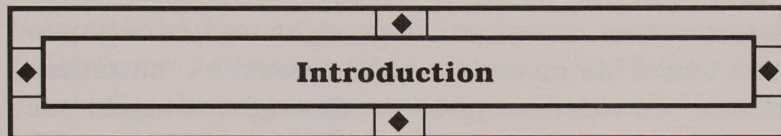


Doing the Right Thing*

Isaiah 53: 1-12

Luke 23: 13-25



When all is said and done, one of life's great achievements is doing the right thing. For many of us, we place a premium on *knowing* the right thing as an assemblage of information. *Doing* the right thing is a matter of conduct, of ethics. A great fissure exists between what we know and what we do. Sin, war, strife and most of the mental and physical anguish we face is caused by the dichotomy between what we know and what we do.

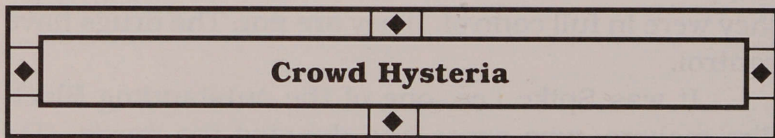
Drug addiction is a plague on our houses from which few of us are spared. This surrender is the result of the gulf between knowing and doing. Most persons trapped in this dilemma would not choose addiction if they were in full control. They are not. The drugs have control.

It was Spike Lee, one of the outstanding Black film makers, who wrote and directed the movie, "Do the Right Thing." Lee, in his usual graphic and no-holds-barred manner, raised the question of doing the right thing in race relations. We would like to think that this is no longer a major problem in American life. Such is not the case, however. In many ways it is more

*April 1993

internalized today than during the 1960s. My greatest concern is that many teenagers and college students, Black and white, have deep-seated race hatreds. This should be of concern to each of us. In many circles today right and wrong are relative terms. There are no standardized norms to judge right and wrong, good and bad. This has come to be known as "situational ethics." In attempting to do the right thing in race relations, someone will usually ask, "Which right thing?" "For whom is it right?"

The events leading up to and including Calvary address the question of doing the right thing. First, this matter needs to be discussed from the perspective of the crowd that demanded Jesus' death. Second, doing the right thing can be seen in the context of Pilate's and Herod's lack of courage. Then, finally, doing the right thing is demonstrated in Jesus' last words on the cross, "Father, I place myself in your hands." In each we have examples of humanity's response to matters of life and death. This, it seems to me, is what Good Friday is about, a matter of life and death.



All of the cards were stacked against Jesus. He was not the target of people foreign to himself; rather, he was victimized by his own people. They plotted to kill him, and Judas, one of his followers, betrayed him with a kiss. Peter denied that he knew him. The crowds, with whom he worshipped and worked, demanded his death.

ROBERT W. WOODRUFF LIBRARY

Crowd hysteria is fickle. People aroused are capable of almost anything. Shortly before Jesus was arrested he was greeted in Jerusalem by throngs of people shouting loud hosannas. They spread palm branches as he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem. One would think that he were a Roman legionnaire marching into Rome, following world conquest. What went wrong? Indeed, what ever goes wrong in human relations? When crowds reject you, truth goes out the window and defamation of character can be anticipated. Doing the right thing under these circumstances has no chance of being achieved.

The crowd that argued before the Sanhedrin Council used three charges against Jesus, all of which were vicious. The first claimed that Jesus was seditious, agitating against Rome. Rome had built its power through the acquisition of numerous vassal states throughout all of Asia Minor, and Palestine was no exception. The crowd knew they could raise doubts in Herod's mind concerning Jesus' loyalty, achieving their evil intent.

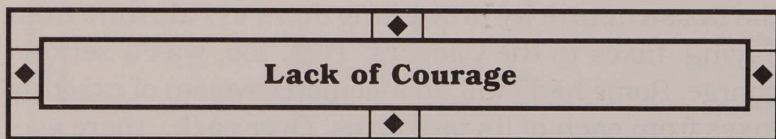
The second claim accused Jesus of undercutting the tax structure by preventing Jews in Palestine from paying taxes to the Caesars. This, too, was a serious charge. Rome had built an ingenious system of exacting taxes from each of its provinces. Over each, there was a Procurator. Then, too, it made Roman citizens of its conquered masses. Accusing Jesus of interfering in tax matters was highly inflammatory.

Thirdly, the crowd applied the *coup de grâce*, charging Jesus of proclaiming himself king. This, potentially, was the most serious accusation. A king must have the loyalty and support of his followers. If

Jesus were truly a king, he would, therefore, be a serious threat to Herod and the Ceasars. Surely this charge weighed heavily on the hearts and minds of the Sanhedrin.

Thinking their case so strong that it could not be refuted, the rabble applied more pressure. It was customary during the Passover to free a prisoner. Barabbas was a Zealot and had been jailed for initiating a riot in the city. In the course of the disturbance a man was killed. Barabbas was guilty; however, the crowd asked that Jesus be killed and Barabbas released.

