

“I am Barabbas.”

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.
Good Friday, March 25, 2005. Text: the Passion according to St. John.*

We’ve just relived a drama: the Passion, the “suffering of God in Christ” as recorded in St. John’s gospel. This drama portrays a conflict of wills, of good versus evil. The part of the story we heard today leaves the audience with the impression that *evil*, sadly, seems to have won the day. But the mysterious truth is that in these events the *will of God* was done. For that reason we call this Friday “Good,” not “Dark” or “Sad.” Appearances can deceive.

The drama of Good Friday is the overcoming of evil through the willing death of the Son of God. As in every great drama, we who witness the play are invited to identify ourselves with one of the characters. As we reflect on what we’ve just heard, with whom do we identify? There is no hero in the story except Jesus and no strong characters other than the Beloved Disciple, the Lord’s Mother and her female companions. So, unless we’re spiritually vain, we’ll have to look for ourselves among the weaklings or even the villains.

So let’s begin with the arch-villain, with Judas. He was one of his closest friends, but he betrayed Jesus into the hands of his worst enemies. Judas cooperated with and maybe even engineered the events that led to Jesus’ death. Judas is a man whose very name has become a curse. —But there must have been at least some *potential* good in him, otherwise why would Jesus have called Judas to be his disciple? What good might Judas have done, had he made different choices?

He handed Jesus over to his enemies. ...Why? Maybe he was frustrated by Jesus’ lack of aggressiveness. In his frustration, did he decide to force a confrontation between the Messiah and his enemies, hopeful that Jesus would summon angels from heaven to defend him? Let’s give Judas the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he was a well-intentioned behind the scenes schemer, trying to push history in the right direction, but his scheme backfired. Maybe Judas thought he could provoke Jesus into seizing political power through the use of miracles instead of weapons. Judas put his faith in power. And the only kind of power he believed in was power that could compel others to do his will.

Judas was sure that he knew what was best. And he lived for power. —Can we discover a piece of ourselves in Judas?

Next we turn to Peter, “the Rock.” Peter looks like an attractive guy: a “John Wayne” type —big, strong, and forceful— but humble, too. He was “ready for anything.” He was Jesus’ strong right arm and spokesman for the Twelve, never afraid to speak his mind. In fact, old “Rock” seems to have been used to speaking first and thinking later. He wore his heart on his sleeve. During the scuffle with the soldiers in Gethsemane, Peter began bravely —swinging his sword around and managing to wound an attacker. But big, bold Peter ended up running away, leaving Jesus behind.

Earlier, he had vigorously proclaimed his loyalty to Jesus and said “*Though everyone else should abandon you, Lord, I will never leave you!*” —But he did. He abandoned Jesus, just as the others did. We watch Peter at the house of the High Priest. There Jesus stands up to his accusers and denies nothing. Peter cringes and denies everything. —Some friend... Some “rock”!

Lots of brave talk from Peter, but it’s all just hot air. —Are we able to see a bit of ourselves in Peter?

Let’s not forget Caiaphas, the ruling High Priest, and his father-in-law, old Annas, the former High Priest. The High Priest was God’s representative, bearer of the sacred trust of Israel. He was the designated defender of the traditions, the Law, the Temple, the glory of Zion, and the hope of the Nation. High Priests were entrusted with holy things, but they weren’t what we’d call “spiritual” men. High Priests were more like Renaissance popes. They had political matters on their minds most of the time, because their nation was a tinderbox, full of wild-eyed Zealots burning with eagerness to expel the gentiles. A High Priest had to be smart, and these two – Annas and his son-in-law and protégé, Caiaphas – certainly were that.

They knew that if Jesus were not silenced, some of his followers might start a war against Rome —and then all that was sacred and precious to them would go down to the dust. Caiaphas was tuned-in to political reality. He knew that if war with Rome came, the Jews would lose. And he was right. War did come 34 years later —and Jerusalem was leveled, the Temple demolished, the High Priest killed, and the surviving citizens enslaved.

