

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for 6th Midweek Lent Service – April 13th, 2011

Matthew 27:20-23

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” asked the governor. “Barabbas,” they answered. “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” Pilate asked.

They all answered, “Crucify him!”²³ “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

Dear Children of God,

Back in 1992, starting on April 29, there were some severe unrest in South Central Los Angeles. Four white police officers had just been acquitted in the beating of an African American man named Rodney King. I think many of us can remember this terrible trial and how upset many people were with the verdict of not guilty for the officers involved. There was anger and outrage. What ensued was one of the worst cases of things getting out of hand in a very quick fashion. Things went from rather calm to out of control within hours. And what started with a few people, ended up involving thousands of people. Literally thousands of people started destroying property, looting stores, shooting guns at each other and seriously hurting innocent people. One of the worst events that happened during these riots was where an innocent man was driving his semi truck through this dangerous area and he was pulled from his truck by a mob of people and was beaten almost to death right in the middle of the street. If it wasn't for the help of a very brave man he might have been killed. All told, this 6 day of looting, assault and destruction resulted in almost a billion dollars in damage, 53 people were killed and over 2000 people injured. I think the best way to describe what happened back in 1992 was it was a terrible case of “mob mentality”.

You know the expression “mob mentality,” don't you? One moment a crowd cheers its team; the next moment it boos or does something worse. One moment you have a quiet crowd; the next, a frenzied mob. And what happens is that people in a crowd often act in a way they would not act if they were alone. They follow the will of the large group, whether it is right or wrong. They become one of the mob, following the impulse of the moment.

That sort of mob spirit seized the crowd that had gathered for Jesus' trial. So let's look more closely at how it must have been at Jesus' passion for One of the Mob, the Follower.

Theme: People of the Passion – One of the Mob, the Follower

- 1. The mob gathered at Jesus' trial**
- 2. The mob turned against Jesus**
- 3. The mob needed the death for which they cried**

1. The mob gathered at Jesus' trial

When the priests and Pharisees planned Jesus' trial, they did not want a large crowd of people there. Jesus' followers came mostly from the common people. If they should become aroused to defend Jesus, the whole plan might fail and cave in under popular pressure. The Jewish leaders could not depend on the people to side with them. Better they should get rid of Jesus as quietly and as secretly as possible.

However, when Pilate delayed the proceedings, a crowd gathered and became a force in determining the outcome of the trial. Some came to see the spectacle of Jesus on trial. Others probably came to see which

prisoner would be released, as was the custom on this day. Most of them ended up shouting in a frenzy for Jesus' blood—the opposite of what we might have expected from them.

The priests and elders quickly sized up the situation and moved to control the crowd. They filtered throughout the body, spreading propaganda, whispering lies against Jesus. They agitated and persuaded. They shouted loudly against Pilate and against Jesus at every opportunity, so as to drown out any opposing voices and to inspire the crowd to pick up the cry to condemn Jesus.

2. The mob turned against Jesus

The crucial test came when Jesus and the infamous Barabbas were paired for the people to choose which to set free. The Jewish leaders had done their work well. When Pilate asked which prisoner should be released, Jesus or Barabbas, an instantaneous cry went up: "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!"

When Pilate asked what should be done with Jesus, the shout came back: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" When Pilate protested Jesus' innocence, they shouted the more intensely: "Crucify him! Let him be crucified!" When Pilate had Jesus beaten and mocked and presented him again as innocent, the mob cried out: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" If there were any dissenting voices, they were not heard or were quickly hushed up by the wild mob.

But why did they turn like that against Jesus? Why did the lips of some, who less than a week before had called "Hosanna" to Jesus, now cry, "Crucify him"? Why did the lips that once thanked and praised Jesus for some miracle of healing now join in the chant against him? Why did the mood of the crowd become so violently hostile? We can only say that a cruel "mob mentality" had seized them.

We don't know what was going on in the thinking of every person who was there. But we can imagine how it was for one or another of the mob in the charged atmosphere of the proceedings—how he would get swept along with the prevailing mood.

