

Today's Devotional is provided by Peter Covington

Another Day in the Sandbox

The passion of Jesus had an emotional effect on his surroundings. Jerusalem slips into a kind of gloom as the time of Jesus' death approaches.

Being a bureaucrat subject to orders myself, I see this mood hit the hardworking Roman soldiers the hardest, those physically in the middle of, but spiritually far on the outside, of these important events.

During Jesus' triumphal entry into the city, the Roman grunts had a trying day of crowd control. It was difficult because the Romans were culturally very different from the Hebrews, and there was historically little blending of the two cultures. I imagine the Roman soldiers rolling their eyes when they learned that it was just another Jewish religious "nobody" who was the cause of all the fuss. The crowd seems quite boisterous as they put down palm fronds and their own clothes to pave Jesus entry, and such enthusiasm does not make crowd control easy, especially if the cause of the emotion seemed so "foreign."



In the same way, when I used to work in government purchasing, often colleagues come into my office quite emotional about a certain purchase and how urgently it was needed. But I had no sense of it's purpose or place in the big picture, so I could only refer them to the policies in place to make the system orderly and ask them to calm down as I refused to

give them special treatment.

The soldiers' job to keep order soon became more difficult and dangerous, as angry crowds gathered first outside Herod's palace then Pilate's residence to yell, carry on and try to influence the leaders' decisions. "Troublemakers" would have been visible stoking emotion in the crowds, increasing potential danger to the puppet rulers and heightening soldiers' anxious sense of duty. But they could little but watch because the disrupters had done nothing illegal. The soldiers waited, ready.

This helpless anxiety is not an excuse for unleashing their frustrations on the helpless prisoner, Jesus. The garrison was ordered to flog Jesus as Pilate tried to appease the crowd, but the soldiers released their own frustration on Jesus as they pushed a crown of thorns on his head, mocked him and beat him with whatever they found at hand.

Government workers unfortunately have those days where the weight of duty feels too much and they react ignorantly. To my shame, I sometimes take out my frustration on a customer, or at home, kick my poor dog when he gets in my way, or in turn demand too much of clerks trying to help me. To avenge ourselves on the powerless never makes us more powerful, but only makes us bullies, paying pain forward instead of good. As a worker for an Empire which feels out of control at times, I can also afford the soldiers a little more humanity as well as share some of their guilt for those kinds of actions.

Then it got harder for the legion. On the way to Crucifixion, they had to keep the prisoners moving and keep the crowds out of the way. Even there the locals would have seemed especially frustrating as some wanted to touch Jesus or aid him while others seemed to be insulting him in a language the soldiers could not understand.

Any sense of morose or guilt in executing people or gambling for their clothes as they died, or physically pounding spikes into a man's flesh, or breaking the legs of criminals to make them die more quickly would likely be lost on war-hardened soldiers. They remind us of the potential for evil that rests in standard operating procedures ("just following orders").

Jesus forgave the soldiers because "they know not what they do." As a government worker, I hope that is never my excuse.

I remember that people have bent the rules to accommodate me more times than I can count. I want to be that check, that safety valve to keep mindless rules from hurting people, to follow the rules accompanied by a heart of compassion. That is sometimes the best we can do.