

"IF WE HAD BEEN THERE"

INTRODUCTION

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

However, I feel 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 the ages have preserved for us. We're tempted 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, in his Gospel, 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 hesitated 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 the crowd - planting rumors, fanning fears, arousing antagonism, promoting prejudice - 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, the day following Palm Sunday.

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 have seen evidence of this in our own time. We think of the poisonous, hate filled atmosphere of Dallas that prompted one man to fire an assassin's bullet.

IF WE HAD BEEN THERE

I have tried to imagine what it might have been like if I had been in Jerusalem that week, witness to the events of that time, and I would ask you to try to do the same now. 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 the East side of Jerusalem, had walked down David Street that Friday morning, my attention caught by the noisy, milling crowd of persons demonstrating in front of the Roman preatorium. I'm sure I would have stopped to witness the scene and perhaps asked some person "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. Looks to me like he's got to go".

I wonder what my thoughts would have been as I stood there watching it all. Would I have thought of the previous Sunday when I had seen him ride in to the city on a donkey and seen in his eyes the most compassionate and caring expression. Would I have remembered some of the things I had heard said about him by my friends living upstate in Galilee - about how he had been healing the sick, helping people, talking about love and kindness.

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, so obviously distraught and disturbed, pacing back and forth with hands behind his back. In front of him were two men, both with 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 in that area of 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. 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".

I. SHUN INVOLVEMENT

If I had been there that day, as a good, law abiding resident of Jerusalem, a member of the local synagogue, I wonder what I would have done. I don't think I would have joined the chorus that was calling to have him crucified. I think I would have been hurt to see the shame and the suffering that 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 to myself, "I don't want to get involved in this".

Perhaps I might have felt a sense of sorrow that this should happen to a good man; perhaps tears might have welled up in my eyes and indignation in my soul, but some other consideration would spring to my attention in my thinking - my reputation, my family, indeed - my very life.

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 cannot 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: "It's all well and good to have high ideals, but after all you've got to be practical". "After all - what would people think". Or an invitation to some Christian responsibility that rather clearly has our name written on it, 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 friends". 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 a few moments, I'm sure that I would have said 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. Caiphas delighted in saying it was

Pilate's responsibility. Pilate passed it to Herod, Herod 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 I'm sure if anyone had come up to me, standing there in that crowd and said, "You know you're partly responsible for what's going on here" - I would have protested fiercely - "Who me? - Look friend, I'm just an innocent bystander. I just happened to come along".

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 this earth today that very 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 center field bleachers at Yankee Stadium. Hunger and want in India - but what have I to do with this? The struggle for the minds of men in Asia and in Africa - how does this concern me? The struggle for human rights in Alabama or for that matter in Harlem - how does this affect me? Poverty in pockets of America - but what has this to do with 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 his life occupies... And yet - it happens time and again. No feeling 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. No sense of personal responsibility. Harry Truman it was who had a little motto on his desk in the White House which said: "The buck stops here". More of this feeling of personal responsibility is needed. For as John Donne put it:

"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 and said as a member of that crowd. "I'm sorry, but I'm just too busy". I'm sure that somewhere along the way I might have remembered that errand that had brought me downtown that morning. Or perhaps I remembered the work piled up on my desk that awaited my attention. Or I may have been on my way to meet the noon caravan arriving from the East. And keenly as I felt for the plight of this man whose destination was Calvary, there were some other important matters in my life that were more pressing. If only it had been some other day and some other time.

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, for instance, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, hurrying along to important engagements and passing by the victim of a beating. Or the foolish young virgins, busy all day with trivia and details,

passing up the preparation of their lamps. And now on Good Friday in the city of Jerusalem, something from words He had spoken on other occasions was now being acted out in a divine drama.

I wonder - are we not the people that Jesus was talking about - busy people doing respectable things, busy people with crowded schedules, varied skills, widespread interests - busy people doing respectable things, but things He would consider to be the wrong things. Oh, we're so busy - making money, pursuing careers, rearing children, tending to the home, cultivating a social life, clamoring for status and social position, getting exercise on weekends - all respectable things. And yet, some cannot even reserve one hour on a Sunday morning for the great things of the soul, let alone take on a little extra responsibility in terms of Kingdom building.

"I read in a book" said the poet, "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". Have you ever stopped to wonder - if this day the author of life should close the book on your life, what precisely would he point to in your life - your busy life - and say: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of one of these my brethrn, ye have done it unto me".

WERE YOU THERE

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed Him to a cross". So go the lines of the beautiful spiritual.

We were there that day - in the crowd "whose state of mind had much to do with what happened". And every Holy Week that comes is not just an anniversary of a 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 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 ideals that are being trampled on, in daily decisions that confront us and call to us for a choice.

This week, the world once again grows quiet to gaze at that man - that strange figure on the cross - to reflect again on his ways and words. This day, no less than than April day 1900 years ago, the people must make a decision - either accept or reject him. As Lowell puts it:

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

LET US PRAY

In these moments of quietness that come at the end of this service of worship, we would search our hearts and ask: if we had been there, what would we have done. Would we have shunned involvement, or claimed no responsibility for what was taking place, or would we have hurried on - too busy with our little interests to see the greatness of Him who was on trial. We remember in these moments those words: "Is it nothing to you - all ye who pass by" Help us in these moments to renew our loyalty to Him, evermore to follow in his footsteps - more ready to serve than be served. We ask this in his spirit. Amen