

“Not Us”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
Palm/Passion Sunday – 28 March 2010  
Luke 22:14 – 23:56

They were outraged, and who could blame them? Jesus seemed to think he had all the answers. Actually, he thought he *was* the answer, but when confronted with questions – by the council, by Pilate, by Herod – Jesus wouldn’t give anyone a straight answer. It must have been infuriating for these dignified men, endowed with power from the Empire or from their elite education, for this Galilean roughneck to deflect their earnest inquiries, almost toying with them after all he had said and done.

They were also afraid, each of every one of them, and with good reason. The council of Jewish elders shared a sacred responsibility to lead the nation religiously. They could not allow a false prophet spread his message unimpeded. It would be a dereliction of duty, an open invitation for the wrath of God to descend upon them.

The council was doubtless concerned with how the Romans would react, too. Jesus entered Jerusalem in a triumphal procession suspiciously similar to a parade that might be offered to a conquering general. He kept talking about this kingdom of God. The political overtones could incite rite, even rebellion, and experience had taught the wise men of the council precisely how the Romans would respond to that: with vicious reprisals. But they weren’t the only ones scared.

Pilate sat on a precarious perch. He had to keep the peace in a restless land filled with people who resented Roman rule. What if this Jesus from Nazareth was the real thing, a leader who could mobilize the people? Such a possibility represented more of a nuisance than a threat.

Pilate had faith in his legions. But why let the situation get out of control, especially when his chief local collaborators – the council – were baying for the blood of Jesus.

Of course, it wasn't just them. A crowd, at least equal in size to the one that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, now hounded Pilate to kill the man. The city was a tinderbox. The high holy festival of Passover approached. Pilgrims had swollen the population from 25,000 to over 100,000, maybe more. It was the worst possible time in the worst possible place for an incendiary preacher to light a fire.

We know what happened. Fear and outrage led a small group of people to incite a larger group people to pressure a single man who held power over life and death to condemn Jesus, which he did; reluctantly perhaps, but Pilate's reservations never affected the outcome. And they enjoyed it. At the foot of the cross, they mocked him: soldiers mingled with the council and the crowd. Their satisfaction must have been intense. Here on a cross, exposed for everyone to see: naked, the whip marks still bleeding; the cause of all their troubles, the man who had all the answers but refused to respond to their questions. It had to have been satisfying, fun.

This is what can happen when people take council of their fears. This is what can happen when outrage overwhelms reason. This is what can happen when convenient expediency triumphs over justice, and circumstances are allowed to overrule all else. An innocent man dies.

We need to remember this. We must never forget. It was not so much a demonic wickedness that put Jesus on a cross, but the frail humanity of those in a position to influence and make decisions. In our democracy, we are part of the influential, part of the powerful, even though we frequently don't feel like it.

Will our fears push us to torment the innocent? Will outrage blind us to the truth? Will peer pressure cause us to conform to a course of action that leads us to disgrace? For make no

mistake, Jesus lives, and so do the powers of darkness that tempt us to sin, using the same tested tools that proved so effective with the council and the crowd and with Pilate.

Jesus died so that we might resist, and he died to forgive us when we don't. He died innocent of everything, except love, so that we might be as guilty and love as fiercely. We cannot as Christians be party to the oppression or the destruction of the weak or the condemnation of the righteous. We cannot connive and conspire to hustle away inconvenient truth-tellers. For we live under the obligation of a covenant written in blood, sealed with suffering, and bounded by love.

The cross of Christ reminds us of many things: the conquest of life over death; the defeat of sin, despite its continuing prevalence; and the consequences of outrage and fear. May we gaze upon it each day and promise: never again. We resist. We will not take council of our fears, indulge our outrage, or seek the path of least resistance. Instead, let us look on the cross and promise Jesus that we will live in love, as he did, whatever it takes. Amen.