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The Gibeonites' deception. Jesus before Pilate and Herod.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Joshua 9. As soon as all the kings who were beyond the Jordan, in the hill country and in the lowland, all along the coast of the great sea toward Lebanon, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites heard of this, they gathered together as one to fight against Joshua and Israel. But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they on their own part acted with cunning, and went and made ready provisions, and took worn-out sacks for their donkeys, and wineskins, worn out and torn and mended, with worn-out patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes. And all their provisions were dry and crumbly.

And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel, We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us. But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, Perhaps you live among us, then how can we make a covenant with you? They said to Joshua, We are your servants. And Joshua said to them, Who are

you, and where do you come from? They said to him, From a very distant country your servants have come, because of the name of the Lord your God.

For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon the king of Heshbon, and to Og the king of Bashan, who lived in Ashteroth. So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us, Take provisions in your hand for the journey, and go meet them and say to them, We are your servants, come now, make a covenant with us. Here is our bread, it was still warm when we took it from our houses as our food for the journey on the day we set out to come to you, but now, behold, it is dry and crumbly.

These wineskins were new when we filled them, and behold, they have burst, and these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey. So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from the Lord. And Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them.

At the end of three days, after they had made a covenant with them, they heard that they were their neighbours, and that they lived among them. And the people of Israel set out and reached their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Kephira, Beroth, and Kiriath-jerim.

But the people of Israel did not attack them, because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel. Then all the congregation murmured against the leaders. But all the leaders said to all the congregation, We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them.

This we will do to them. Let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath that we swore to them. And the leaders said to them, Let them live.

So they became cutters of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation, just as the leaders had said of them. Joshua summoned them, and he said to them, Why did you deceive us, saying, We are very far from you, when you dwell among us? Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall never be anything but servants, cutters of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God. They answered Joshua, Because it was told to your servants for a certainty that the Lord your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land from before you.

So we feared greatly for our lives because of you and did this thing. And now, behold, we are in your hand. Whatever seems good and right in your sight to do to us, do it.

So he did this to them, and delivered them out of the hand of the people of Israel, and they did not kill them. But Joshua made them that day cutters of wood and drawers of

water for the congregation, and for the altar of the Lord to this day, in the place that he should choose. In Joshua chapter 9, when the kings of Canaan hear about the victory over Ai and Jericho, they gather together in war against Israel.

And there is an expression similar to when X heard that repeated at a few points in chapters 9-11 in verses 1 and 3 of chapter 9 and in verses 1 of chapter 10 and 11. However the Gibeonites, a local group condemned with the rest of the people of the land, devise a different plan. Their plan is to trick Joshua and the Israelites.

The Lord had given Israel instructions to destroy the people of the land. However they could treat people outside of the land on different terms. Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 10-18 reads, The little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves.

And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. But in the cities of those peoples that the Lord your God has given you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction.

The Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods. And so you sin against the Lord your God. The Gibeonites seemed to have some awareness of the terms that the Lord had set for Israel.

At least they knew that if they represented themselves as coming from far away, they would have a good chance of arriving at some terms of peace with Israel. The ruse of the Gibeonites might remind us of Israel's own ruse which they used to defeat Ai in the previous chapter. The Gibeonites pretend to come from a very far distance, but really they just lived to the northwest of Jerusalem.

They sought to make a covenant with Israel, something that Israel had been expressly warned against in Exodus 34, verses 12-16. Take care lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their asherim.

For you shall worship no other god. For the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous god. Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land.

And when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice and you take of their daughters for your sons. And their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. The Gibeonites were members of the Hivites and as such were condemned to destruction.

Joshua and the Israelites are initially wary. They want to make sure that they do in fact live far away. The Gibeonites present themselves as a distant people wanting to become a vassal of Israel, a people in service to them.

Joshua questions them further about their origin. And the Gibeonites give an answer designed to please Joshua and the people about the fame of the Lord and his victories in Egypt and the Transjordan and the way that the report had reached them. They show Joshua their supplies which gives the misleading impression that they had travelled a very great distance to them.

This would have given Joshua and the Israelites an encouraging impression of the spread of the fame of the Lord throughout the wider region. And the provisions are used as evidence for the story. It isn't exactly clear who examines or partakes of the food.

It could be either Joshua and the people or it could be the Gibeonites themselves demonstrating in their eating it. Israel ends up entering into the covenant with the Gibeonites without ever enquiring of the Lord. This is a fateful omission.

