

J Barrie Shepherd was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New York City. One day he was flying back into JFK from his native Scotland, carrying with him, from the island of Iona, a large Celtic cross for his church. He didn't trust the baggage handlers, and since this was before September 11, he had the option of carrying this two-foot artifact. He had cushioned and bundled his treasure carefully, so it aroused some suspicion as he approached the metal detector at the airport. The guards relaxed, however, when the x-rays revealed it was not an automatic weapon but only a harmless cross.

When the plane landed in New York, and the passengers went thru customs, the agent asked Shepherd, "Do you have anything to declare?" "Only this cross." The customs agent looked it over, then scribbled down something on a bureaucratic form in front of him. Only later did Shepherd look at his copy of this customs form.

"Item of sentimental nature, of little or no value."

Bureaucratically correct, politically correct—theologically...what do you think?

This is the way the world thinks of Jesus the Christ and His cross—how could it think otherwise? Our cultural outlook of the past century has been exacerbating this trend, for better and for worse: the cross of Christ may be of some personal, sentimental value to individuals—that's "cool"—but if there's one thing every college student today understands it's that there can be no truth with a capital "T" which in any sense governs or affects everyone. If you happen to think the cross of Jesus is important, or not, "I'm OK with that"—as long as, of course, you don't actually think your personal choice might have a bearing on other people. It's all a matter of personal taste and private choice. "Whatever."

This is a very different conclusion from that of Christ's earliest Church—those twelve frightened disciples. Their convictions were far different: "If I be lifted up I will draw *all people* to Myself..." "For God so loved *the world* He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever should trust in Him will have eternal life..." "God was in Christ, reconciling *the world* to Himself..."

Wherever did these unarmed and illiterate peasants, fishermen and camp followers, ever get such an idea? Their little band, their crucified leader put to hideous death in that remote and forgotten outpost at the far border of the Roman Empire—that man Jesus should somehow cast a shadow—make that a glorious Light—which would somehow illuminate and change all the world? How could that be, and how shall we ponder that question on Good Friday, when this petty little political irritant was crucified on that cross at Golgotha?

What had gotten into them? (You know Who had gotten into them, I know.) Is it possible that the cross has some significance beyond personal preference, beyond private conviction? Could it somehow make a difference to the entire world?

I don't know about your understandings of Jesus... I was taught early on that Jesus was the "Son of God," that He was somehow both God and human. I do not disagree with those understandings—but I just had a lot to learn. I guess I thought because Jesus was God, He could do anything. Of course He could be courageous—He was God. He could stand up to the police, the judges, the peer pressure and the evil of

the mob—he was God. He could even get whipped and tortured and nailed to the cross because He was God (we will not dwell on this scene from our lesson—if you saw Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion” once it should last you forever; if not, take my word for it that crucifixion was designed to be one of the most painful and humiliating forms of killing—by people who thought things like being beaten to death or boiled alive in oil weren’t painful or degrading enough.) With the simple naivete of a child, I suppose I sort of thought if Jesus was God He could just somehow put on His God-cape, or eat His divine spinach, or flip a switch somewhere and go into a “God mode” I know I do not have.

This is not true. If God was fully human it means that on earth Jesus enjoyed and endured life just as you and I do. He had access to the same spiritual resources you and I have. He prayed. He prayed desperately to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. Was there not some way out, some other option?

But no. This gospel tells us Jesus was the Lamb of God, who took away the sins of the world. But let’s be careful we don’t understand such an image only as children do. Jesus was put to death on the cross. Exactly what all it meant, how to explain it, in what way that death changed the world and everyone in it is not so simple. The Jews in that time, and all the Mediterranean world, understood the image of animal sacrifice. The Jews believed that by slaughtering innocent lambs their sins before God could be mitigated. Ancients then and many non-Western peoples even today still believe that the capricious gods were appeased by the shedding of blood.

But these images of slaughtering innocent lambs or other animals (or, God forbid, even humans—also a formerly widespread practice) are no longer part of our symbolic world. Jesus the Son reveals God the Father to us; God the Father is the One who waits longingly for us to come back Home again after we have discovered our own gods will always fail. God is the one who invites everyone—the wayward and the down and out and the “up and out” into the Feast of His eternal presence.

