

Barabbas

TEXT:
Matthew 27:11-23

March 16, 2008 – Palm / Passion Sunday

This is Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. We began our worship with the exciting news that Jesus had come to Jerusalem. This journey into the Holy City began one of the most incredible weeks in human history. But Palm Sunday leads directly to the passion of the arrest, trial, conviction and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Our lesson from Matthew's Gospel tells of one of the events on that dark and unforgettable night when Jesus was sentenced to death.

Everyone knows how they hung there on the crosses, and who they were that stood gathered around him: Mary his mother and Mary Magdalene, Veronica, Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross, and Joseph of Arimathea, who shrouded him. But a little further down the slope, rather to one side, a man was standing with his eyes riveted on the dying man in the middle, watching his death-throes from the first moment to the last. His name was Barabbas.ⁱ

Thus began the novel titled *Barabbas* by the Swedish author, Pär Lagerkvist, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1951.

We know very little and we know a lot about Barabbas. He was a bit player who played a significant role in the drama that was played out in the twilight hours between Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. He never utters a word in the story,

and yet his presence speaks volumes about the central figure in the drama. His name was Barabbas, which literally means "son of the father", *bar*, meaning "son of," and *abbas*, meaning "father." *Abbas* was a title given to the greatest rabbis in the Jewish tradition, leading to speculation that Barabbas may have been the son of an ancient and distinguish religious family.ⁱⁱ

Matthew, moreover, offers a curious detail that the other gospels leave out. Matthew gives us his first name: Jesus Barabbas. Many scholars accept that to be an authentic rendering of his name. The 3rd century Church father, Origen, indicated that the manuscripts of his day, included the full name. It is speculated that later scribes omitted the name because of the repugnance of the bandit and the Christ having the same name.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, if we take that little bit of information and place it back into the story, we note that the crowd had a truly remarkable choice. Pilate asked, "Which one? Jesus, the son of the father, or Jesus, who is called the Messiah?" [Matthew 27:17] For Matthew, there is no clearer choice. The crowd had to pick between two people named Jesus, one who sought peace and the other who practiced violence.^{iv}

Beyond very brief notices in the four gospels, we know nothing else of Barabbas. The gospel writers called him notorious. He was described as a rebel and a thief. As an insurrectionist against Rome, he had committed

murder. In the eyes of State he was a terrorist, but to the people, he was a freedom fighter.

After the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and the outcome of his trial had been secured, a crowd gathered in the courtyard of the Governor – a far different crowd than the one which greeted Jesus just a few days earlier on Palm Sunday. According to a custom, Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea and Samaria, offered to release one of his prisoners to the crowd. Pilate's intent was plain enough; it was a choice between a hardened criminal and a man who had obviously done no harm to anyone. Surely the crowd would not fail to make the choice he desired.

Those in the crowd, however, ruled with a passion unexpected by the Roman, cried out not for the rabbi, but for the bandit. For the 1st century Jews, weary and abused by the cruel hand of Rome, Barabbas would have been seen as a man of honor and quite popular among the people. First of all, he was a nationalist who stirred the patriotic blood with his rallying cry, "Judea for Judeans." The people saw him as a man of action. There was no sentimental nonsense about him such as loving your neighbor. He didn't need words when he had a club and a knife. And he offered a simple solution to a difficult problem. His focus was narrow: evil was very clear; get rid of the Romans and all would be well.^v Barabbas was a man willing to risk his life in violent opposition to Rome.

What a contrast to Jesus. The crowds no doubt wondered, what would ever become of this peaceful, non-violent teacher, Jesus?

What a night Barabbas must have spent. The shadow of torture cast across his face as he awaited his cross. Outside the prison walls, he could hear the crowds yell, “Barabbas. Barabbas.” He assumed that the Romans were driving the crowds into a blood-thirsty frenzy.

Just before dawn, he could hear the footsteps of soldiers coming to take him to his horrible death. Expecting his own walk to the cross, he hears one of the Legionnaires speak instead, *By special ordinance of the Law of Imperial Rome, you are hereby granted clemency by his Excellency Pontius Pilate, Procurator under the exulted Emperor Tiberius.*

The shackles were removed from his wrist and ankles and he was pushed down the marble stairs of the Palace and out into the streets of Jerusalem. No one was more surprised than he. Without notice, he moved from being bound to being free.

In Lagerkvist’s novel, Barabbas finds himself haunted by his freedom. In the weeks following his release he finds himself seeking the company of those who were the friends of the rabbi who was killed in his place. He wants to believe that this quiet, unprotesting man could have been his God.

Barabbas’ mind wanders back to the look on the face of that man, the one who was executed between the two thieves. Barabbas knew he was a man who should have been on that cross with those other two. He

had committed his crime. He had acted nobly against the Romans. He had been rightly condemned and sentenced to die. But that didn’t happen; he wasn’t crucified, he was pardoned and set free. He didn’t deserve it. He wasn’t sure he wanted it. But he couldn’t get over it. He couldn’t get away from it. He couldn’t forget it.

Looking in his mind’s eye at that man on the cross, he could only see how he was now bound in his freedom to the one who died in his place.

The story of Barabbas leaves us a little unsettled. Here is what I think is troubling to us about his presence in our sacred story: it is unimaginable to think that one so violent, so committed to the harm of others, so active in subversive political activity, that such a man as Barabbas could be granted such grace.

But at its core, is that not what the crucifixion is all about? Isn’t that what we proclaim when we say the plan and simple truth that Christ died for our sin? Didn’t Jesus die for the sins of Barabbas? In fact, Barabbas is the only person in the Bible about whom we can say that is literally true.

The story of Barabbas offers us a unique perspective to our understanding of God’s grace. In this story we learn that when we say it does not matter – in the eyes of God – who you are, or what you have done, that what we are saying is really, really true.

For God so loved the world – John told us, *so loved the world, the pious and the profiteers, the righteous and the rebels* – God so loved the world, that God gave God’s only son, and those

who believe in the son shall not perish but have everlasting life. God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. [John 3:16-17]

Barabbas envisioned a revolution, a change in the old order. He fought with all his strength and determination to bring about the new order. The power of Rome, however, was far too great for the strength of Barabbas. But Jesus was a revolutionary too. He, too, sought a change in the old order. He fought with strength and determination, and with his life. But the implements of his change were very different from those of Barabbas. Jesus brought about his new order with love, forgiveness, grace, and compassion. Against that, Rome could not stand.

God’s love was nailed on the cross, our sin has been forgiven, and we are bound in freedom to the one who created us, redeemed us and sustains us. Thanks be to God.

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ⁱ Pär Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, translated by Alan Blair, (Vintage International, 1989), 3.

ⁱⁱ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, Revised edition, (Westminster, 1975), 361.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael J. Wilkins, “Barabbas”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1., (Doubleday, 1992), 607.

^{iv} Samuel Wells, *Power & Passion: Six Characters in Search of Resurrection.*” (Zondervan, 2007), 68

^v “Mark”, *The Interpreters’ Bible*, Vol. 7, (Abingdon), 896f.