

SERMON- Palm Sunday (B)
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Good Shepherd
March 28, 2021

Mark 11:1-11 Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29;
Philippians 2:5-11 or Mark 15:1-39, [40-47] Psalm 31:9-16

OPENING:

Earlier this month, our very own Good Shepherd Players performed (online) the stage play, *And Then There Were None*, based on Agatha Christie's famous 1939 novel.

I enjoyed their rendition so much that I rented the recent BBC movie version from the library and watched it as I prepared for this Sunday and for Holy Week.

It's an interesting pairing.

I am not an expert on Agatha Christie, but I know that her faith permeated her work. Throughout, there is the idea of a moral universe, a particularly Christian one, where good and evil exist and compete.

Famously, with Christie, that meant that even the buttoned-up English countryside was rife with sin.

She also expanded the genre by emphasizing that humanity's sinfulness is so profound that even the great detectives and crime solvers of her books cannot restore the world to a state of goodness.

Salvation, thus, always lies outside of ourselves.¹

This all makes good Lenten reading, and especially today, as we get to the height of Palm Sunday and then the depths of Christ's Passion.

Getting back to *And Then There Were None*, Steve McBride infamously gave away its ending during announcements one Sunday by revealing that, quote:

"Everyone dies in the end."

He later protested that that fact was, you know, in the title in the first place.

The Palm and Passion readings possess a similar dynamic: everyone knows what is going to happen in the end, we hear it every year, sometimes a few times.

But it does not deter us from being transformed by it.

We know the ending to this awful "murder mystery" story, but it's still calls out to us.

¹ Nick Baldock (August 4, 2009) "The Christian World of Agatha Christie" *First Things* [The Christian World of Agatha Christie | Nick Baldock | First Things](#); Leonard Freeman (March 2, 2021) "The Theology of Agatha Christie" *The Living Church* [The Theology of Agatha Christie – The Living Church](#).

PASSION PLAYS

Reading and hearing the Passion again this year, while watching Agatha Christie, reminded me of the centuries-long tradition in Christianity of “Passion Plays.”

These were large-scale re-enactments of the Passion story by costumed actors with elaborate sets. They were most popular in Medieval times but exist even today. Key elements include their gruesome and bloody nature, expansive scenes & characters from outside Scripture, and, unfortunately, oftentimes hateful Anti-Semitism.

In these Passion Plays, you have an intriguing set of characters and a fixed setting. You have violence, judgement, and the battle between good and evil—thus all so like Agatha Christie’s novels.

And Then There Were None famously features a Purgatory-like plot where the 10 characters are put on trial even as there is a killer in the midst.

Could we do the same to some of the Passion’s *dramatis personae* to see who is left standing at the end?

PONTIUS PILATE:

Let’s start with Pontius Pilate because, at a very basic level, Palm and Passion Sunday can be seen as a confrontation and collision between Pilate and Jesus. Jesus enters from one end of Jerusalem on a donkey, with a ragtag army of fishermen and peasants, proclaiming God’s Kingdom.

Pilate enters from the other direction, at the head of the greatest military in the world, reminding them of Caesar’s Empire and Roman power.

That collision is stark yet the Gospel writers, including Mark, show some sympathy for Pilate.² Strangely, I always find myself “rooting” for Pilate in the Passion—hoping he is moved by Jesus and makes the difficult and unlikely choice.

In the Agatha Christie world, Pilate would be the local official, the mayor of the town, the one who is looked to as an arbiter of justice and authority; but who ends up being the most flawed and bankrupt of all.

He holds all the power, over the legions, over the Jewish authorities, but he is so weak and pathetic, and oh-so human, the bureaucrat just following orders and the leader swayed by the crowd.

It’s no surprise that Pontius Pilate historically has taken on an outsized role in Passion Plays, even occupying more screen time than Jesus himself, because I think people tend to see themselves in the tortured Pilate.

² Marcus, Joel. 2009. *Mark (Volume 2, Chapters 8-16)* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1026-7.

SIMON of CYRENE:

Less central to the story, but no less interesting a figure in the Passion is Simon of Cyrene. Like Jesus and Pilate he is travelling into the city for the Passover holiday. Unlike them, he is completely unprepared for his pivotal part to play in the plot.

Jesus is too weak to carry the cross to the Crucifixion site, so a passerby is “compelled” to carry it for him. Can you imagine just going about your business, and then all the sudden getting drafted to perform in the greatest story ever told?

If Pilate is the classic nemesis, Simon is the side character, the extra even, who suddenly finds himself in the starring role.

And he carries Jesus’ cross (for crying out loud!), but yet we know virtually nothing about Simon and he vanishes as quickly as he appears.

There are at least two interpretations of Simon of Cyrene’s background:

1) First, I mentioned earlier that Anti-Semitism often features prominently in Passion Plays. Such hatred has led to the idea that a Jew would not be worthy to carry Jesus’ cross, so Simon must have been Greek.

There’s so much wrong there historically, but that sort of thinking taps into the human desire, all too often present in the Christian church, to distance ourselves from the scene, by placing the blame and guilt and sin with “the Other,” with someone else, so as to avoid recognizing the evil closer to home.

2) Now, assuming that Simon was indeed Jewish, we still know little else him, other than this curious note about his sons, Alexander and Rufus.

But therein lies the clue, Mark’s audience would have said: “ahh the father of Alexander and Rufus—we know that guy, he was one us. This was the disciple who picked up Jesus’ cross that day and kept picking it up every day thereafter so that his children are a part of our community.”

Simon of Cyrene is the side character who becomes the lead and needs no introduction. Simon of Cyrene is the link that turns the story into real life, the Passion Play into the deepest, living reality.

JESUS

Now Mark is such a skilled writer that he is capable of putting almost all parts of society into this scene: poor and rich, male and female, Jew and Roman, good and bad.

That having been said, there is only one character that we could end with.

If the Passion story were an Agatha Christie novel, it would be entitled: *And Then There was **One***— because Jesus looms over it and dominates it so magnetically, even as oddly for a hero, he's so passive in his performance. Jesus just stands there throughout.

Ultimately, that's what draws us in about the story. It's not the cheers from the parade, it's not even sorrow from the tragedy, it's the compelling one who is at the center of the storm.

Misunderstood by BOTH sets of crowds, Jesus participates in the action, but on his own terms, rather than ours. His starring turn is heroic and glorious but completely unbound from convention.³

I referred to this earlier as a “murder mystery” but it's a mystery but not in the sense of a “whodunit?” (of course) but in a deeper and more profound sense where we are left with the questions: “Who is this person?” “Who do you say that I am?”

CONCLUSION

Those are difficult questions, another one could simply be: “where do we see ourselves in this story? How would we react to the events described in the Passion?”

Do consider your part in the Passion as we are drawn deeper into this “Murder Mystery” and **H**as the events of Holy Week unfold.

And do consider these words from Agatha Christie from her autobiography: “To be a Christian you must face and accept the life that Christ faced and lived; you must enjoy things as he enjoyed things; be as happy as he was at the marriage at Cana, know the peace and happiness that it means to be at harmony with God... But you must also know, as he did, what it means to be alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, to feel that all your friends have forsaken you, that those you love and trust have turned away from you, and that God Himself has forsaken you. Hold on then to the belief that that is not the end.”⁴

AMEN

³ Schlafer, David J. 1998. *What Makes this Day Different? : Preaching Grace on Special Occasions*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 84-87.

⁴ Quoted in Baldock.