

Towards Easter – Plotting to Kill Jesus

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 2, Isaiah 52:13-15 & 53, John 11:45-57, Romans 3:21-26

Today's topic raises, what I consider to be, one of the worst elements of Christian history but one that we need to be aware of and address honestly and reflectively. History has regularly spoken of the Jewish plot to kill Jesus. The technical term is "**Jewish deicide**". For many years, even centuries, there was an historic belief among some Christians and the general populace that the Jewish people as a whole were responsible for the death of Jesus. When Jesus was put on trial before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Matthew's gospel (27:24-25) tells us that "**When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!" and "All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children!"**" By applying the actions of some to the whole Jewish race the *antisemitic slur "Christ-killer" was used by mobs to incite violence against Jews and contributed to many centuries of pogroms, the murder of Jews during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and during the Holocaust*¹. This has been a travesty of the highest proportion and has distorted our view of the Scriptures and indeed of Jesus. Jesus was a Jew. He grew up in a Jewish household. The disciples were Jewish. Jesus came first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. The Jewish people have a special relationship with God that the Lord has confirmed by Covenants that He will never break. The actions of a particular group of Jews and corrupt leaders have consequences for the population, of course they do, we see this right through the Scriptures, but individual people are not defined by those leaders any more than any of us are defined by the actions of malcontents in our society. Walking through the Holocaust Museum in Washington last year the inhumanity of humanity brought me to tears. Jesus died to bridge gaps, to bring people together, to demonstrate sacrificial love and God's love for all people. That evil could so distort reality as to make God's Chosen people the focus of atrocity, even if some have been in rebellion against God, is something that every Christian should rail against and take whatever action is appropriate within our own sphere of life. Racism of any form is unacceptable in the Christian community.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have discussed the raising of Lazarus and how the miracle of his being brought back from the dead had brought a lot of people to focus on Jesus as the Messiah. This morning we consider how deeply the resentment against Jesus ran in the establishment and how it would inevitably lead to what Isaiah prophesied. Raising Lazarus was a populist miracle, rather than a Messianic one. Following it the crowds were again forming around Jesus, looking forward to what He was going to do once He arrived in Jerusalem. Runners had returned, no doubt very quickly, to Jerusalem to report on the events around Lazarus. The increasing popular unrest was becoming a serious source of concern to Jewish leadership. The Roman overlords would hold them personally responsible for unrest and punish them and the people mercilessly. Public floggings or even crucifying leadership was not out of the question. Matthew records that in the Jewish Council the fear is articulated as the leaders hear of the growing mob around Jesus; "**the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.**"

Have you ever experienced mob hysteria? I remember being at 'varisty in the eighties when all the Springbok rugby protests were going on that led to the violence at Eden Park. It is fascinating how a crowd can seemingly grow a mind of its own, tugged and pulled this

¹ Wikipedia see "Jewish deicide"

way and that by a few loud agitators. Reason seems to go out the window. It can be a very scary place. One can easily imagine how very real a threat the Jewish religious leadership must have considered the enthusiastic crowds around Jesus. Crowds that numbered not in hundreds but in the thousands or more.

At this point Caiaphas, the high priest that year, stood up to speak. In 18 AD, the Roman governor Valerius Gratus, had appointed Caiaphas as high priest in Jerusalem. Now, over a decade later Caiaphas is still in control. In fact, five of his sons will follow as High Priest before the Temple is destroyed. This was a man of influence. As a Sadducee, or at the least a Sadducee sympathiser, Caiaphas was an ardent opponent of Jesus and what He was teaching. For Caiaphas all power and authority remained in the Temple and with the Priesthood and leaders of Israel. They alone could truly interpret the will of God. Upstarts and rabble-rousers like Jesus had to be dealt with definitively. Frustrated with the inept management of this so-called problem Caiaphas reacts angrily with an unintended prophecy of greater depth than he could have known saying, **“You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.”** Caiaphas saw an easy solution. Cut the problem off at its head. Kill Jesus. Execute Jesus. Leave the disciples leaderless like a headless chicken. They could run around for a while headless and then the movement would die a natural death. Jesus must die and in doing so, said Caiaphas, **“Jesus would die for the nation.”** As the Scripture says, **“he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation”**. Caiaphas was right, more so than he could have ever imagined, but not in the way he imagined. As the text continues Jesus would die **“not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.”** Unknowingly and ignorantly, not unlike Pharaoh in Egypt, Caiaphas and his henchmen would, from that day on, plot Jesus’ death and unwittingly put in place the plan of God prophesied by Isaiah some 700 years before.

What then was Isaiah’s prophecy? Actually, Isaiah’s prophecies get increasingly accurate and detailed ... but for today ... **“See, my servant will act wisely, He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at Him - His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and His form marred beyond human likeness - so He will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.”** The Son of Man, who came not to be served but to serve, would suffer the indignity of crucifixion. He would not give in to the compromises of His disciples and turn away, nor give in to demonic temptations. The influence and corruption of the world would not turn Jesus from His course. He was not raised up or highly exalted in worldly eyes, except by a few so this does not refer to worldly esteem but He would be raised up, raised high on the cross. Jesus Himself said (John 12:32), **“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.”** Jesus knew what was coming and that because of His death, He would be able to draw people from every nation to Himself. But sadly, coming with the plot to kill Jesus would be a time of physical torture and pain. The Roman whip, the crown of thorns, a journey, beaten, cut, bruised, brutalised and forced to carry a heavy cross-bar through town and up the hill of Calvary. His blood would be strewn from one end of Jerusalem to the other and from the height of the Cross itself ... all in full public view. Where the nations were ignorant of the Messiah, where they had never heard because of the Biblical illiteracy of the religious leadership, now the story would be told. Jesus, God amongst us, would die as Isaiah had foretold at the hands of those who should have received Him with great joy. Where a corrupt

leadership would lead the people astray and call Jesus a demon, Jesus would pronounce ultimate judgement on those leaders while still on earth. They had truly committed the unforgiveable sin. Their plotting to kill Jesus had achieved more than they knew ... but it also destined their own people to many more years of destitution, struggle and persecution than they could possibly have known.

The use of the disciple Judas, in the plot to kill Jesus, is a warning to all of us. It is what happens when we become caught up in the world and the lure of materialism. Those who would kill Jesus, in thought, in word, in reputation and in deed are still in the world. They are led by the father of lies. If we are not vigilant we too could be caught up in the net that exploits our weaknesses. As Gamaliel warned the Jewish leaders (Acts 5:39), wisdom is required. If we not do watch ourselves and do what is right then we too, like those Jewish individuals of the past, could find ourselves effectively fighting against God rather than for Him.

Writing in Romans 6 the apostle Paul tells us that the Law, that should have led people to God, had been badly abused and misused but irrespective of this there were those, who, apart from the Law came to know the righteousness of God. Today we are not far distant from this. There are those who have so watered down or distorted God's Word as to make it all but meaningless and our society suffers because of it. But even so, there are those in the community to whom God is revealing Himself and these will be saved. God's work continues until Jesus returns to complete it and we are privileged to be a part of God's plan. In our salvation and serving the Lord there is no longer any practical difference between Jew and Gentile although the Covenants remain. All people have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It is only by being justified by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus are we saved. God's forbearance of our sins provides a space, a time, for us and the world to turn to Jesus. In our lives we honour the One who was sent to save us. Our actions do not plot His downfall, through sloth or deliberation, but rather we work to proclaim His Name and lift up His cause.

The plot to kill Jesus succeeded, but only to the degree God allowed it to ... we continue next week.

Amen