

They Met at the Cross: “The Crowd Who Cried, “Crucify Him!”
Matthew 27:15-26 (NRSV)

Thoughtful Bible students have long discussed **what responsibility the crowd had for the cross**. We know the part the Pharisees played, and the priests, and Judas. But what was the part of the crowd? Were they as guilty as the rest? Did masses of ordinary citizens in the street have as much responsibility for putting Jesus to death as the professional and priestly classes?

Some say, “Yes.” They say it was a fickle crowd – as fickle as crowds always are. They had followed Jesus on Palm Sunday, and preceded him as well, thrilled at the thought that the Messiah had come at last. But when nothing much happened they turned on Jesus; and, when the Roman governor, Pilate asked them from the verandah of the praetorium, “‘Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ All of them said, ‘Let him be crucified!’” (Matt. 27:22-23). If simple agreement and collusion in Jesus’ killing is grounds for guilt – as it is in any other case of murder -- the crowd, say these students, is as guilty as all the rest.

Other biblical scholars say, “No.” It wasn’t the same crowd that had cheered one day and then sneered and jeered the next. The people who followed him on Palm Sunday were the open-hearted, simple folk, tourists in Jerusalem, largely drawn from Galilee – Jesus’ home turf -- and other country areas, people who admired his authority, people whom he never lost and who were in their beds when the rabble cried, “Crucify him!”

Remember **the hour**. It seems clear that it was **early in the morning** when Pilate showed Jesus to the people and invited their judgment (Matt. 27:1). Who would’ve been out of their beds at that hour?

Remember, also **the place**. I can recall my own astonishment when I first saw the space outside the Antonia Fortress where the praetorian guard would assemble in Jerusalem. I thought it would’ve been a great, open space like Trafalgar Square in London, or Times Square in New York, and Jesus being brought before a huge, howling mob, screaming for his death. In point of fact, the space was hardly wider than a narrow street. In so confined a space, **a hundred people would have made a multitude**.

Therefore, the scholars who feel that the common crowd was not as guilty as it is sometimes supposed, say, “The people who were there at that hour in the morning were **just the sweepings of the slums of Jerusalem**, priest-ridden and priest-paid. They were there because they’d been told to be there and told what to say. They were suborned. And what they did was the result of **demagoguery at its worst**. The priests and their minions had spread their **propaganda** among them and said, ‘Come along.’ ‘Cry out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” and so when the Prince of Glory was brought to the verandah they screamed out for his blood.”

I think the case of those who defend the people is strong. It’s hard to believe that the same people who’d seen Jesus heal the sick, give sight to the blind, reach out to the poor, and do a thousand and one other merciful things, would’ve shouted with one voice, “Crucify him!”

And, yet, Jesus was crucified. Had the people no responsibility? Should the blame be laid entirely at their rulers’ and leaders’ feet? What culpability do people have at any time for the deeds of those who command them? Or should we exempt them after all and say, “It isn’t their responsibility; they were told what to do”?

This question, is not, as you may know, one of merely academic or biblical scholars’ interest. It is one of the burning questions of history and of all of post-modern life. **Think of postwar Germany.** One of the most torturing questions is this: “What responsibility did the ordinary citizens of the country have for the crimes of their rulers? Were they as responsible as those who were over them? Or weren’t they responsible at all? Or was it half and half? **Think of the blood bath by which the Nazis came to power.** They never denied they beat up and shot hundreds of their own countrymen, and without even the mockery of a trial. **Think also of the persecution of the Jews** – multitudes were sent to the concentration camps and the crematoria.

Or, if that is too long ago, **think of the 1994 Rwandan genocide**, where two tribes who had previously lived in relative harmony together, turned on one another, and butchered one another. Or, **think of the prolonged internecine battles** during the early to mid 1990’s **among the peoples and emerging countries of the Balkan European states.** You see, these are not merely the intellectual problems of the past.

