

The Cross as Miscarriage of Justice

Matthew 27:15-26

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First Baptist Church Decatur

March 26, 2017

What Do You See?

We continue on our journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. We continue to fix our gaze on the Cross.

We discovered three weeks ago that when Paul looked at the Cross, he saw the culmination of the Jewish sacrificial system, when Christ became the final **atonement sacrifice** for human sin. We recalled two weeks ago that in the Cross Paul also saw God **making peace**, both between people and God and between all divided human groups. And we saw last Sunday that one meaning of the Cross is as **moral example and invitation** to love like Jesus did.

This morning I am going to take us in a very different direction. I am going to talk about the Cross as a miscarriage of justice. The Cross was the means by which an innocent man was executed -- after a secret arrest, sham trial, and cruel torture.

To think this way is to bring the Cross down from the theological heights of atonement, peacemaking, and love to the sad earthly reality of human injustice and cruelty. Are there really any lessons to be learned from thinking about the Cross as a gross miscarriage of justice? Well, there must be, because this is the main account offered by the Gospel writers themselves. They must have thought it was important to talk about what happened on the ground, before their eyes, in human terms. Whatever else one might later say about the Cross, this is what happened in Jerusalem on a certain Friday around 33 AD.

Cross as Miscarriage of Justice

Our text this morning from Matthew 27 takes us to a pivotal moment in that Gospel's Passion Narrative.

Jesus is in the custody of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, an unremarkable man assigned to a particularly unhappy backwater province under Roman rule. It is morning. Jesus' life or death is in the balance. Pilate is ruler of all he surveys. Jesus is an itinerant Galilean preacher who has gotten some Jewish religious leaders very angry. Something about blasphemy, or about tearing down the Temple, or being King of the Jews. So many charges. But what to make of them?

Jesus isn't helping him much. When Pilate asks him questions, Jesus stays silent. It isn't just that Jesus has been interrogated all night, and gotten roughed up a bit. It isn't just that he's tired, or sad. He just seems above it all, unwilling to dignify this quasi-trial, this quasi-search for truth and justice, by responding to the many accusations against him. And for Pilate, this is astonishing. Who doesn't fight for his life?

As our text begins this morning Pilate turns to the crowd gathered at the governor's palace, the Praetorium. I picture him up on a balcony, with his soldiers around him, and the Jewish crowd below.

He bellows down to them: What shall I do? Shall I throw my annual bone of mercy to you by releasing the criminal Barabbas or Jesus who some call the Messiah? The text pictures the religious leaders urging the crowds to call for Barabbas. And so: "We want Barabbas!"

Ok, then, what should I do with Jesus? "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate wants to give a show of actually caring about justice: "Why, what evil has he done?"

Of course, if you really care about justice, you have a real trial, and you don't ask a mob to rule on who should live or who should die that day. "And they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So Pilate relents. He publicly "washed his hands before the crowd, saying 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.'" Which is cowardly, and a lie, because the guy who orders another guy's execution bears responsibility for having done so, even if along the way he chooses to consult a crowd frothing at the mouth for that man to die.

The bottom line is that, on orders of Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Jesus of Nazareth is about to have his body lacerated by whipping, have a crown of thorns shoved down hard on his head in mockery, get beat up and spat upon some more, carry a heavy wooden crossbeam on his bloody back through the streets of holy Jerusalem, get thrown down naked on the wood, have his wrists and feet nailed to it, and be lifted up to slowly choke and bleed to death in the sight of whoever might like to watch, over the course of hours or days, near the city garbage dump. All of which would normally be followed by Roman soldiers keeping the body on the Cross for days for the vultures to feast on, as a warning to anyone who might be considering insurrection.

And why? Why was this cruel thing done to our Lord Jesus? Why this miscarriage of justice? I will give you two main possibilities.

1) If you take the main line of the Gospel narratives just as they read, the driving force behind the cruel Roman execution of Jesus is found in the Jewish religious leadership, who want Jesus dead because he has been challenging their authority, making statements that they consider blasphemous, breaking their understanding of Jewish law, inciting the crowds into a messianic frenzy on his behalf, and possibly creating the conditions for a mass revolt that will bring down Rome's murderous wrath down on the Jewish people.

They therefore arrest him on their semi-autonomous religious authority, trump up some charges against him, and send him to Pilate, who alone has the power to execute because the Romans are in charge. Pilate wavers, and so these leaders incite the crowd, or some crowd they have managed to pull together, and they howl for Jesus' blood, which finally tips Pilate into executing him.

Black liberation theologian James Cone wrote a book called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* -- a shocking title maybe to some of us -- because he saw in this scene something terribly reminiscent of a lynching – an innocent man killed on a tree because an indignant crowd wanted blood.

2) If you think in terms of Empire, and especially the Roman Empire, the main story is more like this. Empires subjugate populations of strangers. The way they do so is through the violence of conquest, of war.

