

Views from the pews: Christians and Public Opinion

There's a point in Bach's St Matthew Passion where the composer abandons his baroque harmonic manners and has the crowd discordantly baying for blood; 'Barabas'!!! they cry across three terrifying syllables before the sinister chorus begins – 'Let Him be crucified'!

This we believe is the same crowd that greeted Jesus so joyfully on that first Palm Sunday. A lot had changed in five days.

St Matthew at Chapters 20 and 21 is clear that a 'great crowd' followed Jesus out of Jericho, and that 'all the city was stirred' upon his entry into Jerusalem. So it is highly challenging to find at Chapter 27 that that (same?) crowd is there again, but now, with their messianic hopes dashed, it is Barabas they want freed, and it is Jesus who must stumble uphill to Golgotha.

Pilate behaves here like many other politicians. Matthew is clear that Pilate knew of the chief priests' and elders' 'fake news'. Pilate makes one more effort to get off the hook by asking for evidence of the evil Jesus has supposed to have done, but when the mob ducks the question and again bays for blood, he turns away and washes his hands.

There are lessons here, which are challenging for us dedicated supporters of democracy. We seem to be wedded to decisions made by majority vote. After all, was last year's General Election in New Zealand not determined by a few minutes' simple arithmetic, giving us a peaceful, orderly and constitutional outcome, in contrast to the muddle and uncertainty that was to befall (for example) the United States?

A few minutes spent with Matthew and JS Bach may be all that's required to prompt some troubling reflection. Crowds are easily manipulated – as the chief priests well knew, even though they had no access to social media then. Armed with that new technology, Donald Trump is better even than the chief priests, a chillingly efficient master of the dark arts of manipulating his crowds of supporters. How much longer can we go on accepting Churchill's optimistic view of democratic government? Should we not learn something from the drastic outcome of Britain's referendum on the Brexit idea in 2016?

The message for us is: Stop, pray, think, before we click 'agree' or 'disagree'.

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