

Mt 21.12-16
Mt 26.57-66

THE "REAL" JESUS CONFRONTED...
LUKE 19:45-48; 22:66-71
(SIXTH SERMON IN SERIES)

PALM SUNDAY, MARCH 23, 1986

(Enter, Caiaphas, the High Priest)

Young man, I fail to see why I am here. Is this some kind of trial? An inquisition? Do you think you have the right to judge me? Do you expect me, the High Priest of the Sanhedrin, to defend myself?

(Liturgist: Leroy Kromm) Oh, no, sir. This is not a trial. This is not even a hearing. We do not presume to pass judgment on anyone. After all, Jesus taught us to "Judge not, lest you be judged." We have invited you here to ask you to tell us about those last days of Jesus. The written accounts are scarce. There are many gaps in the story. You see, it is very important for us to understand as much as we can about Jesus. In fact, our theme these past several months has been "Looking to Jesus" in the hope of discovering the "real" Jesus and not just an invention of our imagination. If you don't mind, and we promise to be kind, would you tell us about Jesus as you remember him?

In that case, I would be happy to enlighten you. I do have first-hand knowledge, and my word carries authority. I was the high priest in Jerusalem for 18 years, beginning in 18 A.D., according to your strange calendar. I fail to understand why anyone, let alone most of the world, would use a calendar that begins with the birth of Jesus! Yes, I was the high priest during Jesus' adult life.

Jesus, the "real" Jesus as you put it, was a troublemaker! An upstart! He had the audacity to confront us, to challenge our system, to tamper with the delicate balance we had been able to maintain with Rome. He had the nerve to challenge my authority. He had nerve. He had courage. I'll grant him that, but just who did he think he was? The Messiah? Ha!

He was a hick from the country, a carpenter from Galilee. He was not a priest, not even a rabbi. He had no authority, yet he acted as if he had authority from God. How could he presume to have authority from God? I gave him no authority, and I was the high priest.

His audacity angers me to this day. I still can't believe that he actually entered the temple and drove out the money changers. Have you any idea what kind of organization we were running in the Temple? The temple was not one building, but a whole complex of buildings--with somewhere in the neighborhood of 7,000 priests serving there. And other priests kept coming in from the country to perform their priestly duties for a few days every year. Just to keep an organization of that size running smoothly is a full-time job. And then there were the legislative and judicial responsibilities--conducting the meetings of the Sanhedrin, keeping a finger on the pulse of the people--and on top of all that, the constant struggle to keep the Roman rulers and the people in a reasonable state of peace with each other.

I did not have an easy job, and this low-life from Galilee actually dared to disrupt my organization and tip over the tables of the money changers. Perhaps you don't have a similar situation today, so let me explain. Our

people came from all over the Empire to make their sacrifices at the temple. As they came with foreign currency and needed to buy birds and animals for the sacrifice, we provided a currency exchange service.

This Jesus questioned the ethics of the enterprise. He accused us of cheating. Of course, we did not give dollar for dollar. After all, we had to make a profit. Mind you, he wasn't objecting to money changing in the temple, but that we were making too large a profit. He attacked the money changers and so surprised them with his vehemence, they ran out of the temple, thinking they were being attacked by some crazy man who, by this time, was shouting, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers." Can you imagine the audacity!

We had to do something. The people were beginning to follow him. You've heard about his reception when he entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, as if he were the Messiah. People are so willing to go running off after fanatics. Anybody new, anybody with some idiotic scheme comes wandering out of the hills claiming to be the Messiah, and the people follow like flies. They like the excitement. They like the idea that someone is attacking the establishment. They don't have the intestinal fortitude to challenge the establishment by themselves, but they love to applaud someone who does. They applaud until someone suggests that they might be fellow conspirators. Then they quickly run!

