

Matthew's Passion:

A Reflection Companion for Holy Week



There is great deal to capture one's imagination in the various characters who populate the familiar scene before us now in *Matthew 27:11-54*.

- There is Pilate, of course, who appears wholly reluctant to condemn Jesus, and yet he does so anyway, shifting the blame to the riotous crowd;
- And there is Pilate's wife who professes to have had some kind of perhaps heaven sent inkling that this would not end well.
- There is Jesus Barabbas who was the first to literally receive the gift of life because of the death of the Christ;
- And there are those bandits neither of whom, in Matthew's telling, show any redeeming characteristics whatsoever, but who both join in taunting the one hanging between them whose fate they share.
- There is Simon of Cyrene who unwittingly was called into service to carry Jesus' cross
- And there is the centurion standing at the foot of the cross who is the first to bear witness to this truth: "Truly this man was God's Son!"

There is a sermon in each and all of them, don't you think? And yet, it is so that too often the sheer depth and breadth of 'material' here can leave us overwhelmed and so perhaps we just skim it, not fully taking it in with all its meaning. And there is this. Often by now at the end of winter, at the end of Lent, a certain weariness can set in and we may find ourselves simply tired. Perhaps we are, in fact, rather like the disciples who slept while Jesus prayed. (*Matthew 26:36-46*)

And so I offer this now as a simple companion through Holy Week. This is how I intend to 'stay awake' --- not only physically, but spiritually --- in this most Holy Week of the year. I hope you will consider joining me as I pause with Pilate and Pilate's wife, with Jesus Barabbas and Simon of Cyrene, with the two bandits who were crucified with Jesus and with the Centurion. And with Jesus. Always with Jesus.

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Monday

Pilate & Pilate's Wife

[Matthew 27:11-19](#)

It is easy to see Pilate as a mere figurehead, until his wife sends him her warning message and suddenly he seems all the more complex as he faces the choice before him now. I cannot help but wonder at the conversation shared when his wife got word of how things actually played out that afternoon. Indeed, I wonder if it is a conversation they kept having for the rest of their life together or if it simply lay under the surface, tugging at them whether it was spoken of or not. And yes, I wonder now. How am I like Pilate? Where and how am I pulled between what I know is right and what I know is wrong and how do I respond? And how am I like his wife? Do I speak words of 'warning' or do I keep them to myself? And how is that she came to receive such a 'message' in the first place? Why might she have been open to receive this word of warning?



And I wonder this. We know that Pilate's role meant he was living far from home in 'occupied territory' with the primary duties of keeping the peace and collecting taxes for Imperial Rome. Perhaps it was never all that comfortable for him. One might expect this was also true for his wife. How might that sense of 'un-ease' have contributed to her prescience now. And when and where have I, have we, found ourselves in such places? Are we more open then to hearing and understanding what we normally might not?

Can I see myself in either of them? Can you?

Tuesday

Jesus Barabbas

[Matthew 27:15-26](#)

It is fascinating, of course, to realize that our Jesus and Jesus Barabbas (translated "Jesus, Son of Man) have essentially the same name. It is said that this must be so, for this would be the sort of detail those who first passed this story along would have been more likely to leave out! What kind of irony does this offer now? And there is this. We would be correct in surmising that in a real way Jesus Barabbas represented all of us. All of us for whom Jesus died. And that is the heart of the gift of the Gospel, isn't it? You wonder, though, don't you, what became of Jesus Barabbas after this? Did he realize the magnitude of the gift he had been given? And did he live then, a life of gratitude? Do I? Do we?



Wednesday

Simon of Cyrene

[Matthew 27:32-37](#)

I wonder what errand brought Simon to town that day. And I wonder if he knew whose cross he carried. I wonder if he did so willingly or if he was compelled to do so, having no other choice. And I wonder about all of us. Indeed, I wonder what it is for each and all of us to bear the apparent death dealing burdens of one another. And I wonder if I do so willingly. And I wonder, in the end, if willing or not, it really matters, as long as I get myself out of the way enough to pick up the cross and walk. For the sake of someone else. We don't know Simon's mind or heart. We only know what Simon of Cyrene did. That for a little while he walked in Jesus' place. As we are all called to do. In ways large and small perhaps every single day.



Thursday

The Two Bandits

[Matthew 27:38-44](#)

How broken, how defiant must one be to show such bitterness even with one's dying breath? (It is Luke's Gospel where one of the bandits is penitent, calling to task the other, but not here in Matthew.) And yet, it is so that I can see myself in them and this is why: It is believed that their crimes were political ones --- for this sort of execution was reserved for such as these. And if their crime was 'political,' one might be safe in presuming that they had given their lives to the overthrow of the Roman occupation. Perhaps they saw themselves as those who worked for justice. And perhaps they felt as though for all they gave they never saw success. Is it possible to become bitter even if you have spent your life working on the side of 'good?' Is that possible for any of us whose hearts have been broken one too many times? And so is this possible also for me, for you? And so, I wonder now, as I see a bit of myself in them: How important is it for me, for you, for us, to keep our eyes, our hearts fixed on the One who hangs between us? How else can we keep from forgetting that it is not about what I do, what we do, but always about what God does. Through us, yes, if we are so blessed, but it is always God at work. This means, of course, that the results do not depend on us. Is that a way of not being overcome by resentment or can you think of another? What do you think?



Friday

The Centurion

[Matthew 27:45-54](#)

Finally, in this piece of Matthew's Gospel stands the centurion: one whose job it was to stand guard, to keep the peace. He could have walled off his heart, closing his eyes to all that played out before him and it is so that would have made sense, for how could one take such suffering home without it eventually destroying you from the inside out? Indeed, this likely would not have been the first time he witnessed the cruelty of such an execution. What do you suppose it was about Jesus that caused him to speak aloud such a witness of faith? Was it his dignity in an otherwise utterly undignified circumstance? Was it in how Jesus did not sink to the level of those dying beside him or those taunting him from all around? Was it something in his voice as he cried out to God at the end? Or had he come across Jesus before? Had he overheard his teaching, seen his healing, witnessed the life altering difference he made in the lives of people on the margins? Did all those pieces simply come together on that Friday afternoon? Indeed, how *is* such faith formed? And how was this same witness formed in you and me? When was it that you knew that "Truly, this man was God's Son!"?



Jesus

[Matthew 27:11-54](#)

And through it all, of course, is Jesus, the center of the story, without whom there would be no story, around whom each of the individual stories we reflect on in Matthew 27 revolves. Around whom the lives of all who follow him revolves.

Indeed, it is so that each of these individuals may serve as windows to ourselves --- as windows to how we respond to Jesus. And so I intend to pause with them in these coming days, day by day by day. I invite you to do the same. My prayer for you and me and all of us is that we might 'stay awake' and somehow be transformed by what we see and hear and experience in the days to come, and that along with that Centurion, our faith might be deepened and our witness ever more clear as we worship this one who was and is God's Son.

