

# *"Jesus on Trial"*

<b><u>Occasion</u></b>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<b><u>Day, Date &amp; Time</u></b>	Sunday 24 January 2010 at 18:30
<b><u>Basis</u></b>	Mark 14:53-65
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	Mark 14:53-65 John 11:47a-54 (Matthew 26:57-68; Luke 22:63-71; John 18:12-14, 19-24)
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Have you ever been wrongly accused of something you didn't do?

Most siblings can remember being provoked by your brother or sister  
only to be reprimanded for reacting  
or retaliating.

About eighteen months ago,  
a man returned to his home to find a gang of three masked men in his house.  
They tied him and his family up and threatened to kill them.  
The teenage son managed to escape  
and alerted the man's brother who came to their rescue.  
The two brothers chased after the intruders  
and beat one of them with a cricket bat so severely  
that he suffered brain damage.  
The brothers were convicted of using unreasonable force  
and causing grievous bodily harm with intent.  
They were sentenced to over two years in prison.  
This week, on appeal,  
their sentences were reduced.

Back in 2001 a group of British plane-spotters was arrested in Greece.  
They were imprisoned and charged with espionage.  
After six weeks in prison,  
they were allowed home on bail,  
but had to return to Greece to face trial.  
Initially they were found guilty,  
but later acquitted on appeal.

Any one who has been caught up in these situations reports a feeling of utter helplessness  
in the face of false accusations  
which they themselves know are untrue.

Indeed I understand that a prisoner who believes he is innocent  
and maintains that position  
is much less likely to get his sentence reduced  
than someone who holds up their hand and admits their guilt.

Imagine then, if you can, the feelings of Jesus,  
standing before a hastily assembled Sanhedrin,  
accused by the highest court in the land,  
having done nothing wrong.

To suggest that he was powerless in front of his accusers,  
would be wrong.

For he had chosen this path.

He had chosen not to resist.

But I guess that this made the outrage at being falsely accused  
even harder to bear.

Last week, we left Jesus in the Garden at Gethsemane.

When the disciples realized that he had no intention of resisting arrest,  
they fled for their lives  
leaving Jesus alone with his captors  
who were about to take him to the High Priest.

*"If, therefore, by some magic reversal of the centuries we could have stood at some vantage-point in old Jerusalem about midnight or shortly afterwards on that memorable night, we would probably have witnessed a small party of men leading a strangely unresisting figure through the darkness, along the rocky defile which skirted the precipitous eastern face of the Temple wall, up the historic causeway at the south-eastern angle of the City wall to the headquarters of His avowed and inveterate enemies.*

*How did it come about that the most distinguished Hebrew of His generation found Himself in this dangerous and menacing situation, at the dead of night, on the eve of one of the most solemn of the Jewish Festivals?*

*What were the secret and hidden forces which precipitated His arrest?*

*Why was this particular and highly inconvenient moment chosen?*

*Above all, what was the nature of the charge which was brought against Him?"<sup>(1)</sup>*

To answer the first question we need to go back to the raising of Lazarus from the dead.  
John tells us that it was in the aftermath of that event  
that the balance was finally tipped  
toward the murder of Jesus.

The Pharisees and the leading Jews had considered ways of silencing Jesus for some time,  
but it was the raising of Lazarus which made it a commitment.  
Many of the Jews who witnessed the raising of Lazarus came to believe in Jesus,  
but an antagonistic few, it seems, took a report back to the Pharisees.

They and the chief priests called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

We read the story in John 11, at the beginning.

(John 11:47a-54)

There we see the High Priest,  
the man responsible before God for the spiritual health of His people  
guiding, or rather, bludgeoning his colleagues into murder.

Hendriksen says of this man:

*"That Caiaphas was a rude and sly manipulator, an opportunist, who did not know the meaning of fairness and justice is clear from the passages in which he is mentioned. What he himself ardently craved, for selfish purposes, he made to look as if it were the one thing needful for the welfare of the people."* (2)

Listen to what he says to the other members of the Sanhedrin:

"You know nothing at all.

Don't you realize that it is better for one man to die for the people  
than the whole nation should perish?"

John 11:49-53

And John comments, that

being the High Priest that year  
he prophesied that Jesus would die  
not only for the Jewish people,  
but also for the scattered children of God.

