

Homily Passion Sunday  
Luke 23:1-49  
March 20, 2016  
Grace, River Forest

Luke 19:28-40  
Isaiah 50:4-9a  
Psalm 31:9-16  
Philippians 2:5-11

### The Innocence Project

In Jesus' name. Amen

We generally say that religion and politics don't mix. So what are we to make of this passion account from Luke, this Palm Sunday? It tells the story of religious and political leaders, not exactly conniving together, but certainly colluding to sentence an innocent man, Jesus of Nazareth, to death.

The religious leaders accuse Jesus of "perverting [the] nation," and forbidding people "to pay taxes to the [Roman] emperor" – a lie, since he did just the opposite, encouraged people "to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, cross examines Jesus and finds no basis for any accusation against him. But the religious leaders are insistent; they accuse Jesus of "stirring up the people by his teaching." Wanting to pass the buck, Pilate thinks he's found a perfect out: he sends Jesus to Herod Antipas, who rules the jurisdiction of Galilee, where Jesus grew up and spent most of his ministry. Herod questions Jesus "at length," dresses him up in royal finery, mocks him and treats him with contempt – I know, except for the royal finery, this part sounds a little

like the presidential campaign. But – as Pilot later reports – neither he nor Herod has found Jesus guilty of a single charge brought against him. “He has done nothing to deserve death,” Pilot declares. Well, you know the rest of the story: the religious leaders want to have a truly “bad” man, Barabbas – a murderer and insurrectionist – released, and have Jesus, an innocent man, handed over to be executed. And Pilot caves in to these demands. The torn curtain of the temple and the complete “darkness over the land” from noon to 3 p.m. bear witness to this massive miscarriage of justice. And so does the centurion, a representative of imperial Rome, who declares after he saw all that had taken place, “Certainly, this man was innocent.”

There are two organizations in Chicago whose mission it is to gather new evidence to free innocent people from wrongful convictions. There have been a lot of those in Chicago and environs – wrongful convictions that have led to way too many people being incarcerated – or put on death row – for crimes they did not commit, with some tortured to coerce them into making false confessions. These “innocence projects” have gotten many falsely convicted people, some behind bars for 25 or more years, released.

But why bring this up on this Sunday? Because I think that what we have in the passion story in Luke is also a type of “innocence project,” led by a different

kind of king, inaugurating a different kind of kingdom. Think of the difference between how Caesar would have entered a city – in a royal chariot, pulled by powerful steeds, surrounded by legions of soldiers, and how Jesus entered Jerusalem. Or think of the difference between this king whose throne is a cross and someone like the Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, reviewing his troops on parade, goose stepping in formation before him, followed by column upon column of tanks and missiles and other weapons. Jesus, from his throne room in the place called the Skull, introduces and makes possible a different kind of kingdom, not one of military might or revenge.

We see it in every one of Jesus' three words from the cross in Luke's Gospel. His last word from the cross, a quote from Psalm 31, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," reveals that this is not a story of Jesus dying in our place, to save us from the punishment of an angry, vengeful God. No. This is a story, a project, where God the Father and God the Son, are in it together to break the bonds of sin, death and the devil that hold us, and to remold us in God's image. This is a story, an "innocence project," where the Father and the Son are in it together to reshape the world by God's forgiveness. So, Jesus' first word from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Just who is included in that "them" and 'they'? A vast number – starting with the

religious leaders and then Pilot, who either gave in their pressure, or to his desire to remain in the good graces of Rome. That forgiveness extended to those who exclaimed, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," and to those who cried, "Crucify him!" It covers those who mocked and reviled him, and those who wept for him on the side of the road. Those women disciples who had followed him from Galilee and stood at a distance watching "these things," and those male disciples who – out of fear – had scattered, and were nowhere to be seen. And that vast number of the forgiven reaches to all of us today, who also watch "these things" from a distance, and are in need of release from bondage and renewal – to put in us the "mind of Christ." And then there is that third word from the cross, for the thief who saw in Jesus the hope for something beyond this world, a world in which he had messed up so royally. This word, too, is for anyone who fears it might be too late for them. "Remember me, Lord Jesus, when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus' response is still, "...you will be with me in Paradise."

So why did Jesus, the innocent Son of God, die on the cross? Theologians over the centuries have answered that question in a variety of ways. Here are three reasons that stand out to me today.

That, forgiven, we might become witnesses who proclaim God's forgiveness, to a whole world desperately in need of release, renewal and love.

To form in us the mind of Christ that we might become peacemakers, in a world always more interested in fighting and getting even. Gwen Gotsch sent me a blog (*Inside Nancy's Noodle*, Tuesday, March 15, 2016) written by a Lutheran pastor who attended a Donald Trump rally at Lenoir-Rhyne University, a week or so ago. Because of fog, Trump's plane was about two hours late. The auditorium where he was going to speak seated 1,400 people, but some 4,000 were waiting outside. "When folks standing in line were finally told they weren't going to get in," this pastor wrote, "things got tense. The grassy area that had separated protesters from supporters slowly melted away and angry people on both sides were standing face to face, shouting obscenities, ready to exchange blows. Those of us wearing collars were called upon to hold the line. We linked arms and did just that, standing between anger and anger. One of us started singing, 'Jesus Loves YOU' and we all joined in."

A Facebook post from another person at that rally, who was there during this confrontation, read like this: "...out of nowhere, a red-haired redneck started screaming at the Latinos. They were nice back, but a black group then jumped in to their defense and it got ugly, with a lot of profanity. I was in the middle of this

and then a bit of shoving started. Before I knew it, about a dozen pastors jumped in and formed a line between the factions, locking arms and singing hymns. How I got in that line I don't know, but it was surreal, really a religious experience. These days," the writer concluded, "I am not really pro-organized religion, but I was daggum proud of them today – they really were the peacemakers." I think Jesus died that we might stand between anger and anger.

Finally, I think Jesus, truly God and truly human, died some 2,000 years ago, especially for all those who suffer the unfairness of this world. That includes, I know, some of you here who, in one way or another, have had more than your fair share of troubles and difficulties and burdens. Jesus died, unfairly, innocent so that you might not only know that God is aware of your suffering and heartbreak, but that you might also know that God has experienced it in God's own self. So that you, too, might believe that God in Christ is with you and for you, eternally.

In Jesus' name. Amen