in the first place and did it in the name of God. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Ezekiel, and a long line of Jewish prophets, Jesus attacked the arrogance of the religious leaders that denied God's people the blessings of God's grace.

New Testament scholar Raymond Brown says, "There emerges [in the gospel portraits] a Jesus capable of generating intense dislike. Indeed that is the usual result of asking self-consciously religious people to change their minds... [Jesus] would be offensive on any religious scene if he told people that God wants something different from what they know and have long striven to do..."

In the reading from Luke, we see Jesus being passed from the Jewish Sanhedrin to the Roman governor Pilate to King Herod, and finally back to Pilate. Pilate will go on to ask the crowds for their opinion and they will famously shout "Crucify him!" and in the end, even the disciples will refuse to speak on Jesus' behalf. 2000 years ago when Luke was writing his gospel, people also wanted to know, "Who killed Jesus?" and Luke's answer was, "Everyone." Everyone had blood on their hands. Everyone was looking out for themselves; everyone was protecting their own authority. Everyone took part in Jesus' death. When Jesus, nailed to the cross, breathes his last, a centurion looks at him and says, "Surely this man was innocent," giving mouth to the gospel's conclusion that the only innocent one in the whole tragedy was Jesus himself. Hanging in the silence after Jesus' death is Luke's question, "Are we innocent or are we too continuing to crucify Jesus?"

For two thousand years, Christians have been all too willing to wash our hands with Pilate and blame others for Jesus' crucifixion, but the gospel writers wanted us to see that everyone was culpable because no one could accept the radical gospel of Jesus that required them to change; that asked them to see the world in a new way infused with

grace for all people. And Jesus' challenge has not changed in 2000 years. We like to think of Jesus as the good neighbor who helps you out in times of need and carries our burdens when we can't take another step - "What a friend we have in Jesus," we sing, "all our sins and griefs to bear..." There is nothing in the lyrics of that hymn that suggest life with Jesus could be anything but blissful. Certainly Jesus does offer us the bounty of his caring grace - he laughs with little children; he feeds the hungry and cures the ill; he restores the broken-hearted by bringing their loved ones back from death - but that can't be all he is because who would want to kill a man that can work such miracles on stubborn hearts? Who would want to kill a man who convinced sinners to change their ways and crooks to repent, who cured the diseases of people so that they could get off the public dole and go back to work as contributing members of society? Telling everyone to love one another and do to others what you want them to do to you is generally not going to incite murderous feelings toward you but rather might earn you a "Citizen of the Year" award.

Holy Week reminds us, however, that the grace Jesus offered was not a cheap grace but a grace that held a mirror up to our religious sanctimonious certainty and said, "When did you become the gatekeeper of God's realm?"

Raymond Brown says, "More than likely, were Jesus to appear in our time and be arrested and tried again, most of those finding him guilty would identify themselves as Christians and think that they were rejecting an imposter - someone who claimed to be Jesus but did not fit into their conception of who Jesus Christ was and how he ought to act."

Many of those Christians want to skip from Palm Sunday to Easter to avoid the hard work of the cross but if we are sincere in our desire for the new life Christ offers, we will have to walk the entire road with him. During Holy Week, we must have the courage to look upon the other face of Jesus - the man who will challenge our sense of superiority, who will refuse our excuses, who will reveal to us our self-centered, self protective ways that are so damaging to ourselves and others. Walking this road with him will bring us to understand that Jesus not only offers us the blessings of his grace but also expects us to bestow that same grace on others, to stand elbow to elbow with people who are distasteful to us. It will mean giving up our certainty about who gets into heaven and who will be scattered with the chaff. It will mean confessing our own brokenness and failings and saying to others, "You know, I was wrong about you." It will mean listening instead of pronouncing judgment. It will mean putting down the sword in your hand and extending welcome to your adversary. It will mean confessing where we have gone wrong and asking for God's help to move forward in a new way. It may even mean changing.

May we have the courage and the humility to remain steadfast this week as Jesus leads us all the way to the cross.

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