Remarkable that a man so opposed to God's Son

should make such an accurate prophesy about God's intent.

So from that point on

they plotted to take his life.

The high priestly family had spent much effort to secure their position.

By co-operating with the occupying Roman authorities

they had established a powerful position

which in their eyes provided the people with national security

and allowed the temple worship to continue largely without interference.

But it was a delicate balance.

The zealots were always there

just under the surface,

fermenting unrest and resentment

and recruiting rebels

and many think that Judas was one of these

and that he hoped that Jesus would be the one to start the uprising  
against the hated Romans.

Jesus certainly had the popularity

and maybe by precipitating his arrest,

Judas had hoped to start the revolution.

But when Jesus virtually gave himself up,

Judas knew that was a lost cause.

It was this fear that drove Caiaphas.

Any disruption to their cosy political arrangement

was likely to bring down the wrath of Rome,

as it certainly did some forty years later.

So Caiaphas cunningly suggests that this irritating,  
interfering,  
itinerant preacher  
could be sacrificed  
for the sake of the nation.

It was a small and convenient price to pay.  
The die (as they say) was cast.  
It was only a matter of time.

After the raising of Lazarus, it was no longer safe to hang around Jerusalem,  
So Jesus and his disciples withdrew to a village on the edge of the desert,  
where they stayed until his time had come.  
His triumphal entry in Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week  
would be the trigger for the Jewish authorities to put their evil plans into action.  
All they needed was a traitor  
and one was on hand in the form of Judas

And so it was  
after that fateful kiss  
that we find Jesus in the small hours of the morning  
on trial.  
For what?

John was somewhere in the throng.  
Peter was out in the courtyard,  
warming himself by the fire trying desperately not to be noticed.  
Wishing he were anywhere but here,  
but compelled by his love for Jesus to stay.  
Jesus stands bound  
facing his accusers.

Hastily convened as it was,  
it would seem at first that the Sanhedrin followed legal procedures.  
Their law required that witnesses should be brought  
to testify to the crime that had been committed.  
But none of them could agree.  
One gets the impression that various men had been bribed to testify against Jesus,  
but that the plan had misfired  
and the witnesses' stories didn't add up.

We are not surprised  
for Jesus had broken no laws  
except perhaps for a few minor Sabbath violations  
and they would hardly have warranted the death penalty  
which was the desired result.  
Everything about this trial looks rigged.

Eventually some witnesses come forward with the story that Jesus had said  
he would knock down Herod's temple  
and build it again in three days  
but even then they could not agree.

What Jesus had actually said is recorded by John:  
"Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days",  
but John says that he was referring to the temple of his body  
and that after his resurrection they remembered what he had said. (John 2:19-22)  
Clearly, this trial was going nowhere.

Wearied of following the book  
the high priest takes matters into his own hands  
and approaches the prisoner.  
"So what have you to say," he asks Jesus,  
"aren't you going to answer for yourself?"  
You can almost feel the contempt  
as Jesus remains silent.

And then as if inspired, the High Priest asks the fateful question:  
"Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?"

This time it is Matthew, who supplies the missing detail.  
According to his account the High Priest said:  
"I charge you under oath by the living God,"  
"Tell us if you are the Christ."  
(Matthew 26:63)

Placed under such an oath even the Lord himself must reply.  
And his reply is at once both explosive  
and music to the ears of the High Priest.  
Caiaphas can hardly contain his joy.  
Hypocritically he rents his robe  
- normally a sign of grief and anguish -  
but here a demonstration of vindication that he had finally got his man.

To the High Priest,  
this was blasphemy.  
To him,  
there was only One God  
and for Christ to claim to be his Son  
was to make himself equal to God  
and this they could not abide.

Just listen to Caiaphas  
- almost ecstatic -

“He has spoken blasphemy!”  
“What need have we of more witnesses?”  
“What do think?”

And they all concur.

“He is worthy of death”, they say.

So much for the High Priest and the success, *so far*, of his plan,  
but what about Jesus?

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As we have worked our way through Mark’s gospel  
we have become acquainted with the idea  
that Jesus knew that rejection,  
arrest,  
suffering  
and death  
awaited him in Jerusalem.

In chapter 8 after Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ  
he began to teach them that he must suffer.

