

The Choice

Commentary on Mark 15:6-15 by Dr. Tom Boomershine

Many people conclude that the story of Jesus' sentencing places the responsibility for his crucifixion on the Jews and excuses the Romans. According to this view, Mark's intention is to condemn the Jews and to communicate that "they" are responsible for Jesus' death. This is because most people read the story as silent text and do not experience it as members of an audience hearing it told. But as with all ancient literature, Mark's Gospel was composed for live performance, not for solitary, silent reading. This difference of communication experience radically impacts meaning.

As a performed story, *The Sentencing* is structured by the rhetoric of implication rather than the rhetoric of condemnation. The purpose inherent in its structure is to implicate the members of Mark's audiences in Jesus' death, rather than to encourage them to condemn others (namely, the Jews). The story-hearing experience of implication in *The Sentencing* invites reflection on the crowd's choice of Barabbas over Jesus. At its heart the story invites listeners to turn away from the belief that violence and war will save us from the powers of evil.

The cause of Jesus' death is an unholy alliance between the crowd, the religious authorities and the Romans. As Jesus' final passion prophecy indicates (Mark 10:32-34), the death of the Son of Man at the hands of Gentiles (the Romans) is to be expected. What is unexpected, and is not foreseen in the prophecy, is that Jesus' primary ally throughout his ministry becomes a major agent in his crucifixion. That ally is "the crowd," a character in the Gospel story which has consistently supported Jesus, often over against his opponents, with which we as listeners are invited to identify. Thus, Jesus' prophecy is fulfilled but in a way that no one would have predicted.

The crowd's choice between the way of Barabbas and the way of Jesus is wholly understandable in a contemporary as well as an ancient context. The crowd is acting on the common belief, then and now, that the only way to overcome the powers of evil as embodied in our ever-changing enemies is through violence and warfare. Audiences in the 21st century are bombarded with endlessly inventive variations of this myth of redemptive violence in movies and television. That myth is the foundation of the movie business and the delight of audiences around the world.

In this sense, few Christians actually believe that Jesus is the Messiah. At some foundational level, most Christians agree with the great majority of the human community who believe in the myth of redemptive violence. According to this myth, a realistic view of the world means violence is the only way to control and overcome the powers of evil. It is not only the audiences of Mark who are implicated in the death of Jesus. Everyone who in a multitude of ways chooses and delights in the myth of redemptive violence in its many forms is implicated in Jesus' death and is invited by the story to reflect on this belief.