

**Who is Responsible? Acts 4: 5-12 & John 10: 11-18**  
**Sermon for Sunday 21 April 2024 (Rev Phil Wootton)**

Who was responsible for Jesus' crucifixion? That question, for me, triggers the remnants of a memory of a poem, or meditation, in which a series of key actors, all in the first person, accepted their responsibility:

"I, the soldier who hammered in the nails, I killed the Christ."

"I, Judas, who betrayed my best friend, I was responsible and will never forgive myself."

"I, Peter, who ran away and denied him, I let him be killed."

"We, the crowd, who shouted, 'Crucify! Crucify!' we wanted him dead."

"I, Pontius Pilate, although I knew he was innocent of all wrong-doing, I signed the death warrant." "I, Caiaphas, high priest, out of a mix of jealousy and misguided belief I was doing the right thing, I pushed for his execution."

It's an interesting game, imagining them all before the court of heaven, each in turn saying *mea culpa* – it was me. In this life, however, there's little chance of the likes of Pilate and Caiaphas acknowledging culpability. Blame avoidance is an all too well practised art. The carefully crafted Gospel accounts share the blame around: in the end in fact, if Christ died for our sins, then we all bear responsibility.

In his preaching in the early chapters of Acts, the apostle Peter is quite brazen in his accusations. Asked by what authority – in whose name – they had healed a paralysed man on the steps of the Temple, he replies: 'It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man is healed.'

It's interesting that we're told a list of names of those present (Caiaphas and his father-in-law Annas; John and Alexander [of whom we know nothing] and others of the high priest's family). They are clearly the 'names' considered to have authority in Jerusalem, but Peter names Jesus – proof of God's vindication of the One they had killed. Interesting also that previously the apostles had been brought before 'the Sadducees' – a group who kept their power through collaboration with the Romans, who rejected belief in the resurrection of the dead, and who did not expect a coming Messiah. Peter's words, and the faith he represents, challenge the Sadducee world-view at every point. Peter repeats: 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.'

Read the Gospel according to St John and you get a very different picture. John uses the label 'the Jews' as a short-hand for Jesus' opponents but does not blame the people collectively. (Remember all the disciples were themselves Jewish). In John's Gospel, Jesus himself is in complete control of events. He chooses the way he goes. As in this morning's reading: 'No one takes [my life] from me. I lay it down of my own accord.' Through the story, everyone else's plans and plots seem to run out of control: Judas betrays but bitterly regrets it. The so-called Sanhedrin trial dissolves into chaos as they can't get even false witnesses to agree. Pilate, in his fear and pragmatism, falls into constant prevarication as other manipulate him. Jesus is in charge. Jesus has submitted totally to the will of God. What he wants and what the Father wants are one. It will come to pass. In Gethsemane, when his would-be captors come to arrest him, they ask if he is Jesus of Nazareth. He replies, 'I am' and they fall down before him. That speaks to reality. Jesus is in charge.

In today's reading, we heard Jesus announce himself as the Good Shepherd. We think of good shepherding as care for the flock, looking after the individual, guiding the group to pasture, providing protection, and going to seek out the lost. Here, Jesus seems to have something else on his mind: the depth of commitment that the shepherd has in contrast to that of the hired hand. He cares for the sheep to the point of putting his own life at risk. For him, the shepherd provides the image of self-sacrifice. He makes the choice for himself to lay down his life. He does so out of love for his people. All is within the purposes of God.

This leads us into one of the deep mysteries of Christianity – human freedom and divine will. I call it a mystery not because it's a puzzle to solve – I certainly couldn't solve it if it were. But a mystery is something to ponder and wrestle with. Through such wrestling we may move deeper in our relationship with God. There are two fundamentals we have to hold to: human beings have the ability to make decisions; at their most fundamental, to choose between good and evil, right and wrong. For those who were present, to push for Jesus' crucifixion, or to oppose it. At the same time, Christians believe God is alive and active and has plans and purposes beyond our understanding, that God will bring to fruition. It was God's plan for Jesus to be crucified. It was the inevitable outcome of perfect love entering a loveless world. That does not remove the responsibility from those who carried it out, ordered it, or allowed it to happen. The two work in parallel.

Sometimes, we see God at work when we can't give any other explanation. These might be unexpected, positive coincidences – God-instances, some people call them – or they might be totally inexplicable or baffling. It's fine to attribute them to God, so long as your faith is not undermined if someone comes forward with a logical human explanation. Much more important, it seems to me, is to believe in God at work in and through every human being, indeed, every part of creation. If God is the ground of our being, and if God's fingerprints can be seen all over his work, then that seems entirely natural. So, see all action as both human and divine, both natural and supernatural, both our responsibility and God's. It's not a matter of a bit of each, as if we could measure it on a chart. More like two things operating in different dimensions... except that they do interact. God's working so often happens through the offer of grace, forgiveness and love, and inviting us to live and move in response to that offer.

It's not a puzzle to solve, but a mystery to ponder, and to inspire our worship. Jesus chose to give his life for us out of love for us. It was the choice of Caiaphas and Pilate and the crowd and Peter and Judas and the soldier at the cross to take his life. We do not identify their culpability (or anyone else's) out of a need for someone to blame. The importance of honestly accepting responsibility for all of us in all ages, is so we, may be in a position to receive forgiveness and the new life that flows from it. We all commit the sins that took Jesus to the cross. We all have the choice of owning up and starting again, or staying locked with those choices for ever. Jesus the Good Shepherd came that we may have life in all its fullness. He laid down his life, that we might live.