

Sermon Archive 510

Sunday 24 November, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Mark 15: 6-15

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Reflection: Why choose Barabbas?

Jesus had healed the sick and fed the hungry. He had served the cause of forgiveness. He had championed love, and had wept for the suffering of the people. With his stories he had awoken the imagination, and people all around him described what they'd learned from him as "good news". Behold, and it is good!

Barabbas carried weapons, and during some violent scuffle used one of them to kill someone - rage, violence, blood on his hands. The writer of Mark's gospel describes him plainly as a "murderer".

Given the choice between Jesus and Barabbas, how could anyone (maybe other than the mother of Barabbas) not choose Jesus? Why choose Barabbas?

Hymn: love unknown

There is absolutely no record in any Roman document anywhere of there being a tradition whereby any prisoner is set free for the Jewish Passover. It's almost as if the tradition never existed. If a show clemency was considered strategically advantageous, or "right for the political time", then sometimes (rarely though) a prisoner could be kept alive for a short while until they had been able to celebrate one last Passover with their family. This short postponement of execution was hardly what Mark's Pontius Pilate is floating. I wonder why he would pretend that setting someone free was a regular thing when it wasn't. You'd almost think, wouldn't you, that he's trying to find a loophole through which Jesus could jump, landing on his feet the other side in the realm of surprising, last-chance freedom. (Matthew's gospel embellishes the story with a conversation between Pilate and his wife, who'd been losing sleep over Jesus and having awful dreams. The Pilates were very keen to set Jesus free. Alas, that's in Matthew's gospel, not Mark's, so we'll leave that sitting there as some kind of loose end.). For Mark's gospel,

we simply have Pilate, for reasons mysterious, seizing on some ploy to set Jesus free. It should work, shouldn't it? Because Jesus is a good person whom the people are bound to choose. As the title of this reflection goes "Why choose Barabbas?"

Potential Reason Number 1: Maybe it's nothing to do, really, with either of the prisoners themselves. Maybe it's more to do with our hatred of the Romans, and our desire at every stage to do as much damage to **them** as we can. We know that the main Roman concern is the keeping of order (mainly so the greedy bastards can continue to occupy our land and charge us taxes). So usurping, so re-prioritising is our resentment, that this choice before us, between Jesus and Barabbas, ceases really to be about either Jesus or Barabbas. It becomes a matter of choosing what's most likely to hurt the Romans. And what's most likely hurtful? I's **got** to be someone with weapons and a record of using them. Violence in the community is something Barabbas is bound to bring. So we set **him** free. The fact that maybe his next victim is going to be our brother, our mother, our colleague at work, our friend, seems to fade from our calculating. We fail, somehow, to see that violence in the community is good for no one in the community. We might hate the government, but civil disorder is going to be our problem. If we have any sophistication of considering our own interests in the success of the government, it fails when we choose Barabbas. The reach of the tentacles of deep government-focussed hatred is something we learn when we choose Barabbas. And Barabbas was chosen.

Why choose Barabbas? Potential Reason Number 2: It's sort of like Reason Number 1. Your overriding concern continues to be the occupation of your government and territory by people you want gone. You want them **gone** - and you'd thought for a while that Jesus might have been the One who could do that. Preparing to welcome him to the city, feeling like this would be a tinder-dry time of things catching fire, you gathered your palm branches (echoes of the Maccabean revolt - the Maccabees being known as the "hammer that would smash the Greek occupiers"). You worked out what you'd shout and sing - not some prissy "alleluia, praise the Lord", but "Hosanna, Lord save us!" Your welcoming of Jesus had all the subtext and signs of politically engaged people wanting a strong man to start something big. You're "fired up". And then he arrives - riding a tiny wee donkey.

Your question quickly becomes "is **this** the One to take on the Romans?" Just as Barabbas was more likely to bring violence, so Jesus is least likely to effect any political change. A more sophisticated form of the question

might be "could we possibly believe that gentleness can be victor over violence?" "Could we imagine a world where peace comes not through arms, but through love?" It's an on-going question for the Christians. But for now, the crowd looks at Jesus, and chooses Barabbas. Barabbas was chosen.

Why choose Barabbas? Potential Reason Number 3: Sometimes people will make odd decisions because they've been fed misinformation. Rumour has it that Jesus said he could tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days, but the testimony on it was chaotic - none of the witnesses agreed. For most of Mark's passion story, the accusations are no more precise than that "the chief priests accused him of many things" - many things. Sounds like a "rumour mill" to me. Accusation without evidence - it's a swirling of misinformation where truth doesn't matter too much. It's just as well, isn't it, that our times suffer no such swirling. Sea levels are not rising. Glaciers are not retreating. There is no increase in volatile weather.

But back in those days, deliberate misinformation disseminated by chief priests was a thing. The crowd hears things about Jesus, and chooses Barabbas. Barabbas was chosen.

Why choose Barabbas? Potential Reason Number 4: Some years after his famous statement in 1998, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman", American President Bill Clinton had moment to share his thoughts on his fall from grace. Asked by journalist Dan Rather in 2004 why he had done it, Clinton replied: *"I think I did something for the worst possible reason -- just because I could. I think that's the most, just about the most morally indefensible reason that anybody could have for doing anything. When you do something just because you could ... I've thought about it a lot. And there are lots of more sophisticated explanations, more complicated psychological explanations. But none of them are an excuse . . ."*

Why did the people choose Barabbas? Because they could? Was there some obtuse pleasure to be had in choosing the worst, rather than the best - just because they could? In his hymn text "My song is love unknown", Samuel Crossman asked the same question: *"Why, what has my Lord done? What makes this rage and spite? He made the lame to run, he gave the blind their sight. Sweet injuries! Yet they at these themselves displease, and 'gainst him rise."*

It doesn't make sense to Crossman. He "poems" it as an open question.

The closest comes to a theory is to use the phrase: "men made strange". When we make strange, we choose Barabbas. Barabbas was chosen.

-ooOoo-

On the last Sunday of the church year, we ponder the choice made for Barabbas and against Jesus. It's the same choice explored late last year by Evangelical pastor, David Johnson, the long time minister at Open Door Church in Minneapolis. David argues that the choice isn't necessarily between Jesus and Barabbas, as much as it is a choice between the "**way** of Jesus", and the "**way** of Barabbas". It's a choice between **ways**. It's kind of what we were considering when exploring whether Barabbas or Jesus would provide the most successful campaign against Rome. Which **way of engaging with the problem** do we think is most likely to work. David says that we would never choose Barabbas over Jesus - but the ways?. He then goes on to say: *"but every time I 'power it' over my wife, I choose Barabbas - choose his way. Every time I 'power it' over one of the staff members we have here, every time we get all 'big' and win the argument, or do something that you think is a kingdom thing, but you got big and maybe you even exaggerated and lied to get what you wanted at the School Board, you chose Barabbas, you chose the way of Barabbas."*

I wonder if, in honour of the One whose reign we celebrate today, we couldn't turn it around. When we believe that the power of love is greater than the power of evil, we choose the way of Jesus. When we seek truth, and question the rumour, we choose the way of Jesus. When we renounce our power advantage and seek ways that are more equal, we choose the way of Jesus. When we heal and bless, rather than kill and curse, we choose the way of Jesus. When we call out the "making strange", and seek to be temple of the Spirit, we choose the way of Jesus.

And maybe, as we take on his Way, we are more likely to welcome him as our King.

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