

"THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE"

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 persons perhaps 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.

I feel, however, that 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 history has 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 the history of mankind.

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 to think 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 it is. It was true 2,000 years ago. And the truth of it was again brought home to us this past Friday as once again another great man of our time was brought down by an assassin's bullet. We think of the hate filled atmosphere of so many of our bewildered, fearful cities, and of its effect on individuals.

IF WE HAD BEEN THERE

I have tried to imagine what it might have been like if I had been in Jerusalem that week - a witness to the events of that hour - 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 of people that the gospel refers to as "the crowd"? What would it have been like if we, middle class residents of the East side of the city of Jerusalem, had walked down David Street that Friday morning, our attention caught by the noisy, milling crowd of persons demonstrating in front of the Roman praetorium. The chances are we would have paused to witness the scene and perhaps have asked some person standing there, "What's happening? What's it all about?" That person might have answered, "It's that man from upstate; he's been arrested. Seems he's been saying some things that have gotten him in trouble with the authorities. Looks to me like he's got to go".

What would our thoughts have been as we stood there watching it all. Would we have thought of the previous Sunday when we had seen him ride into the city on a donkey and seen in his eyes the most compassionate and caring expression. Would we

have remembered some of the things we had heard about him from our 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 our minds as we stood there watching, I'm sure they would 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 we might have recognized as Jesus of Nazareth, but the other? "Who's the other prisoner" we 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 we 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 we had been there that day, as good, law abiding residents of Jerusalem's east side, a member of the local synagogue, I wonder what we would have done. I don't think we would have joined the chorus that was calling to have him crucified. I think we would have been hurt to see the shame and the suffering that he was going through. But I'm under no illusions that we 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 think we know ourselves well enough to know that we would probably have said to ourselves, "I don't want to get involved in this".

Perhaps we might have felt a sense of sorrow that this should happen to a good man; perhaps tears might have welled up in our eyes and indignation in our soul, but the chances are that some other consideration would have soon sprung to our attention - our reputation, our family, indeed - our very life.

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 and the demands it may make on us, and so 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. And we can't help but think of that line in reference to the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. He, too, chose to be involved.

NOT OUR RESPONSIBILITY

The second shelter that our minds might have reached that Good Friday is only a hop, skip and jump from the first. Within a few moments, perhaps we might have been saying to ourselves, "But this isn't our 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 that if any one had come up to us, standing there in that crowd and said, "You know you're partly responsible for what's going on here" - we would have protested fiercely - "Who me - look friend, I'm just an innocent bystander. I just happened to come along".

Harold Cooke Phillips 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." A man is murdered in Mem. So what...attitude of many

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? Homeless refugees in Southeast Asia...the struggle for human rights in America...poverty and unemployment in the ghetto - 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 the 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 "but 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. John Donne, writing in the 16th century, put it this way: reminded us:

"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".

Martin Luther King recognized this and in a sermon written from one of the jails of our land in April of 1963, put it this way:

"Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly".

TOO BUSY There's something else that some of us would have thought and said as a member of the crowd. "I'm sorry, but I'm just too busy". Somewhere along the way we might have remembered that errand that had brought us downtown that morning. Or perhaps we might have remembered the work that was piled up on our desk awaiting our attention. And keenly as we felt for the plight of this man whose destination was Calvary, there were some other important matters in our lives 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.

for the most part - white, comfortable, middle class

I cannot help but wonder - are we not the people that Jesus was talking about - busy people doing respectable things, busy people with crowded schedules, varied skills and wide-spread interests - busy doing respectable things, but things he would consider to be secondary. Oh - we're so busy - making money, pursuing careers, tending to the home, cultivating a social life, clamoring for status and social position - all respectable things. And yet....

"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 consider - 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 one of the least of these my brethren, 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 goethe lines of that haunting spiritual. Yes - we were there that day - in that crowd as Coffin reminds us: "Whose state of mind has much to do with the central event". And every Holy Week that comes is not just an anniversary of an event far back in history. It is a reminder that the cross is of no age, and yet it is of every age - that Christ and the things for which he gave his life are forever on trial in the world, in the nation. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that people are on trial - in service that asks something of us, in truth that is having a hard time of it, in justice that has not come to so many in our land, in ideals that are being assassinated, 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 men of Nazareth who died on a cross, whose way was the way of love. The world grows quiet to reflect again on his words and his ways. Can men live by them? And this day, no less than that April day centuries ago, the people must make a decision - to accept him or to reject him. Lowell reminds us:

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

For this nation, that moment is now. The murder in Memphis of Dr. Martin Luther King has brought heartbreak and horror to every American who believes in his country's future. The great, unresolved moral crisis haunting this nation has been drawn more sharply and clearly than ever. Will the martyrdom of this great man - a great Christian and a great American - finally shame and shock the racists - the respectable and the vigilante alike - who refuse to come to terms with his dream of Christian brotherhood for all Americans. It is a time for national penitence. It is a time for renewed commitment to his dream expressed in his own words:

"Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant star of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all of its scintillating beauty"

LET US PRAY In these moments of quietness that come at the end of this service of worship, O God, we would search our own hearts for traces of prejudice and bitterness and hatred that may be there. Cleanse our minds and our hearts, O God, of that which would dishonor thee. Help us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, Our Lord and Master, more ready to serve than to be served, that we may lose our lives and find them in him. We ask this in his name and in his spirit. Amen

The tragic events of Thursday night caused me on Friday morning to set to one side the sermon already launched and prepared for today's service, called "The Alternative to the Cross". Several hours on Friday afternoon and again on Saturday afternoon produced a different message than was originally planned, call it, if you will, "The Choice of the People".

"You and I - in many subtle ways - have helped to shape and mold the emotional climate that drives men to do these horrible and sinful deeds"