It leaves them wide open to the deception of the Gibeonites. And Joshua should have learnt some of the lessons from the initial failure at Ai when they failed to discover that the Lord was not on their side and trusted in their resources and ended up being defeated. Joshua makes a covenant of peace with the Gibeonites which is then ratified by the leaders of the people pledging to let the Gibeonites live.

But three days later the ruse is discovered and because they had made the solemn covenant with them they could not attack them. This causes unrest among the people who complain about the bad judgement of their leaders in the matter. At this point we might think back to the grumbling of the Israelites under Moses something that this generation had largely moved beyond.

But Joshua and the leaders clearly failed in this matter. To deal with their mistake they determine that the Gibeonites should be employed as slave labourers for Israel much as the sojourners mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 11. Joshua places them under a judgement.

He condemns them to menial service for the community and the house of the Lord. But in exchange their lives are saved. The Israelites covenant with the Gibeonites does not merely mean that they must not be put to death.

The Israelites now have a responsibility to the Gibeonites. They must come to the aid of the Gibeonites in the following chapter. The Gibeonites play a role later on in the story of Israel too.

The covenant with them remained in force centuries later. In 1 Samuel chapters 6 and 7 the Ark of the Lord remained at Kiriath-jerim one of the cities of the Gibeonites for about

20 years after it was returned from the land of Philistia. The rest of the tabernacle was situated at Gibeon for many years during David and Solomon's reigns.

This can be seen in 1 Chronicles chapter 16 verse 39 and 1 Kings chapter 3 verses 4 and 5 where Solomon has his dream when he is at Gibeon. It seems then that the Gibeonites were blessed with the custody of the Ark and the tabernacle at this point later in their history. Gibeonite cities are mentioned among Israel in Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 29 and the Gibeonites were involved in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in Nehemiah chapter 3 verse 7. In 2 Samuel chapter 21, the most notable story concerning the Gibeonites after this, there is a three year famine upon the land in the reign of David because Saul had broken the covenant with the Gibeonites that Joshua made at this point and had put them to death.

2 Samuel chapter 21 verses 1 to 3 Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the Lord. And the Lord said, There is blood guilt on Saul and on his house because he put the Gibeonites to death.

So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.

And David said to the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement that you may bless the heritage of the Lord? Centuries later then it seems, the covenant with the Gibeonites was still in effect. A question to consider, how might the Gibeonites remind us of the tribes of Simeon and Levi? What encouragement might the Gibeonites have taken from this? Luke chapter 23 verses 1 to 25 Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.

And Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered him, You have said so. Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, I find no guilt in this man. But they were urgent, saying, He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea from Galilee even to this place.

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus he was very glad, but he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him.

So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with

contempt and marked him.

Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people, and after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him.

Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him.

But they all cried out together, Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas, a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus. But they kept shouting, Crucify, crucify him! A third time he said to them, Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death.

I will therefore punish and release him. But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed.

So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will. Luke 23 begins with the assembly of the elders after their hearing, delivering Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

They accuse Jesus of forbidding paying tribute to Caesar, and of calling himself the Christ, or a king. Pilate questions Jesus concerning the charges against him. The charge that he claims that he is the king of the Jews is the messianic claim seen from a Gentile perspective.

Perhaps we should understand Pilate's question to Jesus as one that has a sarcastic tone. You are the king of the Jews? And Jesus' response to the question is also an edgy one. You are saying it.

One could imagine such an answer antagonising Pilate. But Pilate seems to know what's going on, and he openly declares that he finds no guilt in Jesus. But the leaders of the people are even more insistent in response.

They claim that he stirs up the people throughout the land, which is ironic, because that's exactly what they have been doing. When Pilate discovers that Jesus is a Galilean, he sends him to Herod, who was in Jerusalem at the time. This isn't because Pilate is suggesting that Jesus isn't in his jurisdiction.

Rather, he sends him to Herod because Herod, governing in Galilee, might have more

insight into the Galilean aspect of the case. It would also relieve Pilate of some of the pressure and responsibility of judgement in the matter. It is quite clear to Pilate that there is more to the situation than the leaders of the people are saying.

So he's probably very glad to relieve himself of some of the responsibility of the judgement. Herod, for his part, was very eager to meet Jesus. He had been speculating who Jesus was back in chapter 9, verse 7-9.

Now Herod the Tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. Herod said, Herod questions Jesus at great length, but Jesus gives Herod no reply, as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. However, the chief priests and the scribes are all the time loudly accusing him throughout the hearing.

