

It's a real mess. A sermon preached on March 20, 2016 [Palm Sunday] at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder

Scripture: LEVITICUS 16:20-22
JOHN 19:1-16

I began my parish ministry in a large congregation with multiple staff in a church in southern Ontario.

There was a senior minister, a deaconess (Christian education worker) an organist, a full time secretary

And I was appointed as the assistant minister in November 1980 – though in truth I felt more often like a minion or whipping boy.

That though is a story for another time and place!

One evening at a meeting of the Christian Education Committee at which as the assistant minister I was expected to attend,

There were a series of decisions and actions that had to be taken

None of these were small matters in the life of that congregation

Rather, they represented major shifts in emphasis and class organization for the church school.

Bible studies that had caused divisions within and without the groups

And were Bibles were really needed in the pews
and if so, what version!

Half way through the meeting, the convener read
a letter from the deaconess announcing that she
was resigning from her position at the end of that
particular month.

None of us had any warning that this resignation
was forthcoming – not even as I learned the next
morning, the senior minister.

If the meeting was not already in flux, it certainly
was after the news of the resignation was read.

Every member around the table started to speak
at once – with questions, accusations, the blame
game in full operation.

Conversations at cross purposes were the norm
for the moment.

Voices were raised,

Fingers were being pointed

Questions demanding an answer – what are we
going to do?

What are you going to do Herb – me being the
trained professional church worker at the table –
and wishing I was anywhere else?

Suddenly,

One of the long serving elders of the
congregation

Who was also a member of the committee –
raised her hand and said in a deliberate and no
nonsense way

“I’d like to say something”.

The convener called for order – voices quieted and everyone looked at Ruth – the elder

Quiet descended on the meeting as all eyes focused on Ruth,

All ears eagerly waiting for her words

It’s a real mess, that’s all I have to say.”

It was definitely that – a real mess – no question

Though Ruth’s comment did not “resolve” the issues the committee faced that evening

The comment gave all of us gathered around the table, a necessary pause.

The convener said thank you to Ruth and suggested that the meeting adjourn with prayer and be recalled the following week when each of us had had some time to pray and think through some of the matters the Committee faced.

Postscript: the Christian Education committee did meet the following week and the committee was able to work through in a very constructive way some of the issues that were pending – including that of the resignation of the deaconess.

I have thought about Ruth’s words that evening more than once through the years
For sometimes all we can say about some situations and circumstances in which we find ourselves is “IT’S A REAL MESS”

Some stories we read in scripture – all we can say is its A REAL MESS

- Jacob and the tricking of brother Esau and deception of father Isaac
- Joseph cast into the pit by his brothers
- Joseph being wrongfully imprisoned for the supposed rape of Mrs. Potiphar

But I believe,

Nothing in scripture comes close to the real mess of Jesus' arrest, trial and subsequent execution by crucifixion.

I know it seems to be jumping the gun so to speak in talking about Jesus' arrest and trial.

That's a Good Friday event – though you realize that the crucifixion is said to have happened at 9:00a.m on the Friday morning.

So by service time, it's a done deal!

For many years now, I have been troubled not by the day of Hosanna's and Alleluias

It's a great and joyous time – great ticker tape like welcome for Jesus into Jerusalem.

No, what troubles, unnerves and haunts me is *how under a week many of the same people shouting Hosanna on Palm Sunday*

Are angrily shouting about the same Jesus – Crucify Him

That's a 180 degree turn in a very short time and a radical turn at that.

What Katharine said to the Young Worshippers –
it was a very strange week.

I wonder what caused those to make such a
dramatic a turn

I wonder if I had been there would I be one of
those doing that flip.

Was it just the mob mentality?

The madness of the ever present crowds that
fueled the change? Or something else?

Historically, I can cite examples of the
extraordinary madness of crowds – the
Mississippi scheme of the 1700's which de-
stabilized the French government;
The South-Sea Bubble of the 1720's that
destabilized the British government
The witch mania of New England,
McCarthyism of 1950's America

I believe the American people, the
Republican Party and the world is witnessing the
extraordinary madness of crowds as the
juggernaut known as The Donald steams forward
toward the summer nominating convention.

Be that what it may in terms of The Donald,
To read again the account of Jesus before Annas,
Caiaphas, and finally Pilate,
To enter into these events with our imaginations
To “be there” with our wondering questions is
among other things – to be confronted by a “real
mess”

This is high drama – lots of movement.
 Just read carefully the latter verses of John 18
 There is the demand by the Jews for Jesus’
 execution – outside

Shift inside – (33-38) as Pilate in a one on one
 meeting, questions Jesus about kingship.

Then back outside (38b-40) Pilate finds Jesus not
 guilty and informs the crowd accordingly

I shall release Jesus he says

No way replies the crowd – release to us one
 Barabbas – who is a convicted murderer and
 seditionist!

Back inside – Pilate orders his soldiers to flog
 Jesus (19:1-3)

Then outside (19:4-8) – again Pilate – Jesus is NOT
 guilty!

Crowd is adamant – they demand Jesus’
 crucifixion. Release to us Barabbas

How exasperating the Jews are

Why did the Emperor appoint me here!