Picture yourself there. You have been a follower of Jesus. But you have never given up the popular expectation that the promised Messiah called Jesus would be a bread king, an earthly ruler. You and your friends have looked for the Messiah to lead your country back to the power and fame of what Israel once was, as in the days of King David. You had placed those hopes on Jesus.

Now you arrive at Pilate's court on that fateful Friday. You see Jesus: beaten, silent, meek, apparently giving up without a fight. You can hardly believe that he is the same man you cheered when he entered Jerusalem the preceding Sunday. You turn to the person next to you who seems to have been there for a while and ask, "What does this all mean?"

He tells you that Jesus has blasphemed against God and that the priests have warned that he is dangerous to the peace of the nation.

"But we thought he would lead us to better days," you say, puzzled.

"And what has he done for the nation?" the man challenges. He tells you that the priests say that if Jesus is not stopped, he'll lead us into trouble with Rome. Then Rome will raise taxes, disband the council, and force the people to worship the emperor.

You are confused. You think of some of the miracles Jesus had done, how he helped the people—even raised the dead.

The man next to you counters that Jesus is just a troublemaker. He claims that even Barabbas is better than Jesus. At least Barabbas wants to free the nation from Roman tyranny.

Just then, Pilate appears with Barabbas and Jesus and asks which one he should release. “Give us Barabbas,” the man shouts. “Away with Jesus. Crucify him!”

“Crucify him!” the man next to you repeats. And you hear others in the crowd pick up the cry. You see Pilate gesturing in defense of Jesus. But if Jesus were the real Messiah, he wouldn’t be made helpless under the thumb of Pilate, would he? Pilate seems to be the only one who doubts what to do, and he is your enemy. Your doubts are all confirmed. Jesus must go. The cry goes up again, “Crucify him!”

“Crucify him!” you join in, convinced you were wrong ever to follow the pitiable man standing trial. He’s no king. He’s no Messiah. “Crucify him!”

You become one with the mob. Jesus has no fight in him. Why should you speak up for him? You even cheer when the verdict is reached, and you follow to watch the crucifixion.

3. The mob needed the death for which they cried

What happens to you afterward? Maybe you hear Jesus say, “Father, forgive them,” and that turns you to reexamine your words and actions and repent. Maybe the darkness and the earthquake at his death shock you into realizing how terribly wrong you were. Maybe you are there later in another crowd on Pentecost and hear Peter and the disciples tell of Christ’s resurrection, and you repent and are baptized.

Or, maybe you go to your grave believing justice was done and the people were better off with Jesus destroyed. As one of the mob, you have followed blindly. You have switched allegiances. You will only be led straight again by the light of the truth in the risen Christ.

It was sad how the evil of the crowd that day compounded itself. The devil worked his worst. Nevertheless, Jesus came out the conqueror in the end.

However, we human beings have not changed much since then. We still succumb to the pressures of mob action. We still listen to human rationalizations instead of listening to God’s Word. “Everybody is doing it” is one of our favorite excuses for sinning.

Group pressures still affect us. When you are in a crowd that is doing something contrary to the way of Christ, for example, it is not easy thing to stand alone on the side of Jesus.

Another example might be the idea that we should all join together in one mega, super Church here on earth. The cry is that we all believe in Jesus and his death, don’t we?. The rationale and the appeal to numbers and joining together are impressive. There is only one catch. All you have to do is ignore some parts of God’s Word to achieve it. Even some church leaders are telling you that absolute trust in Jesus and his Word are not necessary. And, if you object, there are many around to drown out your voice. If you object, you are labeled as the one who is wrecking everything.

So, where does that leave us? We certainly need one another, not as a mob, but as a group of individual believers who are growing together in love and faith by the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to come together to remember Christ and to glorify his name for his sacrifice on the cross. We need to listen to Jesus and to avoid any kind of mob appeal that contradicts him. We need also to hold to our Savior in his mercy and forgiveness for the times we have failed him.

Let us remember the crucifixion and the resurrection. Let us rally around the cross of Christ. Let us tell the world that even those who in weakness and ignorance shout “Crucify him!” will find forgiveness and salvation in his crucifixion. Let us all live in repentance and faith and rejoice to be counted as children in the family of God. May we be faithful to the end. Amen.

