

"IF WE HAD BEEN THERE...."

INTRODUCTION

So often we think of that first Holy Week as a drama enacted by a cast of relatively few characters. Jesus and Judas, Peter and Pilate, Herod and Caiphas...these we would list as the decisive characters in that original pageant - the power and persistence of which this week turns the steps of many to Churches and their thoughts to the Cross.

However, we are guilty of some oversimplification when we suppose that we have wrapped up the responsibility for the events of that momentous week in a few names that time has preserved for us. We tend to overlook the part that the crowd played in that drama - the nameless people of Jerusalem, their ranks swollen by pilgrims from the surrounding countryside who had converged on the city for the Passover celebration, the common people who were contemporary to the greatest event in history.

THE CROWD

Those who wrote the Gospels were aware of the part the crowd played in this event. Luke tells us that earlier in Holy Week - Monday or Tuesday, perhaps - the high-ranking ecclesiastics were impatient to seize Jesus and bring Him to trial, but hesitate because "they feared the people". Apparently the "hosannas" of Palm Sunday were still ringing in the ears of the priests and they felt that the climate of public opinion was running against them. And so the strategy of the opposition is clearly recorded in Mark's Gospel by this line, "The chief priests worked on the crowd".

And how they must have worked on that crowd! - planting rumors, fanning fears, arousing antagonism - until, on Friday, the people of Jerusalem were ready to condone a crucifixion they would have resisted on Palm Sunday. A subtle change took place in the atmosphere of Jerusalem and the enemies of Jesus - experts in temperature readings - sensed on Thursday that they could then do what they would never have dared of doing on Monday.

Henry Sloan Coffin once made this observation, "Behind all earth's tragedies, there is a public whose state of mind has much to do with the central event". How true! We've seen evidence of this in our own time. We think of the poisonous, hate filled atmosphere of Dallas that prompted a man to fire an assassin's bullet. (pause...repeat Coffin's remark)

IF WE HAD BEEN THERE

More than once I have tried to imagine what it might have been like if I ~~had been in Jerusalem that week~~, if you and I had been there and witnesses to the events of that week...what would we have said and done if we had been tapped, not for the major roles, but for minor parts in that mass that the Gospel refers to as "the crowd"?

I've wondered what it would have been like if I, a middle class resident from Jerusalem upper Eastside, had walked down David Street that Friday morning, my attention caught by the noisy, milling crowd of persons demonstrating in front of the Roman Praetorium. I think I would have stopped to witness the scene and perhaps asked someone, "What's going on here? What's it all about?" That person might have answered, "It's that man from upstate; he's been arrested. Seems that he's been saying some things that have gotten Him into trouble with the authorities. It doesn't look to good for Him".

I wonder what my thoughts would have been as I stood there watching. Would I have thought of the previous Sunday when I had seen Him ride into the city and caught something in His expression...a depth of caring and compassion. Would

I have remembered some of the things I had heard said about Him by friends living in upstate Galilee...some things about how He had been healing and helping people, talking to them about love and kindness and goodness. I wonder.

But whatever thoughts might have crossed my mind as I stood there watching, I'm sure they would soon have been dispersed by the commotion now taking place.

There was Pilate, up on the balcony, distraught and disturbed, pacing back and forth with hands behind his back. In front of him were two men, both with their hands bound in front of them in the fashion of prisoners. The one I recognized as Jesus of Nazareth, but the other? "Who's the other prisoner?" I might have asked, only to be told that he was Barabbas - the common criminal whose exploits had become something of a legend around Palestine. And then I should have witnessed that incredible scene in which a vague and vacillating Pilate surrendered his own convictions to the incessant clamor of the crowd and gave them Jesus to be crucified.

out
And I should have seen the hostility of the crowd spreading like wild fire to the minds and manners of the Roman soldiers, who proceeded to have a field day with their prisoner. One of them found a bramble bush and twisted some branches into a crown and crushed it on the head of Jesus; another grabbed a purple robe and put it on Him, and they began to roar and jeer along with the crowd, "Hail....King of the Jews".

SHUN INVOLVEMENT If I had been there that day - as a good, law abiding resident of Jerusalem, a member of the local religious scene, I wonder what I would have done. I don't think I would have joined in the chorus that was calling to have Him crucified; I think I would have been hurt to see the shame and suffering He was going through, but I'm under no illusions that I would have sprung to His defense, stepping out of the crowd and saying, "You can't do this to this man. He's innocent". I know myself well enough to know I would have probably said, "I don't want to get involved in this".