Jesus has come in order that every person, every Christian, every atheist, every person of every (or no) religious conviction might be reconciled back to God. The Scriptures are 100% consistent: Jesus did not come to reconcile God to us. God never left us; the love of God for His creation never wavered. Jesus did not come because God is angry: Jesus, God come to earth to reconcile us, has come to us because it breaks the heart of God that we like sheep have gone so tragically astray. Jesus shows us God is not judgment or anger or wrath. God is love.

The New Testament employs dozens of images to try to explain what Jesus accomplished on the cross on Good Friday; the sacrificial image of the Lamb of God is only one, and by the way it is never written that Jesus died “instead of” us—rather, it is always “for our sake—to benefit us.” Think of images New Testament metaphors of courtrooms and the innocent taking the penalty of the guilty, of a ransom being paid to free the guilty or the hostages, of a military champion coming to defeat the opposing military leader and his army, the accounting image of a debt “paid in full,” which is one valid translation of words “It is finished.” No single image of what Jesus did at the cross is sufficient, which helps explain why there are so many.

[There’s one image which is not faithful. Dallas Willard writes of “bar code Christians”—as if Jesus being put to death for our sake reprograms the great scanner at that checkout line at the end of our lives; if we have “accepted Jesus” then we get

scanned along on the little belt to the Good Place while others are not so lucky—all the while remaining, like the celery or cottage cheese within the container, essentially unchanged. How sadly we misunderstood Jesus and His promises if we thought His going to the cross is only about what happens to us when we die. He has given His life in order for us to live in Him, live boldly, live trusting in God, live as if “there’s nothing they can do to us,” nothing in the universe more important than completing the work to which God invites us: live just as Jesus did.]

We’ve heard a good bit of the greatest drama in the history of the world: one which affects the world more than any other. (After all, drama is not drama if there is not something at stake: it’s one thing for UCLA basketball fans to want the Bruins to win in a pre-season scrimmage with another fine team, and they might play good basketball—but the drama is not the same as the Final Four in Atlanta with millions watching on TV!) Seven acts in this drama; like a nervous shuttlecock Pilate goes back and forth, indoors and back outdoors, between Jesus, the priests, and the crowds. This drama especially highlights three characters: Pilate, Caiaphas (or the priests), and Jesus.

The Roman governor Pontius Pilate wants nothing to do with Jesus. He is not expected to be aware of the intricacies of Jewish religious disputes—but as a representative of the Empire he is expected to use his authority to rule on the side of justice. (The historical Pilate was no lightweight: his tenure in Judea was unusually long and stable. Fourteen prefects ruled in his position between 6 and 66 AD; his ten years were the second longest rule of all of them. He did not remove a single High Priest, whereas his successor threw out four. In 31 AD Tiberius Caesar removed many prefects, but Pilate remained in service another five years.) In other words: Pilate, who started out not in politics but in the military, exercised a firm hold over his office and over the people, the Jews. He was nothing unusual—better at his job than most.

Pilate waffled, however, when it came to Jesus. As judge over this case involving Jesus he knew from the beginning Jesus did not deserve to die. Pilate’s first duty, even before his own career path, was to release Jesus. But he was apparently “looking out for #1”—not wanting to allow his disposition of this Galilean peasant to ruin his plans.

Even this high official, backed by the unlimited power of the police and the army, backed down when confronted by Jesus. He has authority to judge Jesus—but it quickly becomes clear Jesus is judging him. “Are you the King of the Jews, or not,” Pilate asks Jesus, who answers with His own question: “Do you ask this on your own, or have others told you about Me?” Pilate dismisses Him: “I’m not a Jew, what would I know about all this petty religious bickering... Your own leaders and priests have handed You over.” Jesus then asserts, “My Kingdom is not of this world”—though in My own way I am surely a King! “You would have no power whatsoever on your own, unless it had been given you from above. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to My voice...”

