THE SIGN OF DECISION

Text: Matt. 27:20-22

But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas and destroy Jesus.

The governor answered and said unto them, Whether of the twin will ye that I release unto you? They said, Barabbas.

Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified.

As we go through life we find that there are many difficult lessons which we must learn. There are the lessons of sorrow, pain, of joy, of discipline, of patience, of waiting on God to work out His purposes in our lives. Perhaps no lesson, however, is more difficult than the slowly growing awareness of the fact that God does not always work at the same speed. Sometimes for years in our own life and for centuries in the life of nations, not much happens. Life is smooth, quiet and uneventful. Time is a slow river moving imperceptibly to the sea. There is a deceptive stillness about life and time which can easily lull us into a false sense of security. And then suddenly things begin to move, the clocks of the world and of life strike together, the river of time roars with confusion, and the chariots of the living God sweep through life and the universe. The God of life and history and redemption swings into visible and evident action.

This is exactly what happened on that first Good and evil Friday almost two thousand years ago. Many years ago an instructor in English asked his class:

"What is the greatest, single dramatic scene in all the world's literature?"

The members of the class immediately made some suggestions. Some mentioned the opening scene of "Hamlet" at midnight on the platform at Elsinore. Others referred to the death of King Lear and the storm, the murder of Duncan in Macbeth, the knocking on the door in the Stricken Silence was another reference. The slamming of the door by Nora in Ibsen's Doll House was mentioned.
In Holy Writ itself the scene in the eighth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John between our Lord and the woman taken in adultery were cited. Finally the instructor said: "The greatest scenes in the entire world's literature are those which took place between six and nine o'clock on Good Friday morning."

This is probably true. Everything thinkable and unthinkable was going on. Every human passion was there--hate, anger, fear, love, pride, devotion. All the material of high drama was there--two trials, one murder, one suicide. There was always the tense waiting for the end.

It is a very curious drama, too. It is held together only by the silent, mysterious figure of the leading character who speaks no more than one hundred words but who dominates the story as though He had rehearsed it from eternity. Here was God really moving fast, and when He moves life and history and men move with Him to new, strange, but divinely appointed ends. He never moves alone.

Now tonight we would like to present for your meditation a few thoughts about the great, final turning point in this drama. We have now reached the point of no return. It is the moment when it becomes finally clear that the drama can end in only one way. This is the final slamming of the door! It is the moment which takes us out of our seats as spectators and makes us participants in the drama. We are in it now for all time and all eternity.

Let us look more closely at the scene before us! From the very beginning of the drama the heart of the action lies in the decision made by those who come face to face with the silent figure of the throned crowned sufferer, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To their dismay they find they cannot remain neutral. They must make up their minds about Him. The hour of decision has come. And so one by one, with a consistency that makes them their minds about what they are going to do with their God on a quiet morning in spring. Judas decides and commits...
suicide. Peter decides—and stumbles off the stage with blinding tears in his eyes. Annas and Caiaphas decide, and get a few more years of shoddy, uneasy power.

The disciples decide—into a night without stars. The stage empties faster and faster until now at this moment which we are considering, this moment of turning, there are only four characters left—a Roman, a criminal, a faceless mob, and the silent, strange, leading figure of Jesus Christ.

Curiously enough, the one man who has the hardest time making up his mind about Christ is not one of the disciples, but Pontius Pilate, the proud representative of a proud civilization. There are things inside of him which seem to hold him back. He has a sense of fairness, of Roman justice, of patrician contempt for these quarreling people. On the other hand, he is a twentieth century man. He has power, and he needs to keep it. And so he twists and turns. He talks and tempers in the vain hope that he may find some way to off the hook, to avoid a decision, to some way out of the dilemma. He would like to find some way of getting rid of his God standing there in the morning sunlight, the living embodiment of another world.

Finally in his desperation he hits upon a seemingly brilliant idea. He does not want to decide, so, as you and I, he will try to let someone else do it. Let the people decide! He resolves to be democratic about the situation and give them the choice between good and evil, between God and man, between Jesus and Barabbas. He appeals to the group morality involved in the problem. Surely they will decide the right way! Has not someone said that the voice of the people is the voice of God? Are not many minds better than one? Is there not something good, something fundamentally sound in the common man which inevitably and invariably rises to the challenge of goodness? We can almost see his mind at work. Surely the people will recognize the thorn-crowned sufferer as one of their own, their friend, their teacher, the carpenter's son from Nazareth. Surely they will prefer
Him to a murderer, a wild-eyed revolutionary, one of the anonymous criminals who was forever cluttering up the Roman jails all over the world. Surely this was an easy choice for the people! It was all very clear and very simple!

Today we all know what happened. Pilate asked his question--there was a roar from the crowd--the voice of it was like the crack of doom in Pilate's ear: "Barabbas! Give us Barabbas!" The people had spoken. The election was over. The votes were in. The votes were counted, and earth and heaven and hell finally and forever.

