

**ST. JOHN’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

April 10, 2022 – PALM / PASSION SUNDAY (YR. C)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*I Crucified Thee*”*

St. Luke 19:29-40	(Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph)
Psalm 118:19-29	(Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord)
Isaiah 50:4-9a	(A prophecy of God’s Suffering Servant)
Psalm 31:9-16	(The psalmist pleads for God’s mercy and help in a time of trouble)
Philippians 2:5-11	(God has exalted Jesus above everyone on earth or in heaven)
St. Luke 23:1-9	(The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ)

In 2004, Mel Gibson’s controversial film, *The Passion of the Christ*, reintroduced the Cross into public conversation and provided an opportunity for the Church to address this (literally) “crucial” subject. When the movie came out, the cover of *Newsweek* asked in boldface type: “Who *really* killed Jesus?” That question arose out of a long and shameful history of anti-Semitism. The foundation of this was the attempt to blame Christ’s crucifixion on the Jewish people. For centuries throughout Christian Europe, violence toward Jews frequently took place on Good Friday.¹

If we are honest, we must acknowledge the sad truth that for many Jews the Cross of Christ has been a symbol of persecution. To admit this is not to apologize for the Cross, but it is to repent for the reprehensible acts that have been done in its name.

The truth is, the responsibility for Jesus’ death lies at the feet of all humankind. Whether the characters in St. Luke’s account of the Passion were Romans or Jews is incidental to the significance of the Cross. We do know that crucifixion was never a Jewish method of execution. Had they killed Jesus, the sentence would have been death by stoning. The cross was a Roman device, and it was Roman soldiers who nailed Christ to the Cross. So, from a strictly historical point of view, Jesus was executed by the Roman state.

A better answer to the question, “Who killed Jesus?” must be, “I did. You did. We did.” The truth is, our sins killed Jesus. We hear this expressed in today’s offertory hymn “Ah, holy Jesus”:

“Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee! T’was I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee.” And the prayer at the second Station of the Cross in the Roman Catholic Church is: “My Jesus, this cross should be mine, not Thine; my sins crucified Thee.”

The fact is, Jesus not only died because of our sins, He also died for our sins. Some of us wonder, “How could a man who died two thousand years ago in Jerusalem have anything to do with my sins? How can I be guilty of His death?” In much the same way, many parishioners feel that confessing their sins to a priest is unnecessary. “After all, I haven’t done anything *that* terrible. Not like those demented, disgusting people I hear about in the news.”

Fortunately, as Anglicans, we engage in a general confession on Sundays and, if we are especially devout, we confess our sins daily as part of the Daily Office. This prayer speaks for a broader constituency that any one of us, or even our congregation. For when we come before God we do not come merely as individuals, we come as part of the whole human family. As such, we participate in a culture whose social, economic, and political networks are often unjust, and sometimes downright evil. And for this, we need to repent even when we are not the perpetrators directly.

Holy Week presses us to see that we too, are Christ's executioners. Christian author John Thomas writes, "Our fingerprints on the nails are easy to overlook, but they are there." "Some years ago," he continues, "I watched a documentary on the Holocaust, titled 'Shoah.' ... The most disturbing portrait of evil was the benign face of an elderly man who worked for the German state railroad. His job was to issue tickets to Jews forced into cattle cars for transport to the gas chambers. This bewildered-looking man could not comprehend that his bureaucratic job had anything to do with the horror of the Holocaust. He didn't shoot Jews or toss them in the ovens. He just issued tickets."

Thomas concludes, "You and I don't flay the skin off Jesus. But we do issue tickets. Our complicity in evil is real and often profoundly undramatic. Until we face that reality, [Christ's] Passion is little more than a tragic movie, and we will miss the truth of our own profound need for the redemption of Easter."²

Thanks be to God, at the foot of the Cross, Christ sets us free to recognize ourselves among the guilty. We can identify ourselves amidst the crowd, both on Palm Sunday when they cried, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," and on Good Friday, when they shouted "Crucify him!" At the foot of the Cross we are free to acknowledge that even the very best of us bears a resemblance to the worst of us. Can we then cry out to God openly as sinners in need of redemption? And can we set aside the tendency to blame someone else, "those other, awful people," for human sin and evil?

Sometimes the Gospel is bad news before it can be Good News, because God's judgment and mercy are two sides of the same coin. But when we honestly confess our sin, and the sins of the whole human family, of which we are accessories after the fact, then we can receive the forgiveness God wants for us. At the foot of the Cross we see that Jesus died not only because of our sins, but also for our sins—to take them away, and to free us for new life with Him and with each other.

This is only possible because Jesus' death was not just any death. If Jesus had been just another man, even a *very good man*, then He was, at best, an example for us of humble sacrifice, and, at worst, just another martyr to human cruelty. Then His death was merely a tragedy. Suffering is never, in and of itself, redemptive.

Just ask anyone who suffers. So why was Christ's death redemptive? Why was it different from every other unfortunate death in history? Or from all the other men who suffered death on Roman crosses? The answer is not that Jesus suffered more than others.

The answer will be celebrated next Sunday, on Easter, for it is the Resurrection that makes the difference. It is Christ's Resurrection that transforms the Cross from an emblem of horror into a symbol of God's wondrous love. In 1906, C. A. Dinsmore wrote, "There was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted on the green hill outside Jerusalem."³ If you want to know what God's love is, look to Jesus, and Him crucified! There you will see the very nature of God.

That is what the Cross stands for, the vast love of God, and our humble contrition before it when we consider the gravity of our now-forgiven sins. To confess "I crucified Thee" is not an empty, pious gesture. Nor is it mere breast-beating. It is an honest admission of our need to have our sins forgiven, and not only ours, but the sins of the whole world. It is a declaration of our need to be reconciled to God and to our neighbors.

The Bible offers us the good news that God has already accomplished this for us through the Cross of Christ. So let us gather at the Lord's Table today in humility and contrition, as those who need forgiveness, as those who cannot do without God's grace. And let us find in Him, whose body was broken for us, whose blood was shed for us, both bread for the journey and the food of eternal life. *Amen.*

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 24 March 2013, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Richard Floyd, "I Crucified Thee," 2004 < <http://richardfloyd.com/2013/03/20/i-crucified-thee-a-sermon-for-palmpassion-sunday/> > 23 March 2013.

² John Thomas, "United Church News," April 2004.

³ C.A. Dinsmore, *Atonement in Literature and Life* (London, Constable 1906), p. 232.