Caiaphas thought, “Yes, the Galilean himself is probably harmless enough, but he can become a figure around whom all the radicals rally. Besides, he really *is* a heretic. He speaks of destroying the Temple and rebuilding it in three days. Maybe he’s a Samaritan ...or else a madman. Madmen are everywhere, and one with a following could

demolish our nation.” So Caiaphas said to the Elders of Israel: “*It’s better that one man should die than that the People be destroyed.*”

Annas and Caiaphas were nominally religious, totally pragmatic, and utterly cunning. —Can we see anything of ourselves in them?

What, now, about Pontius Pilate? In John’s drama of the Passion, Pilate is the key protagonist. There’s a wonderful pairing-off of Jesus and the Roman Governor, in face-to-face dialogue.

Pilate was the official representative of the greatest power the world had ever known: imperial Rome at her pinnacle of greatness. Though he was educated and sophisticated, by certain standards, Pilate was also ruthless, cruel, and impulsive. His hands were already stained with Jewish blood. The very reason that he was up in Jerusalem, rather than in his official residence down on the coast, was because of the risk of riots at the Passover, when Jewish nationalism ran high. At the end of the Passover meal, there was a prayer that God would drive unbelievers out of the land of Israel. The Romans knew that meant *them*.

Cruel though he was, Pontius Pilate was also an experienced magistrate. Governors were *ex officio* judges. He could tell the difference between a dangerous revolutionary and a mild-tempered preacher. He was able to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty. Roman judges were the best the world had ever seen.

The fact is that Pilate might even have been biased a bit in Jesus’ favor because the High Priest was the Roman governor’s constant nemesis. Pilate might have let Jesus go free, just to twist the noses of Caiaphas and Annas. But Pilate was ambitious, and the path of advancement was controlled by one person —Caesar. Caesar alone. All Pilate’s Roman *gravitas* and judicial demeanor vanished when he heard the chief priests call out those fateful words: “If you release this man, you’re no friend of Caesar.”

Woe to the Roman governor who fell afoul of paranoid old Tiberius, who from his palace on the Isle of Capri heard everything even whispered in governors’ offices around the empire. So, Pilate the Judge reasoned to himself, “*What’s one more crucified Jew, after all?*”

Pilate had a career to build. He was ambitious. —Can we discover a certain element of ourselves in this Pilate?

Can we find someone with whom to identify so far? ...Judas? ...Peter? ...Caiaphas? ...Pilate? —*No?*

There is one more. He just has a little part, but we mustn’t overlook him. He’s the one with whom I identify. Maybe you will too. This character is Barabbas. Barabbas was guilty of everything Jesus had been falsely accused of. John calls Barabbas a “bandit.” In fact, he was an insurgent, a revolutionary, an enemy of Rome. Barabbas had already been tried by Pilate and found guilty. Everyone in Jerusalem knew it.

Barabbas was slated to occupy the center cross of the three that were to go up on Skull Hill that Friday. Yet Jesus died on that cross, and not Barabbas—who, if he knew of Jesus at all, probably despised him as a weakling.

The gentle, humble carpenter from Nazareth, whose touch had healed the crippled, given sight to the blind, cleansed the lepers of their sores, soothed the demon-tormented and raised the dead to life stretched out his innocent arms and died on the cross where the blood-stained hands of Barabbas deserved to be.

“By popular demand” the guilty man was excused, and the innocent man was executed in his place. How ironic — and appropriate too — that the One who obeyed his heavenly Father faithfully all through his life should be put to the torture and death of crucifixion in place of one whose name in Hebrew literally means “*Son of the Father.*”

“Son of the Father.” Yes, that’s me. I am Barabbas. No doubt about it. The crowd calls out in sympathy for me. They identify with me because they’re guilty too. And I fear death, now that it has come so close. ...But I’m spared. Jesus is guiltless, brave, and unafraid to die. And so he does. —For me.

Now, because Jesus hangs there in my place with his blood trickling down the wood of the cross that was made for me, I’m free to go.

I am Barabbas, “Son of the Father.” And you are too, my sisters and brothers! We are “Children of the Father,” and because of that, there’s still hope for us. Our Father’s first-born has died in our place, ransomed us, and so we’re free now. Today our lives can begin anew.

Barabbas was guilty and waiting to die. Jesus took his place. —Can we see ourselves in this “Son of the Father?”