

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – WEDNESDAY, 27TH MARCH 2024
PROFESSOR TINA BEATTIE, writer and Catholic theologian

This week, as Christians around the world enter into the drama of the last days of Jesus's earthly life, the Gospels describe some of the darkest aspects of human behaviour. I find myself thinking especially of the fickleness of the crowds.

On Palm Sunday they welcomed Jesus with joyful hosannas as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. A few days later they were calling for him to be crucified. Offered a choice by Pontius Pilate as to whether he should release the notorious prisoner Barabbas or Jesus, they chose Barabbas. Bowing to the will of the crowd, even though he knew that an innocent man would be condemned to death, Pilate washed his hands of the situation. This story seems to me highly relevant for today, as we reflect on the threats posed to democracy by populist politics and the power of social media.

More voters than ever before are going to the polls this year, with elections in at least 64 countries. Hardwon rights and freedoms hang in the balance, with public opinion being increasingly vulnerable to the influence of fake news and artificial intelligence, and with many unscrupulous politicians willing to appeal to people's most base instincts. The crowds surrounding Jesus are evidence of the extent to which groups are vulnerable to the power of emotivism and political and religious manipulation, and how easily public opinion can be swayed. In times such as these, each of us surely has to ask what we stand for, and why.

Before his death in a Siberian prison, Russian dissident Alexei Navalny said that his Christian faith gave him the courage to stand by his beliefs. He said he was motivated by the words of Jesus: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6, NASB). He said he knew that people who say such things are often branded as "pathetic loners", and he said of the Russian authorities that they sought to prove "that no normal or sane person would adhere to teachings of this kind."

Few of us will have to pay as high a price for our principles as Navalny did, and nobody wants to be a pathetic loner. But to hunger and thirst for righteousness sometimes means swimming against the tide, with the risk of being mocked or condemned for our beliefs. It means having the integrity and honesty to recognise where our own prejudices and fears make us vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation, and where we too might be so swayed by the desire to fit in with the crowd that our hosannas turn to cries of crucifying hatred.