

I must have seen too many passion plays, because I had always assumed that the Palm Sunday crowd, celebrating Jesus, and the Good Friday crowd condemning him, were the same people. In a play, they pretty much have to be the same people, as it's so much easier to have one large group of actors than two. But the Good Friday crowd has to be told who Jesus is, so they might well be different people from the ones who celebrated his arrival.

While there have been a lot of great sermons preached on how "the crowd" turned on Jesus, there is another reason to suppose that there was little overlap between the two crowds. If people in Jerusalem didn't know who Jesus was, the Palm Sunday crowd, people who were on their way *to* Jerusalem, might well have been Jesus's followers who came with him from Galilee, and perhaps some who joined along the way. If the "inner circle" of the twelve disciples abandoned Jesus in Gethsemane, it would be very strange if the rest of his disciples remained committed. Although, I must point out, a few women did remain faithful, even unto the Cross.

But the two-crowd theory creates a theological problem. The historical answer to the question, "Who killed Jesus," is "the Romans." The Jewish leadership of Jerusalem certainly had a role in setting his death in motion, but blaming "the Jews" for killing Jesus is not just hateful and evil, it's also just plain false. More importantly, the theological answer to the question, "Who killed Jesus," is *all humanity*. Blaming Jews for the sins of humanity is dishonest, evil, and factually wrong. The Good Friday crowd represents not Jews, but humanity as a whole. But avoiding these errors invites another.

The danger of saying they were two different crowds is that we are tempted to fall into dualistic thinking, to believe in a simplistic, black-and-white splitting of humanity into "good people" and "bad people." Naturally, we are tempted to place ourselves in the Palm Sunday crowd, or at least to believe that there is a separate group of "good people" somewhere. But this side of heaven, there are only sinners in need of a savior. The two crowds may have been different people, but the two groups merely represent two sides of the same coin. And indeed, all people have goodness within us. All people are capable of loving God and neighbor. But that's like telling someone, "Would you like a slice of cake? It's mostly made of the finest ingredients, but there's a little bit of poison in it too. But hey, the good outweighs the bad, right?" Hard pass.

I am not saying that Christianity is effective while other religions are not. On the contrary, I'm saying that nothing humanity does, including practicing any religion, can reconcile humanity to God. Only God can do that, and God did that on the cross, completing the redemption of humanity before we could understand, let alone choose how to respond. Scripture itself shows that Christianity is merely a response to what God did for us, and as we'll see on Easter, it took a moment for even Jesus's closest followers to receive the joyful news of the resurrection and begin to understand what had happened. Jews, too, are still responding with profound faith to what God did for

them; therefore, their response, and their covenant, are just as valid as ours.

So the question for Christians is never, "How are we better than other people." Our question, as ever, is, "How do we respond to what God has done, and is doing, for us?" God calls us to individual responses, which require honest, faithful discernment, and to a corporate response of prayer, worship, service, and evangelism. For our corporate response, today, I ask you to contemplate what Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter have in common, which is not a human crowd, but God's grace. God's grace endures through the best and worst moments of life and history. God's grace is constant because God's love for humanity is perfect, unbounded by space or time, pouring out for us even as we drive cold iron into Jesus's sacred body.

The Church asks us to make a sacrifice of time and attention every week, but especially this week, to follow Jesus on the hard journey of salvation. She slows down her calendar to sync up with the real-time journey to the Upper Room, Gethsemane, the halls of power, Golgotha, and the final puzzle of an empty tomb. In making her days match the days of Jesus, the Church brings us to him anew. Holy Week sweeps away the miles and millennia so that we can watch Grace operate up-close and personal. I pray you, accept the invitation to join the procession that Jesus is leading for us, from worldliness to grace, from death to life.