Herod and his men end up mocking Jesus, the impression being given that they were influenced by the religious leaders. Jesus is dressed in a gorgeous or shining robe, maybe an ironic parody of the Transfiguration or some other sort of kingly enthronement. Herod is caught up in the spirit of the mob.

He ridicules Jesus with his own soldiers. And Luke makes a passing statement here that Herod and Pilate became friends that day, whereas formerly they had been at odds with each other. The rulers of this earth are united by their opposition to the Lord's Christ, as the apostles declare in their prayer in Acts 4, verses 26-28.

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. There is something further going on here, I think, about human psychology that is important, something explored in great detail in the work of René Girard.

Scapegoating unites people by a common enemy, and as a result can relieve or dissolve old antagonisms. Christ forms not just the unity of his people, but a sort of shadowy satanic unity in opposition to him. All the kings of the earth are gathered together with the rulers, against Christ.

That's what gives them their new unity. When Jesus is sent back to him, Pilate gathers the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and declares that neither he nor Herod found anything deserving of death in Jesus. He expresses his intention merely to punish, and then to release Jesus.

But the priests, the rulers and the people all cry out to do away with Jesus, and to

release Barabbas to them. Throughout the trial it is clear that the chief priests and the leaders of the Jews are the instigators and the drivers of everything. They are the ones that are pushing things ahead, the ones that take the great responsibility for what has happened.

Were it not for them, Jesus would not have been crucified. However, they successfully get the crowd on their side, and end up cowing Pilate into submission. The reference to Barabbas seems to assume what is mentioned in the other Gospels about the custom of Pilate at the time of the feast.

And Pilate is clearly rolling the dice here. He sees that he has an angry crowd, and the Jewish leaders against him, and doesn't want unrest. Barabbas serves as a foil for Jesus.

He's a murderous insurrectionist. Yet they prefer him over Jesus. And this is revealing, because if they truly cared about the sedition that they claimed to be delivering Jesus to Pilate for, Barabbas is precisely the sort of person they wouldn't want to go free.

And so in choosing Barabbas, the people choose the violent revolutionary over the true Messiah and Prince of Peace. This choice in embryo was the larger choice that Israel made, a choice that ultimately led to its destruction in AD 70. Pilate tries again to calm them down, and to release Jesus.

But now they insist that he be crucified, and he tries a third and last time, stating that he found nothing in him deserving of death. But the crowd gets even more vehement. The actions and the description of the crowd here is similar to the descriptions that we find elsewhere used of demon-possessed persons.

They're in a sort of demonic frenzy at this point. And the driving force within much of the narrative is the power and the violence of the mob, and the leaders who whip them up. Nothing proves capable of withstanding this power.

Even Pilate, who desires to release Jesus, is unable to resist it, and ultimately surrenders to it, and is absorbed into it. The mob will not be pacified without a victim, and Pilate is prepared to use someone such as Barabbas as a conveniently guilty scapegoat, upon which the fury of the crowd could be expended. But for the crowd, only Jesus would do.

More than any other writer, René Girard has explored the dynamics whereby a victim can act as a sort of lightning rod for the violence of society. The energy of the mob is like a social avalanche. It catches people up into it, and it crushes all that would stand in its way.

And those who are caught up in it are in the grip of a greater power. They are unaware of what they're truly doing. The behaviour of the crowd in the period of the betrayals, the trials, and the crucifixion of Christ, is akin to that of a possessed person.

The many individuals within the crowd fuse into a sort of single entity and actor, driven by a violent frenzy that none within it could truly withstand or understand. That sort of social contagion is an intoxicating and a powerful force. It gives a sense of unity, purpose, and an intoxicating sense of morality.

And all ends up bowing before its impulses. Principles of justice are abandoned. They fall by the wayside.

The governor entirely capitulates. He tries to reason and then to bargain with the mob, but he completely fails. And the result is that Jesus is put to death with the full sanction of Rome, but a sanction that has been wrested from Pilate on account of his fear of the crowd.

Pilate ends up underwriting mob justice, instigated by the religious leaders, who are envious of Jesus. It might be worth contrasting the unity of the mob with the unity of the church. The unity of the church is of a completely different spirit, literally, to the unity of the mob.

And the unity of the mob is characterised by violence, but the unity of the spirit is characterised by a witness to peace. A question to consider. What are some of the roles played by the crowd in the Gospel of Luke and in the Book of Acts?