

March 30, 2022 – John 18:33-40

Under normal circumstances, I really have no interest in watching the Oscars. Or, really, any Hollywood awards ceremony. Seeing a bunch of overpaid celebrities pat each other on the back and give long winded speeches about immoral causes just isn't my cup of tea. So, like many people, I was not watching the Oscars this past Sunday when a moment that will go down in television infamy occurred.

The comedian Chris Rock was on stage roasting members of the audience, when he turned his attention to Jada Pinkett Smith. Jada has an autoimmune condition called alopecia that causes hair loss and Chris made a rather tasteless joke about her baldness. And so Jada's husband, Will Smith, marched up on stage and struck Chris across the face. Then returned to his seat, spewing profanity at the comedian.

Chris Rock was stunned. The audience was stunned. Everyone watching on TV was stunned. And the question on everyone's mind quickly became: "What will happen to Will Smith now?"

I mean, he had just committed criminal assault on live television. There was no question about his guilt. This was not done in self-defense. This was not done with good natured humor or playfulness. A crime had been committed. And everybody saw exactly what happened.

As it turned out, nothing happened to Will Smith. He was allowed to remain in the audience the rest of the night. He ended up winning a best actor award. Chris Rock chose not to press charges. And unless the Academy decides to take action, there will be no repercussions for him at all.

But the whole situation got me thinking about the nature of guilt and innocence. Because so often guilt is not as obvious as it was on Sunday night. Not as clean cut. Not as black and white.

Guilt is very often a shade of grey. At least, it is in our own minds. In virtually every court case there are two sides to the story. A mixture of evidence for and against the defendant. At least some reasonable doubt, at least from our perspective.

I see it all the time when I'm counseling members of the congregation. So often, someone will come into my office to vent about some person that has made their life more difficult. And I want to believe them. But I also know that this disagreement may just be the result of a misunderstanding. Or that their account is skewed by their own biases. Or that there's more to this story than I'm hearing. It's the reason why my gut reaction to any disagreement is, first and foremost, to get both people into my office so that I can hear everyone's perspective.

Guilt and innocence are a very tricky thing when you're dealing with sinful people. Very rarely is one person entirely to blame. Almost never is one person entirely innocent.

Which is why our Gospel lesson this evening is so striking. And it concerns a man named Barabbas. In one sense, we don't know much about Barabbas. Much like Malchus a chapter earlier, we never hear him speak and we know almost nothing about his personal background. From John's Gospel, all we know for sure is that he is a *lestes*.

*Lestes* is the Greek word for robber. It's a fairly general term. It doesn't imply much about the seriousness of the robberies he's committed. It just means someone who robs people.

But like Malchus, there's a lot more we can infer about Barabbas. For one thing, he's on death row. Robbery, by itself, was not normally a capital offense under Roman law. Which means that there's an aggravating factor here. And Barabbas is most likely a violent robber. A bandit, we might say.

We know for a fact that *lestes* can mean just such a criminal because it's the same word that Jesus uses in the parable of the Good Samaritan. "*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers – lestes – who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.*"

We also learn quite a bit about Barabbas outside of John's Gospel. Matthew, for example, calls him a “notorious” robber. He's not just a petty crook. This guy is a ringleader. He's got signs with his picture on them. “Most Wanted.” “Dead or Alive.” “Reward for his capture.” These sorts of things.

And, finally, Mark really fills in the gaps by giving us the exact circumstances of Barabbas' arrest: He committed murder during an insurrection. Except he's not described as an insurrectionist. He's not labeled a zealot, like Simon, one of the disciples. No, he's just a robber who murdered someone during a riot. A notorious criminal who took advantage of a violent, chaotic situation to carry out more violence and chaos.

There is nothing redeeming about Barabbas. His crime is incontrovertible. Pilate knows exactly who he is and why he did what he did. And there is no one among either the Romans or the Jews who would shed a tear over this man's crucifixion. He is guilty.

Which is exactly why Pilate offers him in exchange for Jesus. Because Jesus is innocent. Completely innocent. Jesus is as innocent as Barabbas is guilty.

And Pilate knows it. He's a politician. He recognizes when someone is being unfairly railroaded. He sees the lust for power in the eyes of the chief priests and Pharisees. Jesus is in their way. They want him dead. Pilate gets it. He sees in Roman politics all the time.

And so he hatches what he thinks is an airtight plan to get Jesus released. He finds the most hated, despicable, unredeemable death row convict in his prison and then he says, “If you wanna kill Jesus then you gotta put this monster back on the streets.” Surely they won't shoot themselves in the foot for the sake of a little political vendetta?

But Pilate has underestimated their hatred of Jesus. A hatred that isn't just about politics. It's about authority. Spiritual authority. About the truth of God's Word and the truth of Jesus' message. Pilate has no concept of spiritual authority. And he doesn't even know what Truth is. All he knows is that an innocent man is going to die. And a guilty man is going to escape death and walk free.

Which is a situation that we should understand quite well. Because it's exactly the same thing that happens to each and every one of us. Barabbas wasn't the only guilty man who walked free that day. We walked free as well.

We were as guilty as sin, quite literally. Our crimes were incontrovertible. God knows exactly who we are and why we do what we do. Every sin we commit is as obvious to the Lord as if we had done it on live TV for all the universe to see. There is absolutely no question of our guilt in God's eyes.

We are each Barabbas. In fact, Barabbas' very name is ours. Do you know what Barabbas means? It's two Hebrew words joined together: bar-abba. It means “son of the father.”

We are each Barabbas. Sons of the Father. Sons of the Heavenly Father. Adopted by him in Holy Baptism. Wrapped in a robe of righteousness, just like the prodigal son that we talked about on Sunday. Guilty, yet declared innocent. Sentenced to death, yet set free.

All because Jesus took our place. All because the one with a kingdom not of this world declared that we should be part of his kingdom. All because the one who was truly innocent took our spot on the cross.

That is the truth of God's kingdom that Pilate couldn't understand. The truth that there is a God who loves the world so much that he would send his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. The truth that the Son of Man did not come into the world to rightfully, justifiably condemn the world for its sin, but that the world might be saved, set free, through him.

Guilt and innocence for sinful human beings is so often a shade of grey. But for God, it is not. It is black and white. Your guilt is obvious. Jesus' innocence is obvious. And yet a great and blessed exchange has occurred. The Son of the Father has died on a cross so that you might also be a son of the father. So that you might be a Barabbas. And walk away a free man. Amen.