

A Man Named Barabbas¹

All four of the Gospel accounts mention this minute detail connected with the trial of Jesus. It seems that the Romans were holding a violent criminal in their dungeons at the time of Jesus' arrest and trial. He appears to have been a freedom fighter or terrorist type. Named Barabbas, this was just the kind of troublemaker that made it difficult and dangerous for Rome to occupy foreign lands. Not surprisingly, Rome awarded such brutal characters a public death by crucifixion. The idea was obviously intended to give any would be resistance fighters a second thought about joining some gang of terrorists.

Barabbas probably would have been routinely executed had Jesus not been in the custody of Pontius Pilate. If you recall the story, the Jewish religious officials press the governor, Pontius Pilate, to use his power to execute Jesus. The problem is that Pilate doesn't see any crime in Jesus that warrants crucifixion. Pilate tries to evade the whole messy affair by sending Pilate over to Herod Antipas—another official—to see if Herod won't pass judgment. Herod comes off as a very non-serious person in this lesson. He teases and abuses Jesus, but doesn't conduct any criminal investigation or trial. So Jesus

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is hauled back before Pilate. Pilate still sees no crime warranting crucifixion.

The problem with Pilate is that he is a man with no stomach to act on his own conviction, namely that Jesus is innocent.

The over-heated Jewish officials and agitated crowd of ordinary people unnerve Pilate. And together they start seeking some excuse to go ahead and execute Jesus. It's a sorry scene. Jealous religious officials, an aroused crowd changing slogans, and Pilate looking for some expedient to make the whole nightmare go away.

Someone recalls a custom whereby the Roman Governor releases a prisoner on holidays such as Passover to appease the locals. The idea here is that the Jewish people would be a little less resentful of the occupying Roman legions if captured kinsmen were released, especially as a good will gesture at holiday time.

Notice the shift. We're really not looking at law enforcement, public safety, or the administration of justice. Pilate is appeasing the crowd by letting them pick which prisoner they prefer to be released. They call for Barabbas to be freed, and for Jesus to be crucified.

Thus, the story how the Roman justice system could set free a dangerous public nuisance and send to the gallows a wonderful, and innocent human being—Jesus of Nazareth.

Can you imagine what this turn of events was like for Barabbas? He had just spent his last night, sleepless in a dank Roman prison. He knew that sun-up would bring the end. And a horrible end it would be. For hours he tries to push the terror of flogging and crucifixion out of his mind. He cries in the darkness. He thinks of what has become of his life. He grieves over what might have been. He savors the few pleasures or joys that he has known.

Then the footstep of the detachment of legionnaires approaches. This is it. The heavy door creaks open. Rough hands drag Barabbas to his feet. In moments, he is shoved into the sunlight. And then nothing. The legionnaires depart. Barabbas is stunningly free to go!

Certainly, we wonder why such a strange story has survived as part of the Easter tradition, when other details of Jesus' last days and hours must have been omitted. What are you and I to take from Barabbas' story?

Certainly, Barabbas' experience draws us close to a profound truth. Jesus' sacrifice sets us free. In a manner that is no easier to explain than the twists and turns that led to Barabbas' deliverance, there is something about Jesus' self-giving on the cross that pays a ransom and opens a prison door and grants us a glorious new liberty.

One of the things you and I might forget about our sin and separation from God is that it binds up our lives. Think of addictions; be they addictions to food or drugs, shopping or the internet. These processes make their demand on our time and attention. In fact, isn't it your experience that all of those deadly sins result in personal bondage in some way? Gluttony keeps us wanting to indiscriminately consume what really isn't good for us. Envy keeps us paralyzed with resentment. Pride deprives us of admitting that we can't live completely out of our own resources. Anger keeps us out of full control.

Suddenly, we're in the presence of an important truth for our lives. Jesus Christ sets us free. I can't fully explain it. But somehow in an invisible, spiritual way, a ransom has been paid and the prison doors of your life and my life have been thrown open and we may walk free.

I like the way the Apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthians. "You are not your own, you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Here's where I'm going with all of this. I believe that the Gospel writers carefully preserved Barabbas' story because it really is, in some way, all of our stories. By an amazing turn of events, we are free people. Spiritually free. We now may live in a way that no longer places our lives in the service of unworthy masters.

Do you know where I detect the prison doors swinging open in the lives of Christians? In their conversion stories. Last week, I was reading the words of Sergius Bulgakov, the Russian intellectual who, back in the 1800's repudiated Eastern Orthodoxy and became a student of Karl Marx. He became a professor of politics and law. Then, in his late 20's he had a deep spiritual encounter with Raphael's, Sistine Madonna in Dresden. Listen to his words.

It was a foggy autumn morning. I went to the art gallery in order to do my duty as a tourist. My knowledge of European painting was negligible. I did not know what to expect. The eyes of the Heavenly Queen, the Mother who holds in her arms the Eternal Infant, pierced my soul. I cried joyful and yet bitter tears, and with them the ice melted from my soul, and some of my psychological knots were loosened. This was an aesthetic emotion, but it was also a new knowledge; it was a miracle. I was then still a Marxist, but I was obliged to call my contemplation of the Madonna by the name of "prayer." I went to the Zwinger gallery early in the mornings in order to be there before others arrived. I ran there every day to pray and weep in front of the Virgin, and few experiences in my life were more blessed than those unexpected tears.

Conversion experiences are always so personal and different. My guess is that there is something of the spirit of Barabbas' liberation in every conversion and every deep encounter with Jesus Christ.

[ability to not sin]

Look for it in your own life as we launch on our Holy Week and Easter journey in the next few days. To know Jesus is to

hear a huge locked door open. Think! Paul could be writing to you quite personally..."You have been bought at a price..."

To know Jesus Christ, to follow him, to obey him, is to walk in liberty and newness of life. And nothing holds you back.