

Choosing Barabbas Puts Someone on a Cross

We have found ourselves facing some crisis that forced us to choose either a Barabbas-like solution or the Jesus option. So far, we have not fared any better than that first Good Friday crowd. We keep choosing violence over peace, death over life, and hate over love.

It's that second meeting with the crowd that concerns me.

The occasion was a sort of clemency hearing. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, made a show each year at the Passover of releasing one prisoner as a goodwill gesture. This particular year he found himself with two candidates—Jesus and a man named Barabbas.

The Gospel of Mark describes Barabbas as a “rebel” who was in prison for committing murder during some sort of political uprising. Given the climate in Jerusalem during Jesus' time, we can be pretty sure the uprising was against Rome, and the murdered victim a Roman soldier. In other words, Barabbas was a freedom fighter.

Jesus, of course, was a holy man. He was variously called teacher, prophet and, of course, savior by those who knew him best. None of these designations are particularly dangerous or subversive, at least in the violent sense. In fact, after Pilate interrogated Jesus, he concluded that Jesus was not a threat to Rome at all. Pilate really wanted to grant him clemency, but that was up to the crowd.

The differences between the two men could not have been more glaring. Barabbas the freedom fighter was committed to waging war against Roman oppression with direct violent action. His creed was likely, “Hate your enemy and use any means available to defeat them.”

Jesus, on the other hand, was the Prince of Peace. His approach to Roman oppression included turning the other cheek and going the second mile. Later, when Roman soldiers were crucifying him, Jesus asked God to forgive them—his creed being “love your enemy.”

When Pilate called for a decision, religious leaders stirred the crowd in favor of Barabbas, though I doubt it was a hard sell. Rome was a cruel taskmaster. The crowd would have been naturally drawn to someone who was willing to strike a blow against their oppressors. And let’s be honest: Turning the other cheek has never been very popular. So they chose Barabbas. Jesus, of course, the innocent one, was led away to be crucified.

Unfortunately, it was the wrong choice. Barabbas and others like him eventually led Israel into one provocation too many. Roman legions eventually took Jerusalem down stone by stone. Too bad the crowd had not believed Jesus when he said, “Those who live by the sword die by the sword.”

Not that any of us would have done anything differently. In fact there have been a few times in history when the same sort of choice has presented itself to us. We have found ourselves facing some crisis that forced us to choose either a Barabbas-like solution or the Jesus option. So far, we have not fared any better than that first Good Friday crowd. We keep choosing violence over peace, death over life, and hate over love.

And like it was for the first crowd, every time we choose Barabbas, some innocent soul somewhere ends up on a cross.

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