

Mark 15: 6-15

6 Now at the festival he (Pilate) used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ¹⁰For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹²Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' ¹³They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁴Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Meditation: Even though this gospel seeks to lay the lion-share of the blame for Jesus' execution with the Jewish leadership, Pilate is not blameless either. Indeed, he is applying well-known Roman techniques intended to incite, then humiliate, discipline and crush people already subjugated. By repeatedly calling Jesus 'the king of the Jews,' Pilate knows he is inciting them. By a prolonged process of scourging (and later mocking, beating and eventual crucifixion), he is declaring unmistakably what happens to any leader making a claim within the kingdom of Caesar.

But reading this account doesn't make us sympathetic to the Jewish leadership or the crowds either. Even though Jesus is clearly innocent (Pilate cannot see any reason to punish him) the leadership want to have him executed, even if that means letting a rebel go free, one who would be seen as a criminal and a murderer. They are so determined to have Jesus killed they'll overlook the more legitimate charges against Barabbas. This only adds to their accountability for Jesus' death.

But the irony here is at the very heart of the gospel. Jesus will die in place of and as a criminal, the innocent one in place of the guilty. Who is guilty? We may think it's primarily Barabbas. But Jesus would have had sympathy for the cause of the rebels, though not with their methods and the hate they fed on to achieve their aims. The greater guilt is in Pilate's indifference to true justice, the authorities hunger for power and control which is threatened by Jesus' vision, and the crowds who are so fickle and malleable to the threats, promises and false claims of the authorities.

Have you ever compromised on what you knew was true, just and right? Was it fear that pushed you? Was it a desire to avoid conflict or get on someone's good side that pulled you? How many times must we overlook and ignore things because we are afraid or indifferent or hopeless about anything really changing or we have lowered our expectations in order to cope? But what are we letting go and giving up, and how is that shrinking our own integrity and selfhood?

Prayer: Give us courage, O God, to stand up for what is right, to walk with those who are oppressed because of the colour of their skin, their sexuality, or some other reason. Give us grace to make space for others in their compromises because they are afraid

or in denial or in avoidance of what they should do but are too overwhelmed to do. May we not judge others more than we judge ourselves, and may we open our hearts to others as much as we seek your mercy for our own failings. And may we claim our full humanity before you and not settle for something less because it's easier or more convenient or less threatening right now. Grant us a courage and determination that are yours to walk in the way of truth and justice as they are calling to us in our lives right now; Amen.