

Jesus is our Substitute

Matthew 27:19-31, Judica (Passion) Sunday (Lent V)

March 17, 2013

Beloved of the Lord.....It breaks our heart when we see this angry mob condemning Christ, the guilty Pilate who washes his hands clean of sin, and the cruel soldiers who mock and beat Christ for sport. Their sins and their crimes against Christ make our blood boil. It doesn't matter how many times we see instances like this in the Scripture, and we see what horrible things men can do, and more often than not, we miss the whole point. We are by our sins, by our very nature, that sinful and angry mob which condemned Christ. We bring guilty blood on our own children by our sins. And every time we despise the authority of our God-given government, or we speak evil of dignitaries (as the Bible says), we are that lawless rebel Barabbas himself.

Years ago there was a somewhat pathetic movie about Barabbas. It would have been a total waste of time to watch except for its one redeeming quality, being set free Barabbas sometimes wrestled with the question, "Why was I set free?" Those who live in sin today without repentance and faith, are like Barabbas set free, but still living as a slave to sin. Those however who see the crimes of their sin, and by faith in Christ see all their sins washed away, these are the truly free. We are free from bondage and slavery to the law. Loving Christ we now want to fulfill it. Likewise by His blood, we are free from sin and death and damnation because Jesus is our Substitute. Today then as we consider the free Barabbas and the condemned Christ, let us rejoice Jesus "himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."

I. Pilate sets free a lawless rebel. In Mark 15:7 we learn Barabbas had made insurrection against the government with others, and during this uprising Barabbas murdered someone. Insurrection is an act of rebellion against an established government. Barabbas was thus a lawless rebel with blood on his hands. By his rebellion against authority, Barabbas was following the devil, the first angel to rebel against God's own authority. When man rebels against God, man rejects all that is good and holy from God. Rebellion destroys good order, bringing the chaos and suffering of an angry mob. A true rebel will proclaim all his evil works as good, and at the same time he will proclaim the good Lord as evil. Rebels also want to be idolized and adored, just as Satan by his rebellion wanted to be worshipped and adored as God. When we see the horrors of war, abused women and children, disease, violence, poverty, suicide, and starvation.... This is what Satan's rebellion did. Jesus said of Satan, "He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it." When we rebel against our parents, our boss at work, the

police, sheriff, governor, etc., we are rejecting those authorities God has established for our own good, and we will suffer for it also. We should not fool ourselves into thinking we are different from the angry mob who murdered Jesus or Barabbas or Pilate. In the deepest part of every man's heart there lies a rebel waiting to break free of all God's authority.

God is good then when He preaches His law to open our eyes to our own rebellion. That is the purpose of God's law, to reveal the darkness of our sin. The law of God helps us to see something we didn't see before. This is why Paul says, "What shall we say then? *Is the law sin?* God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet." We are then somewhat like a beast who covers and hides himself from the light under a black blanket. When the law of God is preached, and we hear "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house or his wife", or "Honor thy father and thy mother that it may be well with thee", or "Thou shalt not murder", that blanket which covers our beastly and rebellious heart is taken away. As soon as our sins are uncovered God also pronounces the curse of the law. This is when God says, "Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this Law to do them." Deut. 27:26 This "curse of the law" is God's just anger against our sinful rebellion against father or mother, judge, governor, or policeman. God's punishment for rebellion happens in this world and especially the next. When someone robs us or cheats us or damages our property, they are breaking the law and God will punish, but we ought to be able to admit this lawless behavior which befalls us is the proper fruit of our lawless behavior against others. In other words, if we justify our own rebellion, we have to justify the rebellion of our neighbor who breaks the law by robbing us. Let it also be said, if we are to be saved from our own sinful rebellion, it is first necessary to confess we are lawless rebels, for the Bible says, "Rebellion *is as* the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness *is as* iniquity and idolatry."

Turning our attention now away from Barabbas, let us focus on the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. During Pilate's debate and struggle with the people, Pilate's wife came to him and said, "Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him." In this way the Lord had given Pilate yet another sign of Christ's innocence, for even his wife knows by way of a dream, Jesus is a *just man*, and Pilate should therefore release this *just man*. Yet instead of heeding God's warning through his own wife, Pilate ultimately yields to the will of the angry mob, even washing his hands of the whole affair as if he is innocent. But he was not. And since He despised the many words of God spoken by Christ, since he violated his own conscience by condemning an innocent man, just like Barabbas and Cain and all murderers, there was blood on Pilate's hands.

