

Palm Sunday (2025)

One Christmas a number of friends and acquaintances descended upon me.

The mix was very diverse, politically and in every other way. Conversations were lively yet civil. All in all, we had a great time.

After everyone had returned home, I received a note from one guest. In it, he thanked me for my hospitality and remarked that I had had quite the “cast of characters” around my house.

A “cast of characters” is a good description of those we meet in this morning’s Gospel.

One commentator, Paterson Smyth, says that the world in miniature can be seen around the cross on Good Friday.

Though separated from us by time and place, by examining them, we discover that they are really not that different from ourselves. They remind us that it was people like us who crucified the Lord of Glory. In the words of one of our Passiontide hymns:

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.

Mel Gibson in his 2004 epic film *The Passion of Christ* shares the hymn writer's understanding of the corporate nature of guilt in the crucifixion of Christ. The hands seen driving in the nails into Jesus' hands are Gibson's own.

This morning in this sermon I want to look at four members of the cast of characters around the cross. Each has something to teach us.

First, there were the **chief priests**. They certainly qualify as bad guys in the story.

It was they who handed Jesus over to Pilate to be put to death . . . who persuaded the multitude to ask for Barabbas . . . who mocked Jesus as He hung on the cross.

It is worth noting that these were men of wealth, education and culture. From them, we learn that none of these things is enough to make cruelty and barbarism impossible in a person or in a people.

Many who supported the Nazis regime of the 1930s and 1940s were likewise men of wealth, education and culture. Yet, we know what unbelievable atrocities were committed with either their direct or indirect approval.

All of which to say, the problem of sin transcends all distinctions. More than money,

education and social refinement are needed to make men good.

The chief priests in today's Gospel teach us that all need a new heart and a saviour.

The cross is where man's need and God's action meets. Look up to it this morning and see Christ hanging there bruised and bleeding and say: **“I put you there. Thank you for dying for me.”**

The high priests have something to teach us, but so does **Judas Iscariot**, the second in our cast of characters.

He was man who had enjoyed amazing spiritual privilege. He had been with Jesus from the beginning, had sat under his teaching, had seen His miracles and had felt the embrace of his arms.

Yet, in the end, the lure of 30 bit of silver proved too strong. Where did these silver coins land him? /// In a suicide's grave.

We can learn two things from Judas:

First, money alone does not make for happiness.

Money is not evil in and of itself, but it can become fatal when its quest becomes the end-all of a man's existence . . . when it takes on the status of a god. This was Judas' downfall.

If Judas got wealth wrong, how might we get it right? We find our answer in 1 Timothy 6, verses 17-19 (I am quoting here from the Revised Standard Version):

“As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They

are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed.”

You might be saying: “That’s good advice for the rich, but it hardly applies to me. I’m no Bill Gates, Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg.”

But not so fast. “Rich” is a very relative term. If you have food on the table, a roof over your head, and a little bit more – you are better off than 75 percent of the world’s population.

From Paul’s word of positive advice and from Judas’ negative example, we learn not to make the things we possess ultimate . . . to keep in check the all-to-human desire for *more* . . . to be generous . . . to seek first the kingdom of God.

But there is a second thing we can learn from Judas: **Proximity to the things of God does not assure a right relationship with God.**

Judas was in the presence of the Son of God daily for almost three years, but instead of this proximity bringing him heaven, it brought him destruction.

The same is true today. Many live in the shadow of a church . . . enjoy the benefits and blessings of a nation with Christian roots . . . have Bibles in their homes . . . like Judas enjoy great spiritual privilege. Yet, their heart is not right. Like Judas they are headed for perdition.

Judas reminds us to examine ourselves. Is our religion real? Have we been to the cross?

We have looked at the chief priests and Judas, let us turn now to a third member of this cast of characters around the cross: **Pontius Pilate.**

Pilate put his own security over truth. He knew Jesus was innocent of the charges leveled against him, but he bowed to the will of the mob. His was the sin of cowardice.

His negative example reminds us to stand tall and true under pressure. How we need people in both church and nation who will do that today.

Words of the 19th century poet Josiah Gilbert Holland remain timeless:

GOD, give us men!
A time like this demands
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and
ready hands;
Men whom the lust of office does not kill;
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;
Men who possess opinions and a will;
Men who have honor; men who will not lie;
Men who can stand before a demagogue
And damn his treacherous flatteries

without winking!

Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog
In public duty, and in private thinking.

Such ones – both men and women – are
certainly needed today.

What about you? Will you be one? Will you
stand tall in a culture that invites compromise?

Pilot failed the test. With God's help, we can
succeed.

So far, we have looked at three members of
the cast of characters around the cross. Let's
turn now to a fourth -- the Roman centurion at
the foot of the cross. Unlike the high priests,
Judas and Pilot, he sets before us a positive
example.

He recognized Jesus as the real deal when
the Jewish religious establishment and the mob

did not. Today's passage ends with him saying:
“Truly this was the Son of God.”

From him we learn that God's light can break through in the most unlikely places and in the lives of the most unlikely people.

This soldier's embryonic confession of faith brings great encouragement.

The cultural landscape today may appear bleak. The percentage of Americans without religious affiliation, often labeled as "Nones", now stands between 22 and 31 percent.

Some may opine that the days of the Christian Church are numbered, the age of faith is over.

Not so, a new mission field has been opened before us and beckons us to enter in with the Gospel of Christ.

The God who opened the eyes of this centurion is still powerful and at work.

Our job is to keep telling the story, keep lifting high the cross, keep living the Good News . . . and to leave the rest to Him.

Will we be faithful? ////

The cast of characters around the cross lived a long time ago. Their deeds, good and bad, are recorded in the annals of history. A new cast is on the stage today. Sign on. Learn your part and do it!