At this point, the crowd in Jerusalem was incapable of doing the right thing. Truth had been compromised and right had been sacrificed. Logic had been mortgaged to hysteria. Whenever these things happen today, the results are the same. This is why it is absolutely necessary to preserve the rule of law. Whenever vigilantism prevails we subject ourselves to the conditions that occurred at the "kangaroo court" where Jesus was tried and found guilty.



We have ample cause to question the ethical conduct of Herod and Pilate. Doing the right thing comes into serious question with their unwillingness to exercise the courage of their convictions. Whenever people in high places are unwilling to rule impartially, anarchy always results. The only possible response for the courts in Los Angeles was to find the overzealous

ROBERT W. WOODRUFF LIBRARY

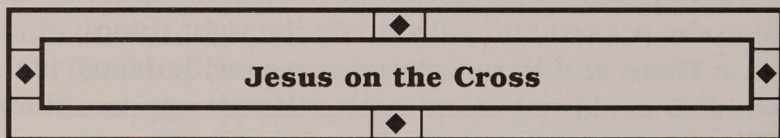
policemen guilty of beating Rodney King. Failure to do so will be yet another indication that "lady justice" is not really capable of fairness, is not really blind. Last year she peaked and failed to do the right thing.

Pilate and Herod played games with Jesus' life. The two could not stand each other. It appears that Pilate, on the one hand, dealt too harshly on numerous occasions with people from Herod's jurisdiction. Herod, on the other hand, was a secret admirer of Jesus and wanted to meet him, not so much to affirm his divinity as to test his ability to work miracles. Herod wanted to see if Jesus were really John the Baptist returned to life, a reincarnated Elijah or another of the prophets. Pilate could have ended the trial, freeing Jesus. For he stated publicly that he was innocent. However, rather than freeing Jesus, he succumbed to the crowd, turning him over to Herod. Jesus was also found innocent by Herod, who, rather than free him, returned him to Pilate.

Again, Pilate had a chance to do the right thing. Rather than exercise moral authority he weaseled, avoiding an act of courage. Both had washed their hands of responsibility. Doing the right thing is always the result of having the courage of one's convictions; taking a stand for truth is basic. Jesus said on one occasion, "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free."

Jesus' death at Calvary is one of history's dark moments, a time when cowardice overcame the potential good. Who was it that said, "The best way for evil to triumph is for the good to do nothing?" Evil triumphed at Calvary and those capable of doing the right thing failed to act responsibly. They lacked the courage of their convictions, listening to the clamor of

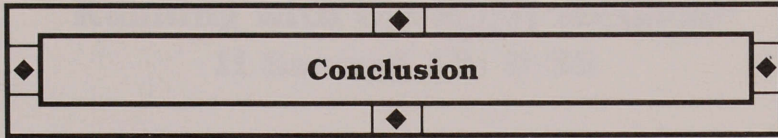
the crowd rather than the spark of divinity within themselves.



A third party was at Calvary. The crowds were there and Pilate and Herod were there. Jesus was there, too, but nailed to a cross, scourged and pierced in the side, hanging between two known criminals. Even they recognized his divinity, asking for an intercession when he came into his Kingdom. One would think that all was lost. All that he had championed was now in question. No longer would he be in place to inspire noble actions and to lift the downtrodden. All hope was gone as Jesus' family and friends saw his life slipping. I imagine that wails of agony were heard from onlookers. Though only twelve o' clock, the sky turned black; clouds obscured the sun; death was imminent.

As the last ounce of strength left his body, Jesus cried out, "Father, I place myself in your hands." Having said this, he died. This, my Christian friends, is history's most outstanding example of a positive ethical decision. This single act became the culminating event that spanned the chasm between God's will for us and our inclination to act irresponsibly. This selfless act made it possible for each of us to survive the surly bonds of our earthly existence and experience eternal life with God.

ROBERT W. WOODRUFF FOUNDATION



Conclusion

As World War II was grinding to a halt and the allied forces were winning and losing battles, a news release appeared upon the Time-Life Building at 42nd and Seventh Avenue, New York City. In neon lights the news would circle the building. As the people watched, there came the sentence, "Allies lose." Cries of shock and horror could be heard. Their worst fears had been realized. Concern for loved ones flashed in their minds and hearts. As these anxious onlookers stood gazing at the Time-Life Building, the news continued to roll, "Allies lose minor skirmish, however, the Axis powers have surrendered. The war is over." As Paul Harvey says, "And now you know the rest of the story."

Good Friday is but the penultimate event. The ultimate event occurred three days later—Easter—the completion of the story. You cannot stop at Good Friday. To do so is to *miss* the grand finale. You will miss the opportunity of experiencing the chains of death fall as if severed by the blacksmith's hammer. To stop at Good Friday is to *miss* seeing death conquered and swallowed up in victory. To stop at Good Friday is to *miss* the transfer of hope from Christ to the hope we have as those who profess his name. Easter, like all Christian drama, ends in victory. This triumph, even in the midst of human waywardness, assures us that God always does the right thing.

ROBERT W. WOODRUFF LIBRARY