



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Palm Sunday – the Cast

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

March 24, 2013

There we have the whole drama, complete with characters and action, but incomplete in detail. The literary style of scripture is minimalist, spare and devoid of descriptors. It is our challenge to flesh out the stories and personalities. As with all scripture, I believe that we are not to read this as a story about people who lived a long time ago, but to discover how these stories resonate and inform our lives. For it we can see ourselves in the imperfect people of the Gospel, we might understand what it is that Jesus would heal in us. So, let's look at this cast of characters.

Pontius Pilate is a figure of history and his context is known. He was Rome's man on the scene, there to do the will of the Empire. He was a bureaucrat in charge of collecting taxes and overseeing public works projects. But his main job was to keep order, using any means he saw fit. As judge and jury he used crucifixion liberally. For Pilate, a figure like Jesus, one who motivated crowds to adoration and religious authorities to distraction, was something to be dealt with emphatically. To refer to someone as "king", or to refer to one's self as "king" was treason. Hence, his question to Jesus, "are you the king of the Jews?" But for practical purposes, and Pilate was no doubt a very practical man, any hint of treason or unrest was simply not tolerated. Jesus' execution was expedient and political. Maintaining a working relationship with Jewish authorities was likewise political and expedient. "You want him dead, how fortunate, because I was going to kill him anyway." Here the authorities, political and religious, protected themselves from challenge. Pilate may be an historical figure but he is very much present today. Self-serving and system-serving. Politicians and institutions resist new ways of thinking. The Pilates of the world get us into wars and serve the powerful, pretending that what they do does not cause real harm. There is some uncertainty about how Pilate met his end, but it was either execution or suicide under the Emperor Caligula. It should give us pause when we see Pilate in our own actions.

Then we have the Disciples, full of adoration and vigor to traipse after Jesus and be a part of the movement until it asked too much of them. He told them what following him would look like, what kind of commitment it would require. How many of us are prepared to live unpopular ideals if it means that our families and friends might turn their backs on us. How often are we willing to stand up and take a position that involves risk? In Luke's Gospel today, the only responses that they can come up with are violence and denial. Neither of those is found in the teachings of Jesus. The twelve disciples are us; they are the human response to the call to be more than you think you can be. They scatter and hide in self-protection and say "I'm scared" instead of "we are one and we stand together, come what may." It's not easy to make that leap but hopefully we are willing to keep trying, to dare greatly together.

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And Peter. Oh! the shame that he must have felt when the words of his fear roared in his ears. Was his betrayal worse than Judas? In Luke's story he has to face Jesus with his shame hanging in the air between them. I think if we are all honest, we will see ourselves in Peter. Did you ever have a friend who went out on a limb for something and you took a big step back because it didn't seem safe? It's really easy to forget that we have promised to follow and be true to Jesus when challenged by life and circumstances and just the way things are. Do we also have those excruciating moments when our eyes meet his and we know that we blew it? In those awful times, can we believe that we are worthy of forgiveness and love?

The priests and the scribes are that part of us that wants certainty and familiarity at all costs. Jesus challenged their status quo, pointed out how their devotion to tradition had blinded them to the intent of the law. God's law is meant to liberate us but when it is poorly or ham-handedly applied it becomes a straight-jacket, trapping us in intransigence and fundamentalism. God is always doing something new, inviting us out of where we have been to where we might go. How often do we respond to that by shouting, "crucify him!"

This is such an uncomfortable day but it needs to be if we are going to be the Body of Christ with courage and integrity. The vision and hope and joy that are offered to us are not cheap. They will cost us. But the price that is asked is only those things that we do not need; blindness, shame, and fear. Let us walk with Jesus this week to his death so that we may greet him with confidence and joy on Easter morning.

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