Pilate’s not interested: “Truth, Schmooth. Who has time for such niceties? What is truth—I have a pain in the neck land to govern and an ugly crowd to control...” Pilate shows contempt for his subjects, the Jews—but then gradually caves in to them. He knows Jesus is innocent, but panders to the people and their leaders by asking them if he might release Jesus instead of Barabbas—the true insurrectionist against the interests of Caesar. The crowds grow more insistent: “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” and Pilate grows

more afraid. He pretends he has authority over these despised Jews, but he totally backs down to their will. He hands Jesus over to be killed. The crowd plays the trump card which causes him to cave in: Pilate values his career and his ambition. The crowd plays on his personal vulnerability: “If you release this man, you are of friend of Caesar...” Pilate knows they are in the wrong, but will not dare risk a blot on his record of keeping the peace, the Pax Romana..

How could Pilate have been so cowardly? Is it only Pilate? You and I have been granted influence and authority. Every day we go into our workplace, into the community, into our school, onto the golf course, as an ambassador of Jesus. We know who Jesus is and what He asks of us. Are we all so vocal about our allegiance to Him, so singlemindedly active in completing the assignments He has given us? Or do each one of us, like Pilate, also weigh our own career paths, our own social vulnerabilities before we choose to stand boldly with our Lord. “Nobody will care if just this once I cut this corner.” “I’m so crazy busy—who has time to get more involved with His Church, His will, when I’m barely surviving as is? “I don’t mind talking about Jesus at my Bible Study, but certainly not here, at the club, or with my clients—what will they think—besides, it’s just “not me” to talk about religion in public—it’s such a private matter, really...and then we know how Pilate felt, and Peter. Our fears, over even such trivial matters, win out within us and we hear the cock crow and break into a cold sweat. Do you still hear the cock crow?

Pilate is not the only one who shrivels into a sad shadow of himself when confronted by Jesus. There are also the religious authorities. [I hope and presume I am stating the obvious: of course the priests and officials, and the crowds, were Jews. As was Jesus, and all His earliest followers. Around Jerusalem, Jews are pretty much all there were. But these facts are as accidents, incidentals to the story. History, and your life and mine, has proven over and over again that anyone else and everyone else who might have been in Jerusalem at the time would have behaved in exactly the same way. The point is that fearful, sinful human beings killed Jesus.]

See what becomes of the religious leaders. They, too, are afraid. For some time this Jesus has been eroding their influence, challenging their authority over the people—threatening to undo everything they stand for. They have not managed to shut Him down by licit means, so they conspire to shut Him down in this horrible way. They testify against Jesus—but in another irony they are portrayed as being too religious, too devoted to God to defile themselves by walking inside the governor’s headquarters, especially since it was about to be Passover, their religious festival. They wanted to keep themselves pure for Passover.

Meanwhile they were plotting with Pilate, falsely testifying to have Jesus done away with. John tells us they were conspiring to slaughter the Passover Lamb (remember John the Baptist, back in the first chapter of John, proclaiming, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world...”) even as the priests over in the temple were getting ready to slaughter the 256,000 lambs (according to Josephus, anyway) for the Passover festival. But they could only plot this death, this organized murder of Jesus, from outside the front door, since indoors was “unclean.”

We are told that at noon, the next day, that Pilate finally hands Jesus over to be killed. “Here is your King,” he explains, finally without irony and dripping with irony. Pilate doesn’t believe Jesus is king in the slightest; he only wants to mock the Jews, upon

whom he looks down but to whom he has just abdicated his rightful authority and his political and personal integrity. This now beaten, shackled, pathetic broken man before him: the king of the Jews. He speaks God's truth without knowing it or believing it. (The only time he shows any backbone: he refuses to change the inscription—at least he can mock them.) "Shall I crucify your King?" "We have no king but the emperor," they responded.

In this denial is a moral implosion to mirror and eclipse, if possible, that of Pilate. The priests have dedicated their lives to serving and honoring and worshiping the one true God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God over the seas and the dry lands. For centuries the Jews had resisted, often at cost of martyrdom and great courage, the various temptations to renounce their God and assimilate into the various ways of the world. These at the time of Jesus, pledged to honor their God, are so sadly blinded by their devotion to religion and tradition that they cannot see the very God having come among them. ("Religion is unbelief," K Barth.) They resist His offer of new life; will not hear His promise that "the Kingdom of God is among you all..." They are so afraid of losing what prestige and position in the world they enjoyed, so committed to the laws and procedures and practices and words they had been taught, they could not open their hearts to the living Word, the Promised Messiah—the Son of God, who had finally come near to deliver them from the overburdensome yoke, the weight of religious practice.

