

I Am Barabbas

On the radio the other day, a young Ukrainian woman was interviewed.

She spoke of the horrors of the war, and how it had changed her.

When she was asked how she was changed, she replied that before the war, she was a pacifist.

She opposed all forms of violence, even in self-defense.

Since the war, she has taken up arms.

As has the rest of the world in solidarity with Ukraine.

As weapons of war pour into Ukraine.

It seems nothing solidifies nations and international organizations more than responding to violence, with violence.

Indeed, Putin is credited with creating a solidarity among the allied nations that hasn't existed since WW II.

Today, our church takes us to another point of solidarity.

To another point of identification.

To another point of being "one with."

As we celebrate first the Feast of the Palms, with its uplifting music, with our march around the block, with the joyful singing of "The King of Glory."

Only to move to the Passion of our Lord, as we all together join in condemning Jesus to his bloody death.

The mood shifts so quickly your neck might feel sore from the whiplash.

But what saves us from that whiplash is our human ability to move from joy to rage in a matter of seconds.

Today, as we gaze at the now empty cross, his body taken down, lying still in the grave, today's lesson in solidarity can be summed up in these three simple words:

"I am Barabbas."

It's true, we don't know much about Barabbas.

It's true we don't know whether he's a freedom fighter for the Jewish people against Roman occupation or just a common crook.

Because it really doesn't matter.

Whatever and whoever he is, he stands in our place.

His name, Bar-Abbas, means "son of the father."

An ironic contrast to the "Son of the Father" who is Jesus himself.

Whether he's a freedom fighter or a common crook, Barabbas, like us, prefers force to surrender.

Like us, he relies on his own wits and cunning rather than surrendering his life to God.

Like us, he knows it's a dog eat dog world, and he knows how to bite!

He's neck deep in what the world calls "common sense."

Whether he's Robin Hood or Jesse James, power and violence are the tools of his trade.

I am Barabbas.

Before God, I stand convicted.

Guilty of murder.

If not at the end of a knife, then at the end of my tongue.

A life perhaps not physically taken — but a reputation destroyed.

I am Barabbas.

Before God, I stand convicted.

For refusing to trust the repeated covenants God so freely gives.

Preferring to store up for myself treasures here and now.

Suspicious as I am of the promised treasure awaiting in the Kingdom of God.

I am Barabbas.

A woman leaving the Palm Sunday service whispers to the priest bidding everyone goodbye:

"I just can't say, 'crucify him.'"

She may be thinking she's onto something admirable, but in fact she's missing the whole purpose and point of this day.

We say the words because we crucify Jesus, every time we refuse to lift up the poor.

We say the words because we crucify Jesus, every time we resort to anger and violence.

We say the words because we crucify Jesus, every time we withhold forgiveness, mercy and love.

When GK Chesterton was asked to write a magazine article entitled "What's Wrong With The World," his entry contained two words.

It said:

"I am."

The passion of our Lord reminds me that we are each of us the problem.

That we are each of us, Barabbas.

Content to meet violence with violence in a cycle that never ends.

While rejecting the way of Jesus.

A way that "soaks up the injustice, evil and oppression like the venom of a sting, unleashing a far more powerful force of love and letting go and forgiveness." D. Garland, *The New Application Commentary*, 583.

It's so hard to trust the Way that Jesus invites us to walk.

A Way that requires every follower to pick up their own cross.

The cross of giving up control over people, places and things.

The cross of non-violence, even in the face of barbarity.

It's so hard because we are, after all, natural born fighters.

We are, after all, whether with words or knives, natural born killers too.

And so there is only one remedy for people like you and I.

It is to surrender.

"The only thing that stops a fight is surrender.

Since it takes two to tango.

Surrender eliminates all rivalry.

All competition.

Usually, in our life outside of these walls, we scoff at the very idea of surrender.

Yet, as Jesus followers, this is precisely what we are called to do, and who we are called to become.

Which is what that vengeance-seeking, apostle-hunting, Christ-destroying Saul of Tarsus comes to see once he's knocked to his behind by the Risen Lord.

As he changes from Saul into the apostle Paul:

“Let the same mind be in you
that was in Christ Jesus,
who,
though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
becoming obedient
to the point of death--
even death on a cross.”
Phil. 2:5-7.

The great poet W.H. Auden was asked once why he was a Christian, instead of a Buddhist or a Confucian, since each shares similar ethical values.

And Auden replied,

“Because nothing in the figure of Buddha or Confucius fills me with the overwhelming desire to scream, ‘crucify him!’”

Just imagine if we believers took the gospel of Jesus Christ seriously?

Took it into the world's war rooms!

Took it into the corporate board rooms!

And, Lord have mercy, just imagine if we took the gospel of Christ into the councils of the church!

Not that watered down, "me and my personal savior Jesus," but the real thing!

The gospel that insists that the foolishness of God is the exclusive narrow gate through which the life that is life, might be found.

When we honestly confront the upside down nature of God; when we honestly confess that "letting go" and "giving up" — define God — aren't we all screaming out with Mr. Auden:

"Crucify him!?"

Which is why the lady who won't say it misses the point.

We are Christians, and as much as it rubs our human nature the wrong way, surrender is the heartbeat, the essence, of the gospels:

"Unless a seed dies, it remains but a single grain."

"Unless you lay down your life....."

"Unless you take up your cross....."

"Turn the other cheek....'

"Forgive seven times seventy times..."

Surrender is the cornerstone of our theology — and of our sacraments.

Surrender IS love in action.

Surrender IS the truest form of “tough love.”

Surrender is what places us squarely within the flow of life — the flow of God.

When we acknowledge that yes, “I am Barabbas,” we then can slowly be formed into the beloved community that can stand confidently at the foot of the cross.

The beloved community that can stand confidently under under the very Word of God’s forgiveness.

“This is my blood, shed for many, for the forgiveness of sins.”

We are the many.

If we can embrace this truth, and be thankful for the forgiveness we receive, then perhaps that thankfulness, that sense of gratitude, can allow us to forgive those who’ve hurt us.

As individuals.

As communities.

Even as a nation.

It is in the miracle of surrender meeting forgiveness that we encounter the mystery who is God.

The ineffable mystery in which all creation lives and moves and has its being.

We begin as Barabbas.

But our destiny is to become — Jesus.

+amen