

# “The People Who Killed Jesus”

a sermon by

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**Text: “And when the chief priests and scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.”  
(Mark 11:18)**

Several years ago I had the chance to visit the land of Israel. One of the most distinct memories that I have is standing on the Mount of Olives and looking across the Kidron Valley into Jerusalem. From the Mount of Olives you can see the whole circle of the ancient walls of the city and the remains of the great temple of Herod, where Jesus taught on a number of occasions.

As I looked at that ancient gate into the city, it was not hard to visualize that first Palm Sunday almost two thousand years ago when Jesus and this small band of disciples came down from the small town of Bethany, dipped down to the Kidron Valley, and then climbed the hill to the gate of the city amid the waving of palm branches and the cry, “Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Had we been there a few days later we would have seen a very different scene – three crosses lifted north of the city’s wall, and watched them through the day until they were silhouetted against the darkening evening sky.

One of the questions that is often asked during this Holy Week is the question: “Who killed Jesus?” So often it is tempting to look at history in terms of good versus evil – light versus darkness. So much of our history is painted in this fashion. I remember some years ago the movie “Braveheart” that focused on the life of the great Scottish hero William Wallace. It was hard to watch that movie and not feel a great affection to the valiant Scots who fought so hard for freedom against the ruthless King Edward I of England.

The same is true of situations such as World War II. The Axis nations under Hitler and Mussolini seemed to epitomize every evil one can imagine: violence, territorial aggrandizement, the killing of millions of innocent Jews, while the Allied forces of Europe and the United States seem to stand for all that was good and right.

The crucifixion of Jesus that occurred on that Good Friday seems so heinous that one would naturally expect that the people who killed Jesus were abysmal murderers.

However, there is something very haunting about the death of Jesus. One of the most solemn factors of the death of Christ is that the people who killed Jesus were for the most part ordinary people. They were people like you and me.

There is a great African American spiritual that we often sing in Holy Week entitled “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” In many ways it is strange that we would sing such a hymn. I don’t think anyone would sing, “Were you there when Julius Caesar was killed, or were you there when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated?” And yet, the existence of this spiritual suggests that there was something different about the death of Jesus. It wasn’t just a small group of people who killed Jesus, but there is a sense that we were all there when they crucified our Lord.

So, as we begin this Holy Week, it is certainly fair to ask again, “Who were the people who killed Jesus?”

## I.

One of the groups of people responsible for the death of Jesus was the religious leaders of his day. They were not necessarily bad people. In fact, they represented the very best of Israel’s religious faith. To be sure, the Gospels paint the Pharisees in a very unlovely light, for they were clearly opposed to the ministry of Jesus. But in the old days, when the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanes crashed down on Jerusalem, violated the temple, sacrificed swine on the altar and tore to pieces the rolls of the Sacred Law or Torah, it was the Pharisees who rose up to protect the desecration of their faith. Their name, Pharisee, means “separated ones” and they separated themselves from a lot of the common people by their intense devotion to the faith.

They had protected the faith from the onslaught of the Greeks, and when the Romans came, they resisted them as well. The Pharisees believed in God; they believed in God’s revelation to Israel through the Law. They had a higher standard of practical morality and they resisted the secularization and hedonism that the Roman rule brought to Israel. They were not bad people. They were among the best of their time.

But how could they endure Jesus? Of course, Jesus believed in God, but early on they caught the drift of his words and saw that if his teachings took hold, it could cause a radical shift to Israel’s faith. To be sure, he believed in righteousness—one could see that—but how could that comfort them when he would not accept their definition of righteousness and even dared to say to them, “You have heard it said of old ... But I say to you ...” Of course, he believed in the Scriptures, but then he seemed to be particularly lax about certain regulations – particularly concerning things like fasting, the Sabbath, and a host of dietary restrictions. Of course, they knew that Jesus was a good person, moral in every respect, but then again, he was very lax about the kind of people with whom he associated, often sitting down and eating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other people who lived way outside the law.

So, who killed Jesus? These people were in part responsible for his death – religious people, respectable people, and conscientious people. But their religion was not a living religion. It was a

hardened religion that had been frozen into bureaucracy, rigid adherence to creed, and rituals and customs.

That is what happened in Judaism. It has happened in Islam as well. It has happened in Christianity also.

So, as I looked down from the Mount of Olives, I found myself not so much angry at the Pharisees but asking God to have mercy on all our organized religion for what we are doing to the Christ today.

