

March 19, 2007

Give Us Barabbas!

by Deacon Bill Stimpson
stimpson.jr@sbcglobal.net

The following article series will discuss the crowd's cry, "Give us Barabbas!" and what it means to us and how we still cry, "Crucify him!" It is not my intention to call into question the scriptural account of Barabbas, but to clarify how it probably happened pretty much as described by the gospel writers. (Please Note: In the first three gospels, the story of Barabbas appears with slight variations and does not appear in John's gospel at all.) Some historians and scripture scholars have argued that the whole account of the crowd choosing anyone at all, let alone the murderous insurgent Barabbas, is a complete contrivance of the gospel writers. I do not believe this and the Church does not teach this idea as having merit. So, this article is premised on the veracity of the crowd's cry, "Release Barabbas!"

During the period, I was dating my wife and for a few years after our marriage; I was not a Catholic. Still, I attended Mass with my wife and eventually accepted baptism in the Catholic Church. A couple of the Catholic traditions I hated the most were the Palm Sunday and Good Friday liturgies. Their length did not bother me; after all, as a Baptist, I was in church on Sunday's from 10 AM to 2 PM and back again at 6 PM. What bothered me most was having the "crowd voices" in the reading of the Passion and having to cry out "Give us Barabbas!" and "Crucify him!" These passages were not new to me, I had heard them read for years, but it was so much easier to hear someone else speak them. By hearing and not speaking, I was allowed to pray to myself, thanking God that I wasn't like them. I was very uncomfortable when it became my turn to speak those same words. I was uncomfortable because I found my self faced with the real possibility of being just like *them*.

As part of our studies for the deaconate, we took classes in New Testament studies and were exposed to several different forms and methods of scripture study. Our teacher had studied for his PhD. in Sacred Scripture at the University of Jerusalem. He was able to communicate a great deal of the technical aspects of exegeses into a language understandable to us "lesser mortals." While studying in Jerusalem, our teacher, Robert Dugas, acquired a copy of a manuscript written by an Iam Cohen, Chief Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court. The title of the manuscript was The Arrest, Trial and Death of Jesus of Nazareth. Mr. Dugas loaned the manuscript to me, which I read with great interest. Mr. Cohen's intention in offering his manuscript was not to disclaim the Christian Scriptures but to clarify certain aspects of Jewish and Roman law so that the Christian reader might have a better understanding of what really happened that frightful and profound day.

Mr. Cohen was a Jew. In his introduction to his manuscript, he made no apologies for his being a Jew and offered his thoughts and ideas that Christians and Jews alike could understand that we have a lot in common. He wrote his manuscript shortly after the Second Vatican Council had concluded and a better understanding of true ecumenism was beginning to develop. The Arrest, Trial and Death of Jesus of Nazareth was offered as a background to the time of the Roman occupation of the Palestine region and what that meant to the non-Roman citizen. The manuscript never denies the events of Christ's passion but offers a different perspective on what might it all meant. To borrow an overworked cliché from Paul Harvey, give us *the rest of the story*.