I yet am amused by the big-mouth disciple. I think his name was Peter. I understand that he told Jesus he would always be loyal and never forsake him. But, the night Jesus was arrested, Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus, much less was a disciple. That is the way with most people. They talk big, they follow a leader boldly, until a commitment is required, until something besides their big mouth is demanded.

At any rate, we had to do something. We constantly heard that he was disobeying the law, out in the open where he could easily be seen---ignoring the Sabbath laws, eating without proper purification, almost as if he were saying, "See? The Law is of no importance." He was prophesying that the nation was headed for destruction by Rome unless we received the Kingdom of God and, according to Jesus, the Kingdom of God meant that the poor people would be first; the last would be first, a revolution! We had to do something. The Sanhedrin--the Council--discussed the situation. We had several meetings and decided that we needed to watch him and even try to trick him into breaking the law. Don't be shocked! You know that it is done all the time by government intelligence agencies and Secret Services.

But, your "real" Jesus was very clever. We figured out a way to trap him. We sent a group of Pharisees to ask him, "Should we or should we not pay taxes to Caesar?" You may not realize the complexity of the question. If he said that we should pay taxes to Caesar, the Zealots would be angered because they felt that our land and its resources belonged solely to God, and that to pay taxes to a foreign power was a sign of unfaithfulness to God. But, if Jesus said that we should not pay taxes to Caesar, then the Romans could arrest him for treason! We thought we had him, but, Jesus was very clever. He answered the question with a question. He took a coin and asked, "Whose likeness is on this coin, and whose inscription is this?" The Pharisees of course had to answer, "Caesar's." So Jesus said, "Give to Caesar, then, what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's."

Yes, he was very clever, and I realized we were up against no ordinary agitator, so we called another meeting. You know what it is like to go to another church meeting! We all sat around complaining about the great influence this man had over the people, and the fact that if we lost control of the people we would be in serious trouble with the Romans. I never did have any patience with people who howl about how terrible things are but never offer any solutions. After all we had been through, it was obvious the only thing to do was to get rid of him and I said so. "You don't mean kill him?" somebody asked. You can afford to have delicate feelings when you're not the one with the power and the responsibility, but that's a luxury I couldn't afford. "That's what I mean," I said. "Sometimes it is necessary for one man to die for the sake of the people, instead of the entire nation suffering." It was the only expedient thing to do.

So we had him watched. And soon we found a man in his own little group of followers who was willing to turn informer, not that he was much good to us. In the end, we had to produce all the evidence for the trial ourselves. What we needed was to catch him in a major offense. The most likely was blasphemy against God, but our coached witnesses did not do well.

At the trial, there we sat, without a shred of evidence against this dangerous man. He was a threat to everything we stood for. He had to be destroyed or his ideas would destroy us. But how were we to do it? I could feel my heart begin to pound. My palms were sticky. Everyone sat looking at the floor, or at me. I don't know yet what made me think of it, but I got up from where I sat, stood directly in front of him, and said loudly and solemnly, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." I waited breathlessly for his answer. Would he condemn himself? Do you know what he said? Young man, do you know what he said?

(Leroy) (Matthew 26:64) Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Blasphemy! I tore my robe and shouted, "He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? What is your judgment?" And the rest of the Council immediately answered, "He deserves death." We had him! The next morning we took him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, where he was sentenced to death.

That's your "real" Jesus! The nerve of him--defying my authority, confronting me and our comfortable way of life, preaching that God loves everyone, especially the poor people! If the poor people would work, they wouldn't be poor! It isn't so bad that he healed these people; but, he healed on the sabbath, breaking our sacred law. He cured blind people who were being punished by God for their sins! He ate with the common people, even went into their homes! He let prostitutes anoint his feet. He even discussed the Law with women and treated women with respect! We can't tolerate such nonsense! Can you imagine what this world would be like if people believed him?

Surely you people don't take him seriously! Surely you aren't his followers! You will fall away, just like the people of my day. Are you believers? Are you his disciples? Are you Christians?

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