

Pilate's question that he asked the Jews is one that we need to consider this evening. "Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?" And the reason we want to consider it, Christians, is because this is not just interesting to us for historical reasons, so that we can learn something more about Jesus. This is a question that each and every one of us must face, a question that each and every one of us must answer. Jesus or Barabbas? And it's not the kind of question that we have a middle ground on, either, where we can just decide not to decide. We have to pick one or the other. And to choose one is to reject the other. If we choose Christ, we must reject Barabbas. If we choose Barabbas, then we must reject Christ. And lest we think that it's also an easy question, let us remember that our answer to this question has serious consequences, eternal consequences. The way that we answer says something about the state of our soul. So this is the question that we have to consider: Jesus or Barabbas?

Because if we choose Barabbas, Christians, we will fall deeper and deeper into sin. That's what we see happening in our Gospel reading for this evening. Pilate, for his part, is trying to find a way to get out of this situation. He wants to find a way to let Jesus go, and he thinks he finds it with the custom he has of releasing every year at Passover one prisoner. And so he brings before them this choice: to choose between Barabbas whom he has brought out of the prison or Jesus. "Whom do you want me to release for you? Do you want me to release Barabbas? Barabbas who is a murderer, Barabbas who stirred up a rebellion, Barabbas who is a hardened criminal? The kind of man you don't want to let out of prison, the kind of man that is only going to cause all kinds of troubles if he gets back out into society. Is this the man you want me to release for you? Or would you rather that I release Christ? Christ who has done nothing wrong, Christ who has not been found guilty of any of the things which you brought against him." And even Pilate's wife, for that matter, knows that he is innocent. "Have nothing to do with that righteous man," she says, "because I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." Everyone knows that Barabbas deserves to be in prison or to go to the cross. Barabbas is a criminal. Barabbas is not a safe man. Barabbas deserves punishment. But Jesus deserves nothing of these things. Jesus should be set free. Pilate thinks the question will be easy. Choose Jesus, because there's no way that you want to let Barabbas go.

But the Jews choose Barabbas. They reject Christ. They turn away from him. "Set Barabbas free!" they say. "Away with this man! Let Jesus be crucified. Let the one who should be in prison go free. Let him out into society. And let the innocent one go take his place at the cross." They have chosen Barabbas and fallen into a tremendous sin. And the guilt of that sin has fallen upon them. It is something that persists upon them even to this day, which we see Matthew pointing out to us when they say, when Pilate tries to wash his hands of the whole situation, they cry out: "Let his blood be upon us and upon our children!" Because God does not take this lightly. To choose Barabbas and to reject Christ is to fall into a tremendous hardening kind of sin.

And we see the evidence of this already in the New Testament, because when Peter preaches to the Jews at Pentecost, the sin that he wants them to repent of, the sin that is oppressing them, is that they have crucified the Lord of glory. And all throughout the book of Acts, we see the Jews resisting the Gospel time and time again. It is not the Romans, it is not the Gentiles who oppose the Gospel. It is those who should have received it in the first place, those who have chosen Barabbas instead of Jesus. They are the ones who throw the Christians into prison. They are the ones who continuously stir up trouble. This sin which has come upon them has caused them to

fight against the work of God. And God does not take that lightly either. There is a judgment that will come upon them. Because in 70 A.D., as we all know, God destroyed Jerusalem and scattered the Jews among the nations, because God will not be mocked. To choose Barabbas is to reject God. To choose Barabbas is to fall deeper and deeper into sin. It's not something we want to do.

And the world, for its part, Christians, also chooses Barabbas. It doesn't want anything to do with God. It doesn't want anything to do with that righteous man. "Away with him!" the world says. "Let him be crucified. We will decide for ourselves what is right and what is true. We do not want this man to tell us." "Away with him!" the world says. "Let him be crucified. What we are doing is not evil. What we are doing is not sin. We have decided that it is good and righteous and holy." "Away with him!" the world cries. "Let him be crucified. We will have no king but Caesar. We will not have this man rule over us. We do not want to listen to God." And the world, just like the Jews, will suffer the judgment of God, because God does not take this lightly.

So Christians, the question we must ask ourselves this evening again: Jesus or Barabbas? A question that we have to answer even as Christians. Because as the book of Hebrews tells us, it is entirely possible to spiritually crucify Jesus all over again. How do we do that? By continuing in our sins. When we choose sin, we are choosing Barabbas. When we persist in that sin, we are turning away from our Lord. We choose Barabbas when we say that our sin isn't sin, when we say that God is just going to overlook it or that it's not that big of a deal. Because we're Christians, maybe it doesn't really matter. That is to reject Christ and to choose Barabbas. We choose Barabbas if we persist in a sin, especially when we know that it's wrong. When we know that what we are doing goes against God's law and yet we do it anyway, that is choosing Barabbas and rejecting our Lord Jesus. And we choose Barabbas if we presume on God's mercy, if we say that it doesn't matter what I do because I'm going to be forgiven anyway. That is to choose Barabbas and to reject Jesus. And if we do these things, Christians, it will harden us. It will lead us deeper and deeper into sin and away from the Lord.

But Jesus comes to us, Christians, to set us free from sin. We are no longer bound to sin. We no longer have to sin. Because we are in Jesus, we are a new creation. And because he has first chosen us to belong to him, we can also choose him, to reject the things of Barabbas, to reject those things which are the way of sin, and to turn towards the Lord in righteousness. Apart from him we can't do anything. Apart from him we're not going to be able to come to him. But in him, we can resist sin. In him we can choose him and reject Barabbas. In him we are a new and a holy people.

Now, you have to understand something here, Christians. To choose him is not going to be easy. It means that you're going to be crucified with him. Being a Christian means that we will have to suffer. But if we have been crucified with him, we shall also die with him. And if we have died with him, we shall also rise with him. And if we rise with him, we shall be glorified with him. So when we come to him, even if it's more difficult for us, yet it is the way of life, the way which leads to God.

So turn away from sin, Christians. Turn away from those things which would lead you away from God. Reject Barabbas and choose Christ, because Christ is the one who has chosen you.

Christ is the one who sets you free. Christ is the one who has forgiven you all of your sins. And when you come to him and call on his name, you will be saved.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son who has given himself for our sake. We pray that you would strengthen us by the gift of the Holy Spirit to turn away from the things of evil and to turn towards you, so that we may always seek after you, knowing that your Son Jesus Christ will lead us to everlasting life. In his name we pray. Amen.