What indescribably sad words we hear from them: "We have no king but the emperor." The best of their tradition; the heart of their noble inheritance: ("Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One...") denied. In professing allegiance to Caesar, they speak the truth: anyone who lives out a higher allegiance than to God has surely substituted the false gods over the True God, the One who has come to us in Christ.

Would any of us know anything about this? We call Him, "Lord, Lord," and we sure enough want the benefits we believe Christ will confer—but are we so quick to spurn all those goodies that other lords, other caesars will deliver? Jesus promises to meet our needs if we live first for His sake, for the Kingdom—but do we trust Him, or don't we think we'd better pile up really full storehouses of grain, of IRAs, of income, just in case? He promises we are beloved daughters and sons of the most High King—so then why do we need so much retail therapy, and other therapies and medications, and such copious doses of amusement and entertainment to assure us we're really OK? Why do we keep giving in to our fears, to those things we know not best for us or others?

In contrast to the collapse of the two parties with temporal power during this two chapter drama—Pilate and the religious leaders—Jesus only grows more strong. He is revealed to be the King: robed and crowned and lifted up, unwavering in His faith. Do you not wonder why this is? They have the guns and the troops, the temple and the pulpits and the robes and the whips and the spikes and the gallows. Jesus has...what did Jesus have? Yes; Jesus had prayer and He had His unshakable trust in the Father.

Maybe the most dangerous part of this drama is how easily we miss the point. It's not just about Pilate or the Caiaphas or the priests. Did they act so differently from how you or I would have?

Representatives of the most advanced and in many ways the most just civil authority of the age—the Roman Empire—and of the highest and most noble of religions of the age—Judaism—happen to be the ones there at the time to put Jesus to death. But

Jesus can have no part in you or in me, and we are no follower of His, as long as we might continue to believe we are not so fearful, not so sinful as those characters; that “I am not capable, I would never have done such a thing to Jesus...”

It was about ten years ago that 60 Minutes broadcast an interview with an Israeli juror who had served on the trial of one of the Nazi prison camp officials, responsible for tens of thousands of deaths, finally tracked down in Cleveland. “What was most difficult for us was to know he could have been anyone’s grandfather. He appeared just like us; he was so normal.”

Pilate and Caiaphas and the priests and the crowds and you and I are normal. The world is normal. Religion is normal. Here’s the big problem, and why the trial and crucifixion of Jesus was not accidental or incidental, and why it affects all the world. Why it had to happen, once Jesus came down showing us so perfectly the love of God. Why the cross has more value than merely sentimental or personal. Why it is so sad to overhear the shopper and the salesperson at the jewelry counter asking about a cross necklace. “Do you want one with the little man on it or just plain?” This breaks the heart of God: the “little man” has come and given His life for us casual shoppers.

Jesus challenges normal people, religious people. He challenges every one of our beliefs, our foundations. We want to decide right and wrong; we want to judge Jesus just like we want to reserve the right to judge every thing and every one else we come into contact—but He judges us, even by the constancy of His love. We want to be able to pick and choose what we offer of ourselves to God; He tells us God wants all of us, will redeem everything we freely offer into His service.

Jesus does not accept our normalcy; He probes and shines His light into the darkness of our ignorance and doubt and cruelty and fear. The radiance of His light, the power of His love, keep judging us until finally we no longer can stand it, cannot live this way any longer: “TURN OUT THAT LIGHT—it’s too bright; it’s too bright!—I can’t take it any more” ... And see what we have done to Him at Calvary.

If our putting out the Light of the world, if murdering on the cross the Innocent One doesn’t break our hearts and collapse us to our knees in repentance and sorrow—or if I really don’t think I’m capable of such a thing, that it’s really not about me—there is no hope in the end.

Whatever.

No real hope, no effective hope, no enduring hope, no eternal hope, in all the world.

Oh, but there is still a Hope. Be sure to worship on Sunday morning to experience it.