Holy hate: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

by Michael A. King in the Nov 13, 2007 issue

They were no angels. Whatever else they did or didn't do, or hoped to do, they hired strippers. Then prosecutor Mike Nifong charged them with rape, Duke University turned on the boys involved and the media feasted on what these white jocks gone wild had done.

Along with many others, I hated them. In the 1960s, jocks gone wild like these had taunted the nerd I was in high school. I was sure that these spoiled rich boys deserved the punishment my boyhood accusers should have faced.

Jesus, who came to bring good news to the poor and let the oppressed go free, who embodied the Jeremiah 23 dream of one who would "reign as king and deal wisely, and . . . execute justice and righteousness in the land," would have hated those rich boys too, we think. He would have chastized the offenders.

Except things got complicated. The villains turned out likely to be victims of false accusations. One victim apparently shredded young lives with lies. We could hate *her*, then, but even better to hate one who exploited lies for his own gain.

Nifong became the new villain, a prosecutor who cared nothing about evidence but only about ensuring his own reelection. Thank God Nifong had no redeeming qualities to complicate our righteous judgment. He deserved to pay for his sins. "Mr Nifong was clearly one of the worst," as the *Economist* said (September 15), so it was good to see him sit there, abjectly apologizing, even spending a night in jail, the mighty one fallen so those he oppressed might go free.

We could also hate those who had abetted Nifong, like "Mr Nifong's enablers in the Duke faculty" who, as the *Economist* asserted, "have learned nothing from it all. . . . Even after it was clear that the athletes were innocent, 87 faculty members published a letter categorically rejecting calls to recant their condemnation."

I even found myself tempted to hate the *Economist*, as it was so eager to turn the story into one more example of political correctness run amok. One could wonder if Nifong was the latest victim of mob justice. Was this finally the truth, or just the

latest turn of a tale shot through with enough sin, ambiguity and hate to lure us all into its cesspool?

Thank God I at least was smart enough to wonder this. Thank God I was able to evaluate the sins in everyone else and even in myself, to see not only their own hate but also to acknowledge my own, and in so doing to be one step holier than the rest of the rabble.

Despair tempts. How do we climb out of the sewer of holier-than-thou-ness? Iraq: an Evil One once empowered by the U.S. hangs from a noose the U.S. helped weave. As blood and chaos flood the dictator's former killing fields, war supporters hate peace lovers' inability to hang tough in the name of freedom. Peace-and-justice lovers hate warmakers' blind inability to see that war is not the answer.

Israel: Six million of us were gassed, but now God gives us this homeland. Palestine: You took our homes; God will help us wipe you off the map.

Democrat versus Republican: Whatever you believe is wrong; I'm right. You will destroy this country. We all seem to be joining in that chorus, hating when the world so needs wisdom instead.

How strange then to hear of one so hated that they crucify him. We wait for his holier-than-they victory. Some have said he is the Son of God. Surely his editorial commentary on what has been done to him will be riveting. At last here we'll find a hero with whom we can in legitimate holiness hate all the rest.

He offers his thoughts: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

What happens next sounds like 2007, perhaps even straight from the blogosphere. First leaders mock him: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" Then come soldiers, "offering him sour wine and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'" Even a criminal hanging on a cross beside him is eager to join the hating game. He keeps "deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'"

Just one alternate voice is heard. Another criminal on his own cross rebukes the mocking criminal: "'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what

we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’”

This man has done nothing wrong. Maybe this means that he is the only one who has been able fully to resist our ceaseless craving to take one more step behind the other’s sin to claim, “You’re wrong, but I’m right.” If so, how this only one who has never done wrong behaves when the whole world mockingly assures him “we’re right; you’re wrong” may be worth copying. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Except that we and I, who have done so much wrong, must add one more variation: “Father, also forgive me; for I do not know what I am doing.”

Maybe that would be our way of yielding to this King—not only those mocking him but all of us drowning today in our mutual holy hate. Maybe that would stop our mad determination to be the last righteous one standing.