Perhaps tears might have welled up in my eyes and indignation in my soul, but some other consideration would rise to the surface of my thought - my reputation, my family, indeed - my very life.

And I think part of the tragedy is that it still happens. Some issue, one side of which carries Christ's signature in legible writing that we can't help but see, and we're scared to death to speak up or step out of the crowd and be counted on His side. So we ask for more time and refer it to a committee and end up mouthing the old bromide, "Well, I need time to think it over. It's all well and good to have ideals, but one has to be practical. After all, what would people think".

Or an invitation to some Christian responsibility comes before us and we squirm when we think of what it may mean - perhaps giving up our Sunday morning, or our money, or our freedom, or some late Saturday evening pleasure. We say "We just don't want to get involved". We don't want to be nailed down to something specific, and yet we call ourselves followers of One who was willing to get nailed down for us!

It could have been otherwise. He deliberately chose to be involved. "He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" - fixing His eyes on the cross and quietly saying, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his

life for his friend". And back of that, God himself thinking that humanity was worth this supreme involvement.

NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY The second shelter that my mind might have reached that Good Friday is only a hop, skip and jump from the first. Within a matter of moments, I would probably have been saying to myself, "But this isn't my responsibility".

Actually, when you come right down to it, the story of the crucifixion reveals the most colossal buck passing game in history. Nobody wanted to accept the responsibility of putting Jesus to death. Caiphias delighted in saying it was Pilate's responsibility. Pilate passed it to Herod, and Herod tossed it back to Pilate and at the end Pilate tried to squirm out of the whole mess by washing his hands in front of the crowd and saying, "I'm innocent of this man's blood". And if anyone had come up to me as I stood there in the crowd watching and said to me, "You know, you're partly responsible for what's going on here", I would have protested. "Who - me?" "Look friend, I'm just an innocent bystander. I just happened to be going by".

Harold Cooke Philipps has said that getting into a group is like getting into an automobile. When two pedestrians accidentally bump into each other there is apt to be mutual repentance. But when these two same people get into their cars and then bump each other there is apt to be some mutual recrimination. "Getting into a group, like getting into a car, reduces the sense of personal responsibility. And the bigger the group, the smaller the sense of responsibility".

And somehow the crowds are so large on the face of the earth today that few have an urgent sense of responsibility for what is happening. We read the headlines and we feel at times like a spectator in the last row of the bleachers in Yankee Stadium. Hunger and disease. Poverty and prejudice. Shooting and killing. It's taking place in our world. But what has this to do with us? How does this affect me? - concern me? We feel little, if any, responsibility for the things happening. And just as we finish convincing ourselves that all of this is not our responsibility, and just as we have wiped our hands over Pilate's washbowl, we look up and see a man on a cross, saying, "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?"

How can a man come within sight of the cross this week and say, "It's not my responsibility, that it's no affair of mine what happens in the world save that square foot that I stand on".....and yet, it happens time and again. ~~No sense of personal responsibility. We see it in the life of the Church. Next Sunday the churches of America will be filled to overflowing (and I suppose we ought to be thankful for this) but what about the other Sundays of the year.~~ Harry Truman it was who had a little motto on his desk in the White House which said, "The buck stops here". (smile) Said John Donne:

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

TOO BUSY There's something else that I probably would have thought as a member of the crowd. "I'm sorry, but I'm just too busy". I would have thought about the errand that had brought me downtown that day. Or perhaps

I might have remembered the work piling up on my desk. Or, I may have been on my way to meet the afternoon caravan arriving from the East. And as much as I felt the plight of this good man, there were some other important matters that were more pressing. If only it had been some other day, some other time...but...

Jesus, interestingly enough, was forever telling parables about respectable people like ourselves who were busy with respectable things, but with the wrong things. The Priest and the Levite in the Story of the Good Samaritan hurrying along to some important tasks and passing by a person in need. Or, the foolish young virgins, busy all day with trivia and detail, passing up the preparation of their lamps. And now here on Good Friday, something from words He had spoken were being acted out in a divine drama.

I've often wondered - are we not those people Jesus was talking about.... busy people, doing respectable things, busy with crowded, tight schedules, varied skills, many interest, busy doing respectable things, but things He would question, things He would probably say are secondary things, not primary. Some of us can be so busy - making money, pursuing careers, tending to the home, cultivating a social life, clamoring for status and social position - all respectable things....tied up with trivia...too busy.

Said a poet, "I read in a book that a man called Christ went about doing good. It is very disconcerting to me that I am so easily satisfied with just going about". (pause.....)

