



Barabbas in the TV drama *Once we were Slaves*
(from Shine TV at <http://www.shinetv.co.nz>)

It had been the kind of day that wilts skin and bakes the ground to brittle brick. Even as the sun was sinking low, burnt red dropping into the distant hills, the pitiless heat still shimmered up from the earth, as people came up along the straight Roman road toward the wells. These deep artesian wells which provided the only source of water for many miles around, these wells were not only a watering spot. They were also the center for much of the social interaction and conversation of the people who lived in this region. Scattered among the hard-scrabble farms which dotted the arid landscape, these people were often found gathered here at the hour of dusk, drawing water from the wells to wash away the dusty grime of another day in the fields, and trading news about the plentiful pain and scarce joys so typical to the

crushing lives of country folk anywhere since the dawn of time.

Tonight, there was an especially large crowd gathered at the wells. Because the stranger from the south that so many people had talked about was going to speak to them. He was indeed strange to the eyes of most of the people who lived in this land just north of the Kishon River, between the town of Cana on the east and the great sea to their west. These people dwelled in the border lands between Galilee and Phoenicia. They were a long way from just about everywhere, and most of their news about the goings on in the great cities of the day was delivered by travelers who stopped at the wells to refresh themselves from their journey along the Roman Road, that same road which now shimmered in the lingering heat at the last labored breaths of the dying day.

And one of these travelers had been the strange man from the South, a man who said he came from the great city of Jerusalem. People who had met this stranger said he had an incredible story to tell. And tonight he would tell that story to anyone who wished to listen, here at the wells. So, the people came from their labor in the hard-baked earth, they came and stood or squatted on the ground, fanning out from where the stranger sat on a low stone wall which marked one of the water wells. When the crowd had grown silent, he began to speak.

In a gentle voice, he started telling the folk gathered at his feet about a man named Jesus. And this man, who had been born in a home of poor people, much like them, this man Jesus had been marked by God as someone special. "In fact," the stranger from the South said, "In fact this man Jesus was actually the man that the Jews of Judea had been waiting for for thousands of years. Because this man Jesus, you see was God's very own Son. And to prove He was God's son," the stranger from the south went on, "This man Jesus had not only lived a perfect life, sinless and overflowing with love for everyone around Him. This man Jesus had also done mighty, miraculous acts of love to prove he was the one everybody had been waiting for. Why, he had turned ordinary water into the most excellent wine at a wedding party just a few miles to the east of the wells in a town called Cana, and everybody there listening to the stranger's story that night, everyone knew exactly where the town of Cana was. And," the stranger said, "This man Jesus had walked on water up to a boat that was floundering in a heavy storm and calmed the wind and waves with nothing more than his words. And he had healed countless people from terrible diseases, and made the lame walk and the blind see, and fed thousands and thousands of people from just the food of a little boy's lunch."

Why, this man Jesus had even raised a man from the dead in a small town not far from Jerusalem. And all of these acts of love and power, well they had worried people. These miracles done by Jesus had really stirred up some people. Because, you see the people who are rich and powerful, the people who control the money and the politics in any country, well these people in charge never really want things to change.

The people at the top never really desire change, not even if this change is good for people, because you see change means the people at the top don't get to be at the top any more. So, when this wonderful, sinless, loving man Jesus started doing all these amazing things to change the world and make it a better, brighter, more beautiful kind of place, well these people at the top starting conniving plans to eliminate this incredible man called Jesus. You see, they decided to murder him."

And Jesus, well, he knew all about these horrible plans to do him in. Because Jesus knew what was in the hearts of everybody around Him. That's what it means to be the Son of God, to know the hearts of God's children. But even though he knew exactly what these wicked people planned to do to him, that didn't stop Jesus. He still road into Jerusalem one day, with people all around him crying shouts of victory. 'Alleluia,' everybody cried. 'Adonai Hosa na!'. 'Lord God Save us,' the people cried, the verse from Psalms, the prayer of the Prophet Ezekiel that can only be made to God himself and to his son.¹ And the evil leaders of Jerusalem knew exactly what that meant. And their hearts melted like wax within them."

So, those evil men didn't waste any more time. They trumped up some charges, framed Jesus for things they knew couldn't possibly be true. And they paid one of His friends to betray Him. One night these evil leaders at the top gathered a band of violent men, and they ran out and caught up with Jesus and his friends while they were praying and resting in a beautiful garden. They tied him up and dragged him into court."

And here, a strange thing happened. In this Roman Court, the Governor Pontius Pilate had an annual tradition. He would pardon a criminal of the people's choosing once a year. So Pilate asked the crowd to choose. Pilate made the crowd choose whether they wanted him to pardon a convicted thief and murder, the most sinful kind of man, or whether Pilate should release Jesus. And that crowd, those same people who had been shouting with joy just a few days before, proclaiming this Jesus the Son of God, this same crowd now starting screaming, 'Free the murderer, and crucify Jesus! Crucify Jesus!'"

"And, do you know," the stranger from the south said, "What you need to understand is that freeing a sinful man and crucifying Jesus is exactly what God intended all along. Because, you see, this Jesus, this wondrous, perfect loving man, this Son of God, He had to be crucified so that a sinner could be set free. That was the trade, you see. The perfect man, the sinless Lord of love had to go to the cross in the place of someone else, so that sinner could be set free. Only then, by God sacrificing His own Son, could a sinner's life be spared and saved."

The stranger from the south bowed his head then and said nothing for a long while. The crowd was silent. People shuffled a little uncomfortably. Finally someone in the crowd said, "Mr. I didn't catch your name." The stranger looked up at that point, and he answered quietly, "My name is Barabbas."

And the truth is, brothers and sisters, on this Good Friday evening, we all of us stand condemned before our Creator God. We are all of us unworthy to enter into His court and stand before the Lord, for we are broken, and flawed, and have indeed all of us fallen short of God's glory. And the only way any of us can truly be numbered among the redeemed, the only way you and I could ever hope to obtain the citizenship of God's Kingdom was for that beautiful man, the Lord of perfect love to offer himself in sacrifice so that you and I can be set free. So, you see, we are all Barabbas.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 04/04/16

¹ See Ps.118:25 and Ezk.23:5-6