When the fighting of the Second World War was over, in an effort to understand the mentality of the German people, the American authorities issued a **questionnaire** in one of the areas they occupied, and under the condition of absolute confidentiality, they asked 150 typical Germans to answer a set of questions. They wanted to know what the people were thinking.

This was one of the questions: **“Who do you think was responsible for the outbreak of war?”** The choices were: the Nazi Party leaders, the German High Command, the German people as a whole, or the Allies. Out of 145 who actually answered the questionnaire, these answers emerged: 123 said, “The Nazi Party leaders”; 20 said, “The German High Command; 1 said, “The German people as a whole”; and, 1 said, “The Allies.” Notice what individual people were saying, **“Not me! Not me!”** The crowd would have said the same thing the morning after the crucifixion.

What’s the truth? Were the common people completely innocent of the crime of Calvary, or does an honest examination implicate them as well?

1. I want to lay down first, that ordinary people are powerful.

We need to remember that **what we say and do can have a powerful effect.** I reject the constantly reiterated, rhetorical question: **“What can ordinary people do?”** I believe that there is a disparagement and a falsity in it against which thoughtful people should be in constant conflict. Consider the heroic stories of the Jews who fought against the Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto and in a number of other places in the Polish countryside. What if more of them had risen up against their persecutors?

Study the New Testament. We are told that **“the chief priests, the scribes and the elders,”** in their bitter animosities towards Jesus would have ended his career sooner than they did, except that **“they were afraid of the crowd”** (Mk. 11:32; Matt. 21:26; Lk. 20:19). Notice that. They didn’t do what they wanted because they feared the ordinary citizens.

Notice also that **Pilate gave the judgment he did** – having already made up his own mind that his prisoner was innocent – **because he was “wishing to satisfy the crowd”** (Mk. 15:15). Feeling himself in a jam, and groping for something to justify the wickedness of condemning an innocent man, he was only too ready to assume that the early morning company outside the

praetorium was a **true cross section of the people**, and that he was yielding to public demand in handing Jesus over as a publicly execrated malefactor. **But they weren't representative of the people at all.**

All history – or nearly all history – shows at some level or other, sensitivity on the part of rulers to **the wishes of the people**. If it weren't so, why should they take so much trouble to mislead and to hoodwink them? What's the point of organized propaganda, unless it is to get people to think what their leaders want them to think? Even **Adolf Hitler** who once said “the crowds are stupid” was careful to encourage **Joseph Goebbels**, his chief propaganda minister, to make a complete and sinisterly clever use of German radio, press and cinema to influence people's minds and hearts, beginning in 1933. Unless they are completely duped, the ordinary people have more power than they know.

You see **there are so many ordinary people**, and when they act in unity and with integrity, they are more powerful than they know. President **Abraham Lincoln's dictum** has never been disproved: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.”

2. I want, secondly, to remind you that though the ordinary people are powerful, unfortunately, **the ordinary people are largely indifferent**. There's a **moral inertia** in the masses that is almost impossible to arouse and to move. Many people are careless about things. Unless it's a big deal, many people don't want to be bothered.

Somebody hot with indignation on some great moral issue comes into a group of ordinary people and pours out his/her soul on the subject. For a moment, people are impressed, but the impression is evanescent. In the passing of a few minutes folks murmur something about it being “very unpleasant and all that,” and then one of the company (in order to change the subject) inquires, **“What's on TV tonight?”** – and that's often the end of it.

The great achievement of people like **William Wilberforce**, in shutting down the slave trade in Britain during the early 1800's, and **Martin Luther King**, in furthering the civil rights of blacks in America in the mid 1960s, was that they toiled on in the face of awful inertia, and by their own unflagging zeal and tireless persistence, made people do the things which, in their best moments, they knew they ought to do. It isn't enough to be

convinced that something is wrong. The harder task is to convince others of it, and to make them so sure and so indignant that they, too, will do something about it at great personal cost.