Why is this happening to me, reflects Pilate

Inside (Jn 19:9-11) Jesus, work with me on
 this – I have the power to release you.

**You would have no power over me unless it had
 been given you from above (19:11)**

Awww! You are all crazy thinks Pilate

I am going to wash my hands of this mess

You are not guilty of the things the people are
 saying,

But frankly Jesus – I now have to think of my
 own welfare
 These obtuse people outside are threatening to
 tell Caesar that I cannot handle things as
 governor
 You won't help me,
 The religious leaders will not bend on this
 And that mob!
 Madness!
 Outside Pilate goes and having ceremoniously
 washed his hands of the matter,
 Hands Jesus over to the mob with the order to
 execute by crucifixion!

Wild it must have been
 Pilate shuttling inside and out
 The Jewish religious leaders – minds already
 made up,
 Not intimidated by this lackey governor
 appointed by Rome, nor the power he could have
 used to force his will and what was right

And the mob, the crowds, now stirred up –
 crucifies him! CRUCIFY HIM!

The result is – among other things –
 injustice on a grand scale.
 Scholars and experts in this area count between
 12 and 27 serious legal and ethical breaches of
 Roman and Jewish law of the time.

There was no valid indictment upon which to base an arrest. Jesus was seized and bound without any formal charge being made. Jesus appears first before Annas, the father in law of Caiaphas, the high priest.

Annas was no longer a high priest – he'd been deposed as such. So, he has no official status to hear charges or pronounce sentence. All of the proceedings take place throughout the night – according to Jewish law, a trial involving a capital offence could not be considered at night. The Sanhedrin was supposed to be utterly unbiased and impartial – if anything, they were to be disposed in favour of the defendant.

It is clear from the 'get go' the Sanhedrin had already made up their mind before hearing one word of the case against Jesus – Jesus was guilty – no question.

Those witnesses that there are contradict each other.

When Pilate can find no reason to condemn Jesus to death – the Jewish leaders bring their threats to question Pilate's allegiance to Caesar.

And this is only a sampling of the findings of historians and commentators with a legal bent. This is not Roman or Jewish rule and justice – this is lynch mob madness!!
It truly is a "real mess"

What, in addition to the injustice surrounding Jesus' trial does this part of the story say to us as God's people?

The story,

And especially Pilate's role in it is a profound and haunting reminder of the corrosive to the faith behavior known as *double mindedness*.

Knowing what is right, but unwilling to risk personal desires and agendas to ensure that the right thing is done for the right reason.

Pilate is torn in two directions – the noise and clamour outside and the calmness and presence of Jesus inside.

Pilate knows Jesus is innocent of the charges made – BUT Pilate is not prepared to follow through on that conviction,

He is too much influenced by the big and strident noise of the ones outside

Pilate's stand on Jesus innocence is half-hearted, and therefore crumbles under pressure from the chirps and whistles around him!

The world is no friend to the ways and promises of the Lord – never has been and never will be

While I believe compromise in some things is necessary and good for the whole, There is a point in all things where compromise just leads to more compromise and eventually we

find ourselves having no givens standards or conviction on anything
Everything becomes "it depends".

Doublemindedness is sneaky.
So often it begins by us basing some of our convictions, ways of living
Not on what is truly stated in scripture or is clearly reflected on God's actions in history,
But rather on: I wonder what others will say.
I wonder what others will think of us

Such things become more important than the Lord,
Or, doublemindedness – foot in the camp where justice, fairness and right is the default position
And foot in "it depends" –takes the form of shading the truth
So that others will be more impressed with us
Or, wanting to look good,
Seem to be in control rather than being honest with ourselves – that a great deal of the time we are not in control, but badly hemorrhaging spiritually.

Allowing ourselves to be swayed by human opinions, world views over what is clearly God's promises – that is double mindedness
Saying we believe in God, but not following through in actions or thoughts.

Pilate was not a follower of Jesus – so can we impose the same standards on him as we might ourselves?

No we cannot, BUT Pilate knew Jesus had committed no capital offence necessitating execution and certainly not execution by crucifixion.

Yet, that knowledge did not convict him to go toe to toe with the Jewish religious leaders.

How often even today, fear of what others might think, say or do seems to trump what is clearly right and just?

Edmund Burke 18th century Irish politician and philosopher lived at a time of revolution in France and threatened serious civil unrest in Britain.

He was a keen observer of his time and I think an astute commentator on the dangers of doublemindedness in every age.

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

I am under no illusion of how hard it is to make consistently the right choice for the right reason.

The world I live in is often one of a lot of shades of grey than straight forward black and white. Ours is a world where “it’s a real mess is at times all we can say.”

Too many times I have fallen into that 'doublemindedness' behavior – wanting to do what is clearly the right thing, clearly of God, But hearing too much, paying too much attention to the strident chirps, whistles and chatter around me that say things, like it will not matter, who cares, why bother, what will others think, do or say if you do or do not do this or that..." The events around the week between Palm Sunday and Good Friday confront me with how easy –even for the most committed to the Lord -- it is to fall into that doublemindedness behavior.

And having been confronted with examples of such doublemindedness to come before God in sorrow and contrition, Asking for his forgiveness.

And to remember that God is always forgiving and patient *-if* we are honest before him.