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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
16 March 2008

Passion Sunday
At the Mass

Bringing the two prisoners before the people, Pontius Pilate asks them, "Which one do you want me to release to you, Barabbas, or Jesus called Christ" (Matthew 27:15)? This very same question is posed to each of us: which man do we want, Barabbas or Jesus?

Barabbas was a "notorious prisoner" (Matthew 27:16), a murderer (cf. Mark 15:7) who took part in an insurrection (Luke 23:19). He was known as a "robber," a code word for a resistance fighter (John 18:40). Some saw in Barabbas - and he in himself - a messianic figure, one who would deliver the people from Roman occupation. His name is composed of two parts, Bar Abbas. Bar means "son of" and Abbas means "father;" he is the son of the father.

The choice between Barabbas and Jesus is no mere coincidence; through Pilate, the tempter forces the people to choose between messiahs. The one promises freedom from foreign powers and the other promises freedom from sin and death.

Up until the third century, this Barabbas was referred to as "Jesus son of the father" in the Gospel manuscripts. We see, then, that

Barabbas figures here as a sort of alter ego of Jesus, who makes the same claim but understands it in a completely different way. So the choice is between a Messiah who leads an armed struggle, promises freedom and a kingdom of one's own, and this mysterious Jesus who proclaims that losing oneself is the way to life. Is it any wonder that the crowds prefer Barabbas? ...If we had to choose today, would Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, the Son of the Father, have a chance? Do we really know Jesus at all? Do we understand him? Do we not perhaps have to make an effort, today as always, to get to know him all over again? The tempter is not so crude as to suggest to us directly that we should worship the devil. He merely suggests that we opt for the reasonable decision, that we choose to give priority to a planned and thoroughly organized world, where God may have his place as a private concern but must not interfere in our essential purposes.¹

We have a choice, then, between two sons of the father. Which one will we choose?

¹ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Adrian J. Walker, trans. (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 41.

Through Barabbas, the tempter offers us a life and world fashioned after our own designs; Barabbas promises what so many others promise: peace, prosperity and a brighter future. But "what did Jesus bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world? What has he brought? The answer is very simple: God. He has brought God."²

He has brought us God, and now we know his face, now we can call upon him. Now we know the path that we human beings have to take in this world. Jesus has brought God and with God the truth about our origin and destiny: faith, hope, and love. It is only because of our hardness of heart that we think this too little... To the tempter's lying divinization of power and prosperity, to his lying promise of a future that offers all things to men through power and wealth - he responds with the fact God is God, that God is man's true Good.³

² *Ibid.*, 44.

³ *Ibid.*, 44, 45.