

## Palm Sunday (2026)

It was a Christmas for guests. Some stayed at my house, others in a rental house over the road.

They were of different ages, educational backgrounds, religious perspectives and political persuasions . . . ensuring the conversation was lively, to say the least!

After everyone had gone home, I received a note from a young college professor saying how much he enjoyed his visit. He threw in: **“You had quite a cast of characters!”**

The same can be said of St. Matthew’s Passion narrative. Here we find quite a cast of characters.

One commentator, J. Paterson Symth, said that the world in miniature can be seen around the cross on Good Friday.

Let's look at three from this cast of characters.

First, there were the **chief priests**. Two are named: Caiaphas, the official high priest, and Annas, the ex-high priest who continued to have great influence over his successor and the affairs of the Jewish council – the Sanhedrin.

These were men of wealth, culture, education and yes religion, but they were not good men.

They appear a number of times in today's passage, always in an unfavorable light.

They instigated Jesus' arrest.

They handed Jesus over to Pilot to be put to death.

They persuaded the crowd to cry out for Barabbas, rather than Jesus.

So great their rage, they brought forth false witnesses to testify against Jesus. They were without a moral compass.

Perpetuating their positions of power and status – not truth -- was their chief concern.

They remind us religion is not enough.

People who use religion for their own advantage, sad to say, are still out there. So, pay attention and be careful whom you follow.

But it is not just *they* we need to watch out for. We also need to pay attention to our own hearts. What are our motives?

Is our religion genuine? Are we lovers of truth and justice, followers of the Lamb, doers and not just hearers of the word?

We turn now from the chief priests to a second person who played a role in our Lord's

arrest and subsequent crucifixion, **Judas Iscariot**.

As one of the Twelve, Judas enjoyed great spiritual privilege. He heard Jesus teach. He saw His miracles. He tasted His wine.

Yet, he became a pawn of the devil and sold his Lord for a paltry 30 pieces of silver.

And even before taking this drastic step, he was dipping into the money bag.

Judas stands as a striking illustration of the principle put forth in 1 Timothy 6:10: **“For the love of money is the root of all evil.”**

People like Judas are still with us today. They put things before people, money before God. The lure of material security causes them to cut moral corners, to sell out to the devil.

The temptation to do this, moreover, is not just out there in other people. It is with ourselves.

Again, we need to be on guard. Material things are gifts from a good God. They add pleasure to life when rightly received and used, but when wrongly received and used, they lead to destruction.

The latter was the way with Judas. A few coins brought him not happiness, but a suicide's grave. Learn from Judas. ///

**Pontius Pilot** was likewise part of the cast of characters that day. He stands out as a pathetic picture of weakness and cowardice.

He knew Jesus was innocent, yet he refused to do the right thing. He set aside honor for expediency. He sought to absolve himself of responsibility by ceremonially washing his hands.

In this instance at least, he should have listened to his wife . . . who, according to some non-biblical sources became a Christian. Let's hope she did. You might be surprised whom you will meet in heaven!

Whether that legend is true or not, the temptation to compromise, to go with the crowd, to play it safe, to pass the buck, remains with us today.

Pilot, by negative example, teaches us to do the right thing even when it is unpopular and costly. ///

I want to suggest that these three characters – the chief priests, Judas and Pilot -- are not that different from people we know, indeed from ourselves.

A question that follows is: **Who sent Jesus to the cross?**

Was it the Jewish religious leaders, Judas, the Romans, Pilot, the crowd that called for Barabas' release? /// Answer: All of the above.

Many if not most of you have seen Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*.

When it came out, some criticized the film for laying the blame of Jesus' death solely on the Jews. But, in fact, that is not what Gibson does.

In the scene where the nails are driven into Jesus' hands, it is Gibson's hands that are seen hammering the spikes. This was intended to say that all of us are implicated in this crime.

*Who was the guilty, who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee. 'Twas I Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee, I crucified thee"* to quote one of our Passiontide hymns.

The good news is that as all bear the guilt, so for all is the redemption and forgiveness brought by the cross . . . for all who hear and respond to the call of the Gospel.

We shall probably never fully understand the mechanics of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement, how the guiltless took the guilt of the guilty and bore it to Calvary.

In the end, hymn writer Harry W. Farrington perhaps said it best:

I know not how that Calvary's cross  
a world from sin could free;  
I only know its matchless love  
has brought God's love to me.

As a result, we can have a new start. We don't have to be defined or held back by our past.

Think about your own past, your own mistakes, your own failures. Lay them at the foot of the cross and leave them there. ///

I said I was going to look at three of the cast of characters around the cross. Before I close, I would like to add a fourth, a bonus if you like. It is the **centurion** whose voice we hear at the very end saying: **“Truly this was the Son of God.”**

How much this soldier actually understood is hard to say.

But it seems clear this Gentile had a burst of understanding and responded appropriately.

He reminds us that God is sovereign. His light is not limited by time, place or race.

More than that, this soldier points us to what our response should be to Jesus. It is to confess Him as God’s Anointed.

But we dare not stop there. With revelation comes responsibility. We must take up our cross and follow Him. We must say, wherever He leads I'll go. Have you done this?

If not, this Palm Sunday can be your day of discovery.

It can place you in another 'cast of characters' – in the company of the saints of God, those who lived not only in ages past but who are doing Jesus' work around the globe at this very moment.

Why not? If you hear His voice, respond without delay. Slip in and take your place. Discover purpose and destiny.