WERE YOU THERE "Were you there when they crucified My Lord? Were you there when they nailed Him to a cross?" So go those haunting lines of that lovely spiritual. "Were you there?"

Yes, friends, we were there that day - in that crowd "whose state of mind has much to do with the central event" - ~~with that tragedy, with what happened.~~ And every Holy Week that comes is not just an anniversary of some far off event in history. It is a reminder that the Cross is "of no age", and yet it is of every age - that Christ and all that He stood for is forever on trial. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that people are forever on trial - in service that asks something of us, in truth that is having a hard time of it, in values that are in danger of being forgotten in the business of life, in those daily decisions that confront us all and call to us for a choice.

CLOSING This week the world - the city - will once again draw quiet to gaze at that man - that strange and unforgettable Galilean on the cross - to reflect on His word and His way. And this day - no less than that Spring day 1900 years ago, we must make a decision regarding Him - yes, to either accept Him or reject Him.

Perhaps, in our congregation today, there is some one who feels led to make that decision for the first time, or perhaps there are some who would reaffirm that decision of earlier days and years, in light of his or her growing understanding of Christ and what He asks. James Russell Lowell put it so well in that poem, one of my favorites and the words of our closing hymn,

"Once - to every man and nation,
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side...."

PRAYER Move in our hearts, O God, in these moments of quietness that come at the end of this service. ~~We remember those words,~~ "Is it nothing to you, all ye who pass by". Search us. Strengthen us. Renew our loyalty to Him in whom we find the greatest revelation of thyself, O God, in human terms.

We ask this in the name and spirit of Jesus, Our Lord and Master.

Mr. Steven K. Kauffman: 1520 York Avenue, New York, New York 10028.
Transfer of Church Letter. Haworth Congregational Church, Haworth,
New Jersey.

Mrs. Steven K. Kauffman (Teresa): 1520 York Avenue, New York, New
York 10028. Transfer of Church Letter. Haworth Congregational
Church, Haworth, New Jersey.

Miss Juliana Kotey: 469 West 144th Street, New York, New York 10031.
Transfer of Church Letter. St. Andrews Church, Abossey - Okai,
Accra, Ghana, West Africa.

Mr. E. George Matthew: 520 East 88th Street, New York, New York 10028.
Associate Member. Home Church: Indian Orthodox Church of
Kerala, Southwest India.

Mrs. E. George Matthew (Layla): 520 East 88th Street, New York, New
York 10028. Associate Member. Home Church: Indian Orthodox
Church, Kerala, Southwest India.

Mr. Charles B. Strauss: 315 West 70th Street, New York, New York 10023.
Transfer of Church Letter. High Ridge United Methodist Church,
High Ridge Road, Stamford, Connecticut.

Mrs. Charles B. Strauss (Helene): 315 West 70th Street, New York, New
York 10023. Transfer of Church Letter. High Ridge United Methodist
Church, High Ridge Road, Stamford, Connecticut.

Mrs. Glenn E. Weeks (Barbara): 1725 York Avenue, New York, New York
10028. Transfer of Church Letter. Wollaston Church of the
Nazarene, Wollaston, Massachusetts.

Mr. Arnold O. Wolf: 11 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010.
Transfer of Church Letter. St. George's Episcopal Church, New
York, New York.

NEW MEMBERS

We are pleased to welcome into the membership of our Church the following persons. We trust that this fellowship will be a real blessing to them as it has been to us, and we welcome the contributions which they will make to the richness of our Christian life together.

Miss Dana Adkins: 504 East 84th Street, New York, New York 10028.
Confession of Faith.

Mrs. Augusta Ansah: 64 West 84th Street, New York, New York 10024.
Transfer of Church Letter. Ernest Bruce Memorial Methodist Church, Adabraka Circuit, Accra, Ghana, West Africa.

Mrs. Edna Estella Brown: 230 East 88th Street, New York, New York 10028.
Associate Member. Home Church: St. Mark's United Methodist Church, New York, New York.

Mr. St. Clair Browne: 1259 Grant Avenue, Bronx, New York 10456.
Confession of Faith.

Mrs. St. Clair Browne (Bettie): 1259 Grant Avenue, Bronx, New York 10456. Confession of Faith.

Mr. Russell E. Flagg: 103 East 84th Street, New York, New York 10028.
Associate Member. Home Church: St. James Protestant Episcopal Church, New York, New York.

Mr. Otis G. Hairston: 1646 First Avenue, New York, New York 10028.
Confession of Faith.

Mrs. Otis G. Hairston (Barbara): 1646 First Avenue, New York, New York. Transfer of Church Letter. Bethel AME, Wilmington, Delaware.