

The Accuser

In the name of him condemned to die that God's people not perish, dear friends in Christ: Thus far in our Lenten meditations, as we've been examining some of the principal actors in the story of our Lord's passion, we've looked at Judas who betrayed Jesus and Simon Peter who denied him. We saw that both in their own ways were guilty of idolatry. Judas made a god of money. It was that simple. And he learned how powerless his god was when he tried to use it to undo the crime he committed. It could do nothing for him; which led him to despair and to suicide. Peter, for his part, became his own god when he imagined that he could by his own strength and merit save himself. He even thought he could save Jesus from the cross. He had to be shown the hard way just how weak and sinful he was – and how he needed Jesus to save and forgive him. Fortunately, he came to see that truth when his false god failed him. But the thing to be stressed is that the examples of both of these men stand as warnings to us – warnings that even those who are outwardly the closest disciples of Jesus are subject to being led astray from faith in him to false hope in the various idols of this world.

This evening we turn our attention to Caiaphas the high priest who, unlike the others we've looked at was never a disciple or friend of Jesus. He never even pretended to be. Though it's safe to say that he was considered to be – and I'm sure that he would have considered himself – a friend and faithful servant of God Most High. But before we examine Caiaphas himself, it will be helpful to better understand the office that he held.

At the time of Jesus' ministry the high priest was both the highest political and religious office among the Jews in Judea. Politically, he was the head of the Sanhedrin, which was the 70 member Jewish ruling council. In today's terms, it had the powers of both Houses of Congress and the Supreme Court combined. You see, even though Judea was a conquered nation under the iron authority of the Roman Empire, the Romans preferred to have their subject nations mostly rule themselves under whatever existing structures they were used to. So, for most day to day governing operations and for the vast majority of legal cases, things were in the hands of the Sanhedrin – which made the high priest a very powerful man. But he was not the highest power. Final authority always rested with the Roman governor who represented the Emperor. He had the power to veto or overrule any decision the Sanhedrin made. And if he issued a directive, the Sanhedrin would have to comply. It also happens that at the time of Jesus' ministry, for reasons we need not go into, the Roman governor had revoked the power of the Sanhedrin to impose the death penalty. Capital cases were reserved for the governor.

With respect to his religious authority, the high priest quite literally stood in the place closest to God. He was the chief mediator between God and man. Whereas all priests prayed and offered sacrifices on behalf of people, only the high priest offered the sacrifices that took away the sins of the whole nation. This is particularly true of the sacrifices on the great Day of Atonement, when the high priest would cast lots over two goats. One was to be sacrificed, and the high priest would take its blood into the innermost chamber of the Temple called the holy of holies. It was the dwelling place of the Lord's with his people. And there the high priest would pour the blood over the mercy seat, thus covering up the Law of God with blood and making atonement for sin. And then the high priest would come out from there and confess all the sins of the people on the head of the other victim called the scapegoat. That hapless beast would then be driven out into the wilderness bearing away all the nation's sins.

All right, now that we know what Caiaphas' job was, let's get to know the man himself. First, he was of the tribe of Levi, and specifically of the priestly class. That is to say all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. It means he was born to privilege. Second we know that he was of the party of the Sadducees. Almost all the priests and an 80% majority of the Sanhedrin belonged to that party. Think of them as the theological liberals of their day, over and against the much smaller party of the Pharisees who were the conservative hardliners. Though the Sadducees claimed to revere God's Word, there were parts of Scripture they didn't take very seriously. In particular, they rejected the idea of any kind of an afterlife. They said this is all there is; and when you're dead, you're dead. So, the best you can hope for is to have a good life now – a good life being defined as keeping yourself in harmony with the Lord who rewards you in the here and now for walking in his ways and keeping his commands.

That was the basic notion, anyway. In practice, however, the Sadducees tended to be a lot more worldly. Look at it this way: if you've only got so many years on this earth and then it's all over, and you have no sense that you're going to be judged after death for the things you did or didn't do in this life, well, then if you can figure out a way to make this life easier and more comfortable, even if it goes against the Lord's Word, doesn't it make sense to do it? Bear this in mind as we consider Caiaphas and his actions.

Third, we know that Caiaphas should never have been the high priest. It was supposed to be a hereditary position, passed down from father to son. But the father of Caiaphas was never the high priest. He must have been wealthy, powerful, and well connected though, because he managed to arrange a marriage between his son and the daughter of the high priest. His name, the high priest, was Annas. And what happened was this: Annas and the Roman governor who preceded Pontius Pilate, a man named Valerius Gratus, didn't get along very well. They were always knocking heads. And so Gratus removed Annas from his office as high priest, and rather than appoint one of his five sons to the position, he appointed Caiaphas, his son-in-law. Apparently the two had worked out some kind of arrangement, Caiaphas presenting himself to the governor as someone who would be more cooperative and easier to work with than Annas.

Now, to the Jews this was something of a scandal. From their point of view, the Roman governor had no business interfering in the practice of Jewish religion. And the appointment of the high priest was to them strictly a religious matter. In fact, many pious Jews never considered Caiaphas to be the legitimate high priest. And if you remember, when Jesus was arrested, he was taken first to Annas for trial before he appeared before Caiaphas in the Sanhedrin. But the Romans saw the office of the high priest as primarily a political thing. They were concerned about running a country, not a religion. They needed someone they could work with, whether he was legitimate or not. And they had the power to back it up.

