Who's to Blame?
The Rev. Amy Spagna
Good Friday – April 15, 2022
John 18:1-19:42

I dreamed I met a Galilean
A most amazing man
He had that look you very rarely find
The haunting, hunted kind,

I asked him to say what had happened
How it all began?
I asked again, he never said a word
As if he hadn't heard

And next, the room was full of
Wild and angry men
They seemed to hate this man
They fell on him, and then disappeared again

Then I saw thousands of millions
Crying for this man
And then I heard them mentioning my name
And leaving me the blame.[1]

This song, which is sung by Pontius Pilate in the middle of the first act of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, raises the question of who's at fault for this event well before it happens. Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, the lyricist and composer, based the show largely on the Gospel of John. Like in the original, Pilate tries to be empathetic, to give Jesus the chance to explain what he is up to and why people gathered outside Pilate's headquarters are so mad at him, and fails to grasp the entirety of what's happening. Like the crowds, who keep pushing him to do something, Pilate is caught up in all the raw emotion swirling around him. His cool-headed, logical, and very Roman way of trying to work through the situation does him little good. The crowd is

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[1] Barry Dennen, "Pilate's Dream." Track 8 on *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Disc One. MCA Records, 1970, compact disc.

restless in its demands that Jesus be put to death. Pilate's own fears that they'll turn on him next if he doesn't go along with them more or less force him to reach into the inventory of very public and – to his logical, Roman bureaucrat's way of thinking - highly effective solutions available to him for dealing with this little problem.

Pilate's Dream points out that it is all too easy to point fingers and to try to blame someone for a causing disastrous event. It's especially true in an emotionally charged situation like this one. Someone has to be the cause, and bear ultimate responsibility, when bad things happen. There are plenty of possibilities in the case of the Crucifixion. The top three are Pilate himself, who delivered the death sentence as a way of trying to save his own hindquarters; the Romans, who carried out the sentence; and, as been misread for centuries, the Jews, whom John portrays as the catalysts for convincing Pilate that Jesus is a menace and has to be silenced for good.

It's the third of these – "The Jews" or *Iudaioi* in Greek - which is a far more problematic solution than blaming either Pilate or the soldiers under his command. Along with the assertion in John 8:44 that the Jewish people with whom Jesus is arguing are "of the devil," which more often than not gets taken completely out of context, the heavy involvement of these *Iudaioi* has been used for centuries to insist that the Jewish community is somehow "less than" in God's eyes. What's more, the line that, "the Jews killed Jesus!" has been used as the basis for all manner of anti-Semitic attacks. It's only now, after the Holocaust and a recent rise in attacks on Jewish communities in this country, that the Church has actually started thinking about how to deal with John, and the texts like it, that we hear every year during Holy Week. They have done a tremendous amount of damage, and not only in terms of justifying the overt

discrimination against, and murder of, the Jewish people. It affects us on a subconscious level as well, so much so that we don't necessarily stop to think about it when these *Iudaioi* are talked about as not being good people or having the "right" pathway to God.

New Testament scholars of all stripes nearly always take great care to remind those who will listen that we cannot read a difficult text like John, with difficult characters like Jesus, Pilate, Peter, Judas, Annas and Caiaphas, and all the rest, apart from its social and historical context. When we try to read it with that context in mind, we learn a lot about the world these people, and the ones who later preserved their stories, actually lived in. It was just as vibrant and just as messy as our world is, and the people telling the story are just as prone to putting their own unique spin on the facts. John's lens in particular is one which wants to set up, and maintain, those who choose to reject Jesus – whom he slaps with the label of "*Iudaioi*" – as a singularly hostile entity.

Since it is clear from the composite of all the gospel accounts that Pilate, and the Romans, were ultimately responsible for putting Jesus to death, why does John insist on pointing fingers elsewhere?

John's Gospel, as we have it, was finalized some 60 to 70 years after Jesus' death. Just like the rest of the New Testament, it puts its own unique spin on things almost as much as it reports the objective facts. That spin starts with how the community which produced it viewed the world through the trauma of what we would recognize as a schism. That is, it very likely that they were originally part of a Jewish community, and were kicked out of that community as the result of their belief in Jesus. The contours of their faith, as reflected in the gospel, are very much an "either/or"

proposition. It starts with the contrast between lightness and darkness in the very first chapter, and ends by making sharp distinctions between those who believe Jesus is who he said he is, and those who don't.

There's no gray area there. Either you're with John's community, or you're firmly outside of it. As a result of that way of thinking, the people John calls *Ioudaioi* are definitely on the outside looking in. By association, so was any group which opposed Jesus openly relegated to being on the outside, whether they were contemporaneous with the writers of the gospel or not.[2] This rhetorical tactic effectively makes these *Ioudaioi* a "them," regardless of whether they were among the people who arrested Jesus, or were in the crowd, where the Christ-believers are "us." And, as you might expect, such a worldview only serves to increase the feelings of animosity and superiority which allows "us" to do whatever we think is right where the "them" are concerned.

What is so appealing about seeing the world as only an "either/or" proposition, instead of the "both/and" that it really is, is it gives concrete answers to why things are the way they are, without leaving any room for error or argument. It makes us feel better about being among the "right." It's what allows Pilate to make the choice to give in to the crowd, because it's either that, or losing his job because he could not keep the peace. It's what allows the writers of John to associate people who lived three generations before they did with the ones who hurt them so much in the present, and to paint them with the same tarry brush. And, it is what allows us, as the spiritual descendants of all of them, to continue to perpetuate the same ideas about who is "in" and who is "out" where

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[2] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, Francis J. Moloney, editor (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 157-170.

God is concerned. Those ideas have proven to be just as deadly and painful for everyone involved in their promotion as the iron spikes holding Jesus' body against the rough wood of the cross were for him.

The *Ioudaioi* didn't do this. Period. If we insist on looking for someone else to blame for what has happened, there is plenty of it to go around. The first place to look is among the individuals in this story who believe they are in the right, when they most decidedly are not. The crowds who push the leaders over the edge are wrong. The leaders, especially Pilate, who give in to their fears about what the crowd might do to them, are also wrong. But above all else, as the soldier standing guard next to the cross in Luke's version of this event observes, the execution of an innocent man is wrong. Jesus himself is the only one who is "right," when we tell it this way. And being "right", in this instance, means letting it happen, and trusting that God will take care of the rest in God's own way.