By the way, history tells us three years after the crucifixion, the president of Syria (Pilate's superior) ordered Pilate to go to Rome and defend himself against charges that he had abused his office by a certain cruelty committed

against the Samaritans. In a court of law Pilate was found guilty, and thus banished to Vienne, in Gaul, and there, or on a mountain near Lake Lucerne, - so tradition has it, - Pilate committed suicide. By this terrible example of Pilate, let us learn not to sin against our own conscience as Pilate did, for this will be a snare the devil uses to lead us to despair. But secondly, when God's Law pricks our conscience so we realize our guilt, let us not rebel against His Word like lawless rebels, but let us confess our rebellion and not be stubborn about it. And lest we despair, let us rejoice Jesus came to pay for our sins of rebellion, by His holy and innocent blood. By faith in Jesus, we wash our guilty conscience with the innocent blood of Christ, and we are clean, *every whit*. Hebrews 10:22 says, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water."

II. The innocent Christ is condemned rather than the guilty Barabbas. Now that we have covered the main characters of our lesson, namely the lawless mob, Barabbas the murdering rebel, and Pilate the unjust judge, let us consider the innocent Christ who is retained to be slain, while the guilty Barabbas is set free. This is the height, the Mt. Everest of injustice, for Christ is in no way a rebel against God's commandments, nor does He fear man more than God. Throughout His life Jesus had kept all of God's laws and commandments perfectly, and most importantly, and Jesus kept the Father's commandments in the purest sense, namely by love, for "love is the fulfilling of the law". Naturally, this keeping of the law and making payment for our sins was the whole and entire purpose of His coming, for Jesus said to Pilate, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." This agrees with Mark 10:45, "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. He came to pay the bill we owed but could not pay, eternal hell for our sins. While I know these are indeed hard financial times for many of us, what are these debts or burdens compared to the price Jesus paid.....the price of blood.

If there is one word we should remember today, concerning Barabbas who is set free, and Jesus who is slain, it is the word SUBSTITUTE. Just as Barabbas could not be set free, unless Jesus was condemned, so we could not be free of sin and death and hell, except Jesus take our place, suffer and die in our stead, as our SUBSTITUTE for our sins. The Bible says, Jesus "is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for *the sins of* the whole world." To propitiate means to gain or regain favor, good will. This is why when Christ was born the angels sang "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." As our SUBSTITUTE, Jesus would restore all mankind into the good favor of God. As True Man Jesus would keep the commandments in our place. As True God Jesus would pay the impossible price we could not pay.

Now here we might say "But that is not just, and God is just. How can a just God condemn an innocent man like Christ, and how can God be just letting us lawless rebels go free?" But the answer is beautiful: Jesus stood before the Judge with a perfectly pure and willing heart to be our Substitute. Jesus wanted to do this and nobody forced Him to do it. This is that "great love wherewith He loved us", a "love which surpasses all understanding. When you thus fear God's wrath and condemnation, when those terrifying thoughts of hell fill your mind and you are afraid of dying, set your eyes upon your willing Substitute Jesus Christ, who with a willing heart died in your place. When we see this grace inside the heart of Christ, we see and even experience that "peace of God which surpasses all understanding."

And if that is not enough, put yourself in the place of God the Judge of all mankind - and then picture Jesus coming before the Judge with a pure heart saying, "I have come here to take their place, for I have had pity upon the entire world of sinners. I have become a True Man of flesh and blood so that I am now their Brother and Friend. Accept My sacrifice by punishing Me and not them. And since I have loved you dear Father, since I have kept all the commandments you commanded Me, let me now pay the penalty of their sin. Condemn Me, don't condemn them. Let Barabbas go free." Now consider this - dear Barabbas, if you were the Judge, what would you do? Wouldn't Jesus Himself move you to set Barabbas free? The Gospel, the pure and unadulterated Gospel truth which sets us free, is the answer of the Judge, "YES, for your sake, at your request, I will condemn you and set them free." When we are Barabbas, and we hear this truth of how Christ set us free, what happens in the lawless heart of that rebel? Doesn't this truth convert even Barabbas? We the condemned die and live at the same time. We die to who we are, yet we live in Christ and drop to our knees saying, "My Lord and my God." For the rest of your life dear Barabbas, there is NOTHING left to do but glorify God for all He has done. "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth." Therefore now by faith and love, keep God's commandments, do not be lawless rebels, and see that ye love one another fervently with a pure heart, as Christ loves you. Amen.