(Mark 8:31)

And then again in chapter 10,  
he takes the twelve aside and explains in detail  
that he will be arrested,  
condemned to death,  
be handed over to the Gentiles to be killed,  
but would rise again on the third day.

(Mark 10:32-34)

We see it so clearly, because we know it happened,  
but it was nowhere near so clear to his disciples.  
Somehow it seems they convinced themselves it would never happen.

Yet as we were reminded last week,  
as the appointed time approached  
Jesus was filled with an indescribable dread  
as the immensity of the task  
and the burden of our sins  
stared him in the face.

There in the Garden of Gethsemane as he communed with his Father  
he experienced an agony beyond our understanding.  
Finally, strengthened and resolute,  
he came to meet the motley band of temple guards  
who had come to arrest him with swords and clubs.

And now we see him standing all alone before a hostile Sanhedrin,  
bound  
and surrounded by those who wished him ill.

All his friends,  
his disciples,  
the women who cared for him,  
his secret and his public followers,

those he had blessed,  
those he had healed  
- no-one was there,  
except for a silently supportive John  
and a frightened, insecure Peter.

Yet somehow we know who is in control.

Bound though he is,  
He stands serene before his accusers  
secure in the knowledge that they can do no more to him  
than He and his Father have already determined  
should be done.

They by contrast are flailing in the wind,  
- trying to get the charge to stick.  
- frightened that they might fail.  
- fearing they might have to let Him go.  
- fearful lest the whole thing goes wrong  
and their fragile pact with Rome should break asunder.

He had no need to answer their accusations,  
they were self evidently false.  
He had no need to defend himself,  
there was nothing to defend.

Silently he waits for them to destroy themselves  
and even when challenged by the High Priest to answer their accusations,  
he remains serenely silent.

Only when challenged under oath in the name of his God,  
His Father  
and Himself  
does he speak  
and with devastating effect.

To the charge:

"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed one?"

He replies:

"I AM. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One  
and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61-62)

Suddenly the tables are turned.

These dignitaries are standing face to face with the King of Kings  
and Lord of Lords  
and **HE** will judge **them**.

The high priest may be elated that he has his victim at his mercy,  
but unwittingly he has just condemned himself.

Believing they have a criminal in their hands  
they spit on him,  
blindfold him,  
abuse him  
and beat him,  
but their victory will be short-lived,  
for in three days time,  
he will rise again  
and in the fullness of time judge the world, including them, in righteousness.

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In many ways,  
Jesus is still on trial today.  
Almost every day,  
I read of someone denying the truths of Christianity.  
Amazing as it may seem,  
the claims of this man to be the Son of God  
have not been silenced after more than two thousand years.

And nowhere is the battle more hotly joined than in these islands  
which owe their history and their heritage  
to the values of the Christian Gospel.

Far from believing that throwing away the moral compass of our nation,  
a compass based on Christian principles of right and wrong,  
is the cause of our difficulties,  
the obvious ills of society  
are blamed on the prejudices and intolerance of religion,  
emphatically,  
the Christian faith.

The solution proposed therefore  
is to remove all aspects of religion from the public arena,  
thus freeing society from their bonds.

In spite of all the evidence that this policy is not working,  
successive governments  
and this one in particular  
are hell-bent (and I use the term deliberately) on this path  
and Jesus is tried all over again  
and in this worlds eyes  
He is rejected.

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In essence, every one of us stands at the trial of Jesus  
and we hear the challenge  
"are you the Christ the Son of the Blessed One?"

And when he says "I AM,"  
we either choose to follow Him,  
or side with those who would murder a righteous man  
rather than lose their power in this world.

This is not a mind game.  
We must not fall into the modern trap of thinking that faith is arbitrary  
and that belief is just a means of survival in an unforgiving world -  
- that belief is somehow imaginary  
- and ultimately inconsequential.  
The truth is unaffected by our belief,  
just as a tree falling in a forest makes a noise  
whether anyone is there to hear it or not.

Jesus calls you to believe in him  
And you must to answer that call or no.

You either follow or condemn!  
The choice is yours.  
And your life will never be the same again!

Amen

- (1) Adapted from 'Who moved the stone' by Frank Morrison, p15, published by Faber& Faber, 1958.
- (2) Adapted from 'John' by William Hendriksen, p163, published by The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959

Paul Rydon – 24 January 2010