In the same vein, **I believe the ordinary people of the country aren't against Jesus Christ.** It's fairly easy to get people in Canada and the United States of America to say that they believe in him. One can still quote Jesus almost anywhere and be heard with respect. But though the average North American isn't against Jesus Christ and, indeed, at some level in their mental life they have a deep respect for his person and teaching, they're inert. They aren't willing to work and sacrifice for the things Christ is seeking. The crowd will cheer him at one moment and disperse at the next if a speaker challenges its members to take up a cross and follow him.

That's the challenge. That's the obdurate impediment to spiritual progress -- not the opposition of the people, but their awful **apathy and indifference.**

3. Notice, thirdly, that **ordinary people** under democracy **can have whatever they want.**

"Democracy" -- defined by **Abraham Lincoln** in his Gettysburg Address, as "government of the people, by the people and for the people" -- is a word sometimes loosely and even falsely used; it's been employed to cover subtle forms of autocracy and bureaucracy. But real democracy, when it is honestly practiced, is a precious thing. It has been won by the costly sacrifice of men and women all over the world. Freedom of speech and association! Universal adult suffrage! Secret ballots! People who have always enjoyed these privileges seldom realize how great they are.

Under democracy people can have whatever they want. But **we must want it passionately enough.** And our passion must wield us into work together, gird us with courage and toughen us to a terrible persistence.

So far as **effective action** is concerned to be neutral or indifferent on a particularly important moral issue is indistinguishable from a vote against it. That's how **a handful of vigilant, passionate zealots can turn a crowd into their pawns.**

I'm in no doubt that **the mass of ordinary people**, who had seen Jesus work wonders and who loved him well, were unspeakably distressed by his

crucifixion; but when the deed was done they were in bed. His enemies worked swiftly, by night and in the early hours of that solemn day which divides all history. When the ordinary folk were astir and about, Jesus was already on the cross. Many of them, no doubt, were shocked. They could have protested, with a good deal of cogency, that they weren't to blame.

It's hard to blame people for not being vigilant, harder still for not being heroes. But **that is how wickedness wins its way into this world**. It counts on the sleepiness and comfort-loving character of the good – and it wins. What was it that British parliamentarian **Edmund Burke** said, “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.”

When the last World War ended, there were **many ordinary Christians** who belonged neither to the valiant few “**Confessing Church**” membership whose leaders Hitler had found it necessary to put into prison or to death, nor yet to the membership of those who called themselves “**German Christians**” whose leaders had become the willing tools of Nazi wickedness. They belonged to **the large central body of Christian people** who had somehow been bypassed in Hitler's rise to power.

When ecumenical conversations began again with them they had to admit, with great embarrassment, that they had no idea that there were such places as concentration camps. No idea! Others said – if you can believe it -- that they had heard nothing of the extent and atrocities of the Jewish Holocaust. They had been aware of some minor anti-Semitism (which they half-regretted and half-excused), but of the wholesale slaughter of decent, talented people on the grounds of their race, they knew nothing.

Then they added other things. “It isn't good for Christians to get mixed up in politics.” “We had been partly persuaded that National Socialism was good for Germany.” “We had only the newspapers to go on, and we didn't realize how much they were controlled.” “We thought that the adamant Lutheran minister, Martin Niemoeller was being a little thick-headed and uncooperative.”

So it was done. **Good people had been fooled** – to their own awful cost, and to the cost of most of the world.

Were the people responsible for the crime of Calvary?

Not, I think, in the way that some scholars have supposed. Not with malice aforethought; not with a diabolically thought-out judgment given against Jesus.

They were guilty by inertia, guilty as we are guilty today – guilty of moral torpor, and **guilty of being so self-obsessed and comfort-loving** that we will not stir ourselves and suffer for the truth.

On these counts the people were guilty then, and on those counts most of us are guilty now

Amen

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