But the way they maintain power is through a combination of enticement and judicial violence. They buy off a small part of the population, no more than 5%, giving them perks and privileges to get them to cooperate. They terrify the rest of the population to prevent rebellion, making clear that, as the Borg in Star Trek once said, “Resistance is futile.”

The New Testament depicts all of this. Part of the Jewish religious and political leadership was bought off – mainly the Sadducees, temple officials, the Herodians, and the high priestly family. The Pharisees seem to have opposed Jesus on genuinely religious grounds. The others I just mentioned opposed him for self-interested political reasons, and they had a relationship with Rome. So they were the real threats to Jesus.

That’s because Jesus was a threat to them, and their whole cozy arrangement with Rome. He was a threat from the moment he started saying that a new kingdom is on its way – a kingdom of God – in which love, justice, and mercy prevail, in which the mighty are brought low, the poor are lifted up, and the powerful find their power taken away from them.

He was a threat to the temple system long before he cleared it on that memorable day, because he found holiness in people, especially outcast people who loved God, rather than in temple sacrifices.

He was a threat to those who had all the wealth because he preached judgment on them, like the story of Lazarus and the rich man, and because he said stuff like “woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6).

He was a threat to Rome and those who collaborated with Rome because he was a Jewish prophet who renewed the prophetic Jewish vision of the reign of the one true God, Yahweh, the God of Israel. Rome had the kingdom, the power, and the glory, and the Emperor was Lord and Savior. But Jesus said that Yahweh God had the kingdom, the power, and the glory, and that Yahweh God was Lord and Savior.

So Jesus had to die, as all prophets have to die. He was doomed the moment his ministry began. Some scholars think that rather than three years, his public ministry lasted maybe a year. All it took was to get him to Jerusalem, where prophets go to die. Then the sham trial, the torture, and the public execution, all in the name of Roman peace, justice, and order.

I would be neglectful of my responsibilities as a Christian pastor if I failed to tell you about a tragic historical irony. Because of the highlighted role in the Passion Narrative not just of some

Jewish religious leaders, but of crowds of Jews calling for Jesus' execution, many Christians were taught over two millennia to blame "the Jews" – that is, the Jewish people as a whole, for Jesus' death.

The long and terrible history of Christian anti-Judaism gained much of its power from this belief -- including mob violence, which often erupted during Holy Week as crowds were incited by the telling and retelling of this very story.

This biblically derived Christian anti-Judaism was only broadly repudiated after the Holocaust, in which six million Jews were murdered in what was once Christian Europe.

So a story about mob-incited state violence against Jesus became a routine incitement to both mob violence and state violence against Jews. I cannot tell you how horrible this is. It is something we must remember so as NOT to pass it on to our children and grandchildren.

Let's sum up before moving to what this all means for us.

We are talking about two different ways in which we can see the Cross as a gross miscarriage of justice.

One is as a kind of lynching, in which a crowd senselessly turned on our innocent Jesus and demanded his death, and a cowardly Roman governor gave them what they wanted.

The other is as the murder of a Jewish prophet, the greatest Jewish prophet, by Rome itself and its small cohort of local collaborators, who saw him as a real threat to their unjust rule, and did away with him.

Both ways of seeing what happened to Jesus on Good Friday make sad and perfect sense if you know anything about human history.

Jesus as Murdered Prophet

Does this meaning of the Cross have any relevance to us today?

For me, at least, it resonates very deeply and in some very different ways than some of the other meanings of the Cross we have considered.

I am deeply moved by this Jesus of Nazareth, who responds to God's call on his life, leaves Nazareth behind, and begins his public ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of God, exhibiting God's power to heal and forgive, showing mercy and welcome to outcasts of all types, and confronting the injustice of the power structures of his context. And he does this knowing that the outcome of his ministry can only be death.

And then he "set his face to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51), saying wryly that "no prophet can die outside Jerusalem" (Lk 13:33). Hailed by the crowds with Hosannas and Hallelujahs on Palm Sunday, the cheers turn to cries for his death by Friday morning. But surely Jesus was not surprised,

because as the Gospel of John says, “he knew what was in man” (Jn 2:24). And then Rome and Jerusalem conspired to kill him, and he was murdered on that cross at Golgotha.

This angle of vision on the Cross makes me love Jesus all the more. So committed to God’s will. So much of an advocate for the marginalized. So doomed to die, by the evil structures of greedy, grasping human power.

This Jesus reminds me of other great prophets of Christian history, who also have died for the kingdom and for justice. I think of Martin Luther King, dead at 39 by an assassin’s bullet in Memphis. Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran Archbishop who opposed government and paramilitary hit squads, and was murdered by one of them while celebrating Mass in church. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, also dead at 39, hung in a Nazi prison camp for resisting Hitler, just one month before the end of World War II.

I want to be like this Jesus, and like these people who wanted to be like this Jesus. I want to be a warrior for justice and for the kingdom of God. Surely one of the very many meanings of the Cross is this. Jesus was a murdered prophet. He died a martyr to the kingdom of God. May we, at least, live our lives for the same cause.