With this moment the scene becomes fearfully modern and contemporary. We may call this what we please--spiritual blindness, mob spirit, moral insanity. We may refer to our texts in psychology and sociology in order to explain just what happened here. We must never forget, however, that this was a cross-section of our common humanity. These were people, even as you and I! They were men and women from the homes, the shops and the markets of Jerusalem. Here were students from the school of Gamaliel, good people, religious people, people who would not think of killing an animal on Saturday, but who are ready to kill their God on Friday. We are reminded of the end of a great Spanish novel Blood and Sand in which the matador is dying and finally says, "I hear the roar of the only beast there is--humanity."

All this makes this scene very personal in its meaning for every one of us. Each of us in his own way must be a student of human nature. This is vital for a happy life. We must learn to get along with others; why we want to know why people act as they do. Here, right here now, is one of the great laboratories for such a study. Just why did they the mob yell: "Barabbas! Give us Barabbas!"? Surely it was not because they hated our Lord Christ personally. Their leaders may have hated Him, but not the people themselves. He had come, as He had told them, to bring the Gospel to the poor, to bind up the broken heart, to tell captive
souls that they were free, to open the eyes of the blind, to heal those that had been hurt and broken by life. My soul, you cannot hate anyone for that! No, we must understand clearly that there was something deep and dark and demonic, something which you and I must face honestly if we are ever to understand human nature, life and history. Here was something awful to see, but necessary to understand. The people made their decision and cried "Barabbas!" the word today cries "Barabbas," we cry "Barabbas" because they, the world and we are under the deep, dark, demonic compulsion of sin. Here it is. All of it! It is clear and sharp in the morning sun. What was behind that cry on Friday morning is still behind it today. Sin! Cruelty, blasphemy, bl indehate! All the whole, vile catalogue down to the last dregs of the lowest degeneracy. Every wrong appetite, every evil desire, every unnamed vice to the very last and the lowest of them all. Every sin of the world and in the world was there that morning. The sin of the past and the future, today's sin and yesterday's sin--this was behind the choice of the people. What was in the air that spring morning and is in the air in our own world is dark and evil. And so they cried "Barabbas!" James Russell Lowell tells of a painting in Brussels in which God is about to create the world and an angel is holding His arm; "If about to create such a world, stay thy hand." No, that is not the answer. It would easy if we could blame all this on God, but God did not create a world of sin. This is our own doing. We can never blame anyone else for that.

Now up to this point it is probably true that almost every realistic observer of the modern world would agree with what has been said. There seems to be no other way to explain what has happened to us, the way we dance and laugh on the edge of destruction, the seeming helplessness of the Church, the dark, blind, selfishness of men and nations. How can we explain that! Really all realistic observers will agree that it must be something like sin. There must be something really wrong
with the heart and soul of man. There must be something evil at the very core of human life, something which compels him to choose evil instead of God, which drives him to choose Barabbas again and again.

In our time he usually chooses his own private, proud Barabbas, whoever he may be, just as long as he is a substitute for the living, redeeming God.

Concerning that many of us will agree. Now for the remainder of the truth which we confront today there will not be such universal agreement, perhaps not even in this church. It is now necessary for the preacher to present God's side of the story, a view that we can accept only by faith. It is at one and the same time simple and mysterious. If we in realism and penitence must identify ourselves with the people, God in His pity and grace identifies us with Barabbas for whom our Lord became a substitute, who went free because God was captive on a cross, who lived because Christ died. Now we are almost at the end of the story. This is what a theologian calls the mystery and miracle of grace. It always begins with a conversation between God and man. The conversation goes something like this:

Man, beaten and crushed: "I am a man of unclean life."

God: "I have redeemed thee, thou art mine."

Man: "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

God: "Rise, stand upon thine feet and I will speak unto thee."

Here, then, the final, great, eternal miracle happens again. Man stands up free and forgiven because one day there was a cross and his sin entered into the life and heart of the eternal Son of God made man. It was shared by God. It was buried in God. And because this great decision was made by God, we can leave this church today heads up, free and forgiven. We will go out again into a world engaged in a gigantic, terrifying conspiracy of defeat. In his *Farewell to Arms* Ernest Hemingway makes the modern temper articulate: "The world breaks everyone and afterward..."
swiftly or by slow torture. It kills the very gentle and the very brave impartially.

If you are none of these, you can be sure it will kill you, too, but there will be no special hurry." This is the approach of many modern minds to life itself. We know that we cannot possibly live on that. We can live only when we know that God has mended the broken places and that we are strong and free where He has come.

We are free and forgiven by the great decision which He has made by the might and measure of the glory of the Cross.

Years ago a crowd was standing in a great square in London listening to the bell toll for the dead on Armistice Day. A man was standing in the crowd with his head bowed in prayer. A stranger spoke to him: "Do you really believe that these men are alive, that they are with God?" The man answered, "Yes."

The stranger replied, "Yours must be a wonderful religion!" It is! It really is!

When we know that we are strong and safe in the full forgiveness of God for time and for eternity. God has made His decision, and by His grace we have made ours, and we have really made the right choice.