## II.

But, it was not just organized religion that killed Jesus. It was organized business as well. This morning we read from Mark's gospel the passage which deals with Jesus' cleansing of the temple. He was particularly hard on the money changers and the ones who sold animals to be sacrificed on the altar.

But can you imagine how offended these people were? They were not bad people. They had no desire to hurt Jesus. If Jesus had minded his own business and left them alone, they would have been glad to have left him alone. They were profitably engaged in trade in the temple courts that was a standard practice of their times. If a pilgrim came to Jerusalem for Passover, why should he not have to change his foreign currency into the temple currency, and why should the money changers in the temple not charge them a fee for doing so. After all, they had to pay the temple priests a fee just for allowing them to be there.

They also sold animals to be sacrificed. What was wrong with that? After all, if people were allowed to bring animals on their own, it could lead to blemishes and disfigurements that would undermine the whole sacrificial system.

Once again, these people were not bad people. They were people like you and me, working hard to support themselves and their families. But when Jesus took a whip and literally drove them out of the temple, Jesus sealed his own fate. Up to that point Jesus had been a problem to the religious community, but now he had touched a sensitive nerve and it would not be forgotten.

Today, we are living in the greatest recession our nation has faced in the last seventy years. Now, the causes of a recession such as the one we face today are complex, but is there anyone who doesn't believe that some of our misery has to do with people who took short cuts – subprime loans – houses sold to people who could have never afforded them. Some things do not change, and greed is one of them.

## III.

But, it wasn't just the religious leaders and business leaders that turned against Jesus. It was the politicians who also helped to raise that cross – politicians just doing what politicians commonly do – playing it safe – that killed Jesus.

Even Pontius Pilate was not an evil person. He did not wish to harm Jesus. He recognized early on that Jesus had done no wrong. "I find no fault in this man," he told the crowd on several occasions. He even offered the crowd a way out. He gave them a choice – he would either release this innocent man, Jesus, or else he would release Barabbas, a known killer and terrorist.

But what could Pilate do? Caiaphas, the Sadducee, and his associates were wily, shrewd politicians, and they were more than Pilate's match. They saw that Jesus' claim to be the Messiah could cause a public uproar, perhaps even a revolution – and they knew the Romans would not stand for that. Caiaphas, the High Priest, surveyed the whole situation and then with a cool, keen, and shrewd eye said to Pilate, "It is expedient," he said, using the politicians favorite word, "it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish." As for Pilate, he could not afford to be accused of being lax in forestalling a public uprising. So, he washed his hands of the whole thing, and chose to play it safe.

#### IV.

Now, surely, there is someone here today who would have to protest all of this. To say that the death of Jesus was caused by such ordinary things as a religious or business community or even organized politics – surely that is a stretch of the imagination. There must have been other more important villains. If you feel that way, of whom were you thinking? Of Herod, Judas, or even the Roman soldiers?

Take Herod, for example. If you had known him, you would have probably liked him. Most people did. He was quite debonair, witty, worldly wise, a pretty regular guy. Of course, he was a bit short on moral scruples. He fell in love with his brother's wife and took her. Why not? He wanted her and she wanted him. Moreover, if he loved her and she loved him, were they not justified in making two lives happy at the expense of one life's unhappiness? That is a familiar argument. I heard it again this past week.

As for Jesus' death – that was Pilate's responsibility, not Herod's. So Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate, promptly forgot the whole matter, and probably walked over to his club for a long drink at the end of the day. There are many Herods in Charlotte today.

As for Judas, how easy it would be to lay the whole matter on him. After all, he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. But to say that is to short change Judas. He was one of the twelve who left everything to follow Jesus. Jesus trusted Judas. In fact, Jesus made Judas the treasurer of this little band of disciples.

But something happened to Judas. He began to lose faith in Jesus. After all, Jesus was supposed to be the Messiah and the Messiah was supposed to be the one who would shake off the hated Roman rule. So why had Jesus become so passive, Judas wondered. He became disillusioned. And so he betrayed his master for thirty pieces of silver. When he came to his senses, he threw down his ill-gotten money and went and killed himself.

Lost faith, disillusionment, resurgent selfishness – that was Judas. Does it sound familiar? "Let the person here without sin cast the first stone."

In the end, there is something haunting about that Negro spiritual. For we were all there. And if all we do this week is attend worship on Palm Sunday and then return on Easter morning, we miss the whole point of Holy Week.

So, I am challenging each member. Attend one of our services this week. Set aside some time to read again these chapters from Mark's gospel (chapters 11-16), examine yourself, so that on Easter morning you may join with all of us and proclaim, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"

Amen!