

## Caiaphas and the Trial of Jesus

John 11:49-53

A sermon for the Season of Lent

We have taken up Peter, and today we'll take up Caiaphas and the trial: What actually happened, and who was responsible for this trial and crucifixion, this miscarriage of justice.

About 170 A.D. a Christian named Tatian put all four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – together into a single narrative of Jesus' life. It was called the *Diatessaron*, which means "according to the four." And we think that it was actually all together! We think so because there are such movies, like *The King of Kings*, a silent movie from the 1920s, and there are others since, most recently, *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson. We think we can really see things "as they actually were" (the goal of historical research as stated by the historian, von Ranke). Of course it was much more complicated. We need to see this in order to understand what happened at the trial of Jesus.

When we look at the four gospels, we find that in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus had a three-year ministry, but in John Jesus' ministry was only one year. That obviously becomes a problem when we think we can put all four gospels together.

When we look at the account of the cleansing of the temple, we find that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is just before the end of Jesus' ministry, but in the Gospel of John it's at the beginning of chapter two. Because revolt was a constant threat, the temple was heavily guarded at all times. Roman soldiers were everywhere. It is difficult to imagine how Jesus could take five steps without the soldiers being right there to stop Jesus taking a whip and driving out the money changers and overturning their tables.

Then there is the trial itself. The Sanhedrin, the court, did not even exist as it is described until about sixty years later. To be sure, there were some kinds of courts in Jesus' time, and the Jewish law was strict about certain things. First of all, the court could not meet at night. And yet in Matthew, Mark, Luke,

and John, this happened Thursday night. It also says the court is not to meet during a festival or the eve of the Sabbath.

There have been those who have said perhaps the trial really happened on a Wednesday. There have also been those who have said perhaps it wasn't truly a court but a kind of preliminary hearing. But that does not eliminate the problem because they asked for Barabbas, a convicted murderer, in place of an innocent man. There were false witnesses, and they could not reconcile their testimonies so they had to throw out the witnesses.

Then in John 18:31 the Jews say: "We come to you, Pilate, because it's against your law to let us kill somebody." But in the Book of Acts 6:1 the Sanhedrin was there and Stephen was stoned to death. The same is found in Josephus when James, the brother of Jesus, was put to death by the Jews.

The Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy: "Are you the Christ or not?" (Mark 14:62). Jesus answers: "I am." And then goes on to quote Daniel 7:13: "You shall see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." We are often confused by this because everyone who followed God and was a believer was "a son of God," but the "Son of man" who came on the clouds of heaven was the Eternal One himself.

The Jewish leaders gathered to discuss what to do. It's here that Caiaphas speaks, making a political calculation. John 11:49-50:

"One of them, named Caiaphas, who was the high priest that year, said: 'You don't know anything at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.'"

What Caiaphas was saying was that it's a good idea to use Jesus as a scapegoat and let him be punished in order to spare the nation. That's the plain meaning of his words. But the text goes on (John 11:51-52):

"He (Caiaphas) did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad."

He speaks the truth but not in the way he imagines. Here we see an example of how in the Gospel of John there are layers of meaning to what is said. Caiaphas' prophecy has the opposite meaning from what he intended: Jesus is the Savior. Jesus is the one who, by his death, saves his own!

This shows us the difficulty in seeing how we understand what was going on. The same is true with Pilate, the Roman governor, who is spelled out one way in John and another way in Matthew and parallels. We get the idea that Pilate is deeply troubled psychologically, yet we know he was a ruthless Roman governor. It seems very unlikely that this account is the way it was. (It surely wasn't the way it is in Mel Gibson's movie.)

The Gospel of John has striking polarities: the contrasts between light and darkness, between blindness and sight, between those of this world and those of the world above, the Jews against Jesus and the Jews for Jesus (John uses simply "Jews" instead of "Jews against Jesus" and that creates a basic confusion. The Gospel of John is not anti-Jewish [anti-Semitic]. Jesus was a Jew). What's the main polarity in the Gospel of John?

The main thing is election. The Lord rescues us from our lostness and helplessness and gives us real freedom:

- John 1:13: "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of the will of God."
- John 6:44: "No one can come to me except through the Father who draws him."
- John 6:65: "No one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father."
- John 10:28-29: "I give them eternal life and they shall never perish and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one shall snatch them out of the Father's hand."

He gives us real freedom: John 8:26: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

How is God doing things? The Father chooses, and the Father determines through Jesus Christ.

What do all these strange things from the past have to do with you and me? They have a lot to do with you and me for two big reasons. First of all, anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism did not begin with the Christian era. It began about 500 BC in Babylon. We are able to trace the anti-Semitism of the Babylonians.

The Apostle Paul struggled with this, especially in Romans 9-11, because the Jews were his kinsmen and they have the Covenant. What do we say about this? Paul doesn't end up saying there are two covenants. Rather, he writes in Romans 11:29-36:

"For the gifts and calling of God are **irrevocable**. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How **unsearchable** are his judgments and **inscrutable** are his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord and who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen."

Paul doesn't solve the dilemma. He says this is God's business, not ours.

However, we do face the fact that in the Western world anti-Semitism is rising in a terrible way. After World War II it diminished because of reaction to the Holocaust. But in recent years anti-Semitism has grown in intensity in the Western world.

Second, what about you and me? What does this trial and this crucifixion have to do with you and me? God is the one who brings about the coming of Jesus and his death upon the cross because Jesus is doing it for our sake.

The Lenten hymn, "Ah, Holy Jesus," states it directly. The second verse says: "Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus hath undone thee. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee."

We have to think about the fact that the death of Jesus was not just something long ago and far away; or that somebody else did it; they're at fault, not us, and now it is merely historically "interesting." It is also for us,

that we deny him, and in that sense we, too, like Peter are responsible for his crucifixion. But the Lord rescues and restores us like he rescued and restored Peter. Amen