

A question is asked; was the use of the term "John Doe" for an unknown person, first used in the Bible?

## **JOHN DOE**

"The Passion of our Lord according to St. Matthew."

"Thanks be to God," comes the congregation's response.

Descending from the pulpit, Father John stands at the top of the center aisle.

"As we approach the celebration of Easter, we hear in today's reading 'Father, Abba, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me; but not what I will, but what you will.

"And the gospel writer goes on to describe Jesus' passion and death. But there is something he leaves out."

Looking at the congregation, the associate pastor allows a knowing smile to amble across his face.

"Every one of us were part of that event that fateful Friday," he says.

"We were all there ...

"All of us stood with Pilate and Jesus before the mob.'

**Hi, Tony here. It's Palm Sunday, here at St. Kate's, and as is traditional the entire passion narrative Lord is read and recited by the celebrant of the mass, selected readers and the entire congregation.**

**The reading finished; Father John begins his brief sermon. From his opening words, and the attention he has engendered in his flock, this might be an interesting few minutes.**

***What do you say we sit back in the pew listen.***

**"As some of you are aware, I enjoy collaborating with a fellow clergyman in composing our words for these Sunday morning talks. We meet, as is our habit, at Sam's Bistro. Sam's delightful cinnamon rolls help get the creative juices flowing."**

**Pausing a moment, an impish grin animates Father John's face.**

**"And my expanding waistline is a testament to her talents," he adds looking toward the back rows.**

**A murmur of soft laughter rolls through the congregation as Sam, with her little girl Emily Ann, sitting in one of the pews, chuckles and blushes slightly.**

**"This past week, though, my friend was ill. So, thinking I was going to be on my own, I was surprised**

to find our parish adult education director, Joey, at our usual table.

"It seems Thursday morning's storm left parts of the city without power, including Joey's shop. So, forced to close, he headed to Sam's for some coffee and a late morning breakfast bagel."

Pausing a moment, Father John sips from a bottle of water on a small table to his left, then continues.

"Now, when I said we were all there with Pilate and our Lord, obviously I'm not speaking of being physically present; but figuratively we all were."

Listening attentively, the faces of the congregation register curiosity to confusion. Seems Fr. John has everyone's attention.

"How?" you ask.

"Well, it was Joey who brought an interesting thought to my attention. Something I hadn't really thought of. Joey asked if we were all present in one of the minor characters.

"Guess who." Father John asks, smiling gently.

Silence.

"Who is that minor figure, you ask? Any guesses?"

The congregation remains silent for a moment, then little Danny Farley, in his usual pew with his mom and dad, raises his hand.

"Mary, his mother," the boy says.

"Good guess, Danny," Father John says, tousling the young man's hair. "But, no, I'm thinking of someone else."

"John, the apostle, who stood with Mary," comes another answer from a small voice in a pew to Father's right.

"Again, a good guess young lady, but that's not who I'm thinking of."

Silence ensues with no further answers forthcoming.

"Barabbas," the priest says.

"Now, again, we weren't physically there; yet might Barabbas be the metaphorical figure in whom we see ourselves; is Barabbas all of us? This is what Joey asked. And when I thought about it, I could see where Joey was going with his idea.

"Barabbas was condemned and similarly, we all were. Barabbas, to earthly crucifixion; all of us to an eternal death. A fate far worse than crucifixion."

Shifting in the pews, the congregation focuses their attention more intently on the priest.

"As we just heard, when Pilate didn't want to crucify Jesus, he offered to release another man to them, the man we know as Barabbas. He is described in various gospels as a murderer, a bandit, a revolutionary, and a thief.

"And it was at that point Joey posed a question I'd never thought before; was the name Barabbas the first century equivalent of our modern-day term, John Doe? Was Barabbas just some unknown thug hauled out of the depths of the prison by Pilate to offer the mob in an attempt to avoid condemning Jesus? Remember, Pilate publicly said he found no fault in Jesus.

"Joey went on to say that he'd done some research as to try to find out more about this man. And what he came up was interesting.

"Barabbas is an interesting name. You see, bar abbas means, 'son of the father.'" That form is known as a patronymic; Aramaic in this case, denoting the lineage of a man through the father. From his research, Joey said there's some speculation the name was actually, 'bar rabban'; son of the teacher; son of the rabbi, It is an interesting possibility; the son of a rabbi who influenced his son to wage a war against the invading Romans. And over time, 'bar rabban' somehow became 'bar abbas'? Both of us found it to be an intriguing thought.

"Now follow me for a minute. Jesus' name, as he was known growing up in Nazareth, was Yeshua bar Joseph; Yeshua, son of Joseph. Closer to home, Joey would be Joseph bar Michael; I would be John bar Michael as both our dads were named Michael. But bar abba is generic, not particular to any named father. So, might 'bar abba' son of the father, or Barabbas, be a generic reference to a person whose name was lost to history?

"After all, in effect, we are all children of a Heavenly Father.

"The gospels are short on names. Outside of his disciples, Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, Bartimaeus, and a few others the names of the people Jesus encountered, cured, and even raised from the dead are not recorded. The name of the young, rich Jewish man, Jairus' daughter, the widow at Nain and her son, the Centurion whose servant Jesus cured, the wise and foolish virgins, the worthless steward, the paralytic, the man born blind, and others are nameless. Yet the thug offered the crowd was uniformly recorded by all four gospel writers, forty or more years after Jesus' ascension.

"Think about it; maybe the gospel writers were trying, in an allegorical way, to emphasize not just a single individual, but the entirety of mankind stood on that platform with Pilate and our Lord, condemned to death."

Pausing to let his question sink in, Father John again sips from the bottle of water, then continues.

"This is how the gospels are to be read; as a living event and not just the words of a simple historical story.

"When we consider the scene with Pilate, Jesus, and Barabbas in that light, it's fair to ask, was Barabbas just an anonymous thug to be crucified? Did Pilate, believing Jesus not to be guilty, offer the mob a heinous criminal, thinking they wouldn't let a despicable brute go free in favor of crucifying one of their own rabbis?

**"And, is it possible the gospel writers, like the rest of the crowd, did not know the thugs name and used the John Doe of the day, Barabbas, as his moniker? Might a bit of analogy be the purpose of the writers?"**

**"That. In our own way, we're all ... Barabbas."**

**Returning to the altar to continue the celebration, Father John turns to the congregation.**

**"Peace."**

**The passion of our Lord is read at every Catholic Mass on Palm Sunday. Do we hear it merely as a narrative story of an historical event?**

**Sacred Scripture, though inspired by the Holy Spirit, was written by men. With that in mind, were the four writers borrowing from each other? It's a fair question. After all, there are conundrums in Scripture. The gospels don't agree on the number of women at the tomb on Easter morning, or the actions of the two men crucified with Jesus. The passion narrative differs slightly from writer to writer, and other small inconsistencies exist. Yet years later, as age and time dim the memories of men, the identity of a minor character, a nameless thug, is clearly remembered by all four gospel writers ?**

**As Father John said, the point we all might well want to take to heart is to realize Barabbas, is a metaphor for each and every one of us.**

**In the person of Barabbas, a man condemned to die, did we all stand, with Pilate and Jesus on that platform, condemned ...**

**... and like Barabbas, were set free... as the Lamb of God  
...**

**... was sacrificed for the sake of the wolves.**

**Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.**

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