So Caiaphas became the high priest – officially, at least, if not legitimately. And in that capacity he had to walk a fine line. He had to appear to be a good, pious, law-abiding and faithful Jew, standing up for Jewish interests against the hated Roman oppressors, *and* he had to work in apparently friendly cooperation with Gratus, and later his replacement Pontius Pilate. And from what we know, he was very good at what he did. At least he lasted in the position a lot longer than his predecessor or his next four successors. It tells us that he was both an opportunist and a skilled politician. He knew how to play all the angles and both ends against the center.

But above all, what we see in Caiaphas is a full-fledged pragmatist. A pragmatist is someone who lives by the motto: whatever works. Questions of right and wrong are secondary.

What's most important is "does this action produce the desired result?" If so, it's the right thing to do. And that's no doubt why it was under his administration that the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals were allowed to set up their operations on the outermost court of the Temple. It made sense. It worked. Pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the Lord could buy pre-approved animals, already inspected by a priest and deemed to be "without blemish", and so didn't have to worry about bringing one from home – one of their own which, for some strange reason, would almost certainly be judged unworthy no matter how good it looked. You get the idea. So, by allowing the sellers to operate on the Temple grounds, Caiaphas was providing a helpful service to worshippers; and the fact that he and his cronies were getting kick-backs on these sales, the prices of which were outlandishly high, well, that worked too. It worked to make them rich – and all in the service of God and their fellow man.

Caiaphas had a good thing going. And the prophet Jesus of Nazareth was a threat to him and his good thing. There was first the political threat. The Jews had long expected the Messiah to come – the Savior promised to our first parents; to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and then to David and his descendants. Jesus seemed to fit the bill. Unfortunately, in the centuries leading up to the time of Christ, Jewish thinking got away from seeing the Messiah primarily as a Savior from sin and its consequences and leaned more in the direction of someone who would set up an earthly kingdom, like Israel had in the days of David and Solomon. There had been a few messianic pretenders who arose, leading small armed rebellions against the Roman occupation. None of these lasted very long. They were swiftly crushed by Roman legions. But Jesus had captured the nation's imagination. His supporters were far more numerous. And when he raised Lazarus from the dead in front of a crowd only a couple miles from Jerusalem, word of it spread through the city like wildfire. Caiaphas feared that people would declare Jesus the Messianic King, take up arms, and rebel against Rome; which in turn would bring overwhelming Roman force to put down the insurgency. It would be a disaster. And that's at least one reason he talked the Council into condemning Jesus. It was for the nation.

But he had self interest too. Jesus spoke openly against the Sadducees and their false teachings. And when Jesus cleansed the Temple of the money changers and sellers of merchandise, it made Caiaphas look bad. Everyone knew there was a scam going on and that it wasn't right. But Jesus had the courage to call them on it. In doing so, he seized the moral high ground. And Caiaphas couldn't let that stand. It was personal.

And so he set in motion the plan to arrest Jesus. It couldn't be public; Jesus had too much popular support. That would make Caiaphas look bad again. It had to be someplace quiet, away from the crowds. Well, we know that Judas took the bait, taking the offered reward money and leading the Temple guards to capture Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Thus Jesus, under arrest, came to stand before Caiaphas for trial and sentencing. And for everything that follows we see Caiaphas at his pragmatic best. He knows the trial can't be public, so he holds it secretly and illegally at night. He knows that there are no legitimate charges to level against Jesus, so they put forth false witnesses to make a case against him. The trouble is that these witnesses don't agree. Finally, frustrated because his plan is falling apart, he places Jesus under oath and demands that he answer whether he is the Christ, the Son of God. But this too was illegal. One of the principles of Jewish Law was that a defendant did not have to speak on his own behalf. If Jesus had remained silent, he could not have been condemned.

But Jesus could not be silent. He came to bear witness to the truth. And so he confesses that he is indeed the Christ, the Son of God. They would be blasphemous words if

spoken by anyone else; but not for Jesus. But Caiaphas and his allies don't believe. So Jesus is condemned to die.

But that led to Caiaphas' next problem: only the Roman governor could impose the death penalty, and Roman law wouldn't recognize blasphemy against the Lord as a crime, much less a crime worthy of death. They had to come up with charges that would stick in a Roman court. Note how he very pragmatically attempts to avoid the issue at first. When Pilate asks what the charges against Jesus are, Caiaphas responds, "If he were not a criminal, we would not have brought him to you." He hoped to have the decision rubber stamped without further inquiry. When that fails, he throws the book at Jesus, charging him with crime upon crime; but the chief offense is that by claiming to be the Christ, he was calling himself a king. Thus Jesus was defying the authority of Caesar and was therefore guilty of treason. Upon examination, Pilate discovers that this is not true. He knows Jesus is no danger to the empire. Finally Caiaphas is forced to turn to the unruly mob, leveraging against Pilate's better judgment the threat of a riot. For reasons we'll discuss next week, he knows this will get Pilate to bend to his wishes. The all important thing was that it got the job done. Pilate agreed to have Jesus crucified.

So, Caiaphas the pragmatist: do what you have to do to get the job done; and, I might add, the end justifies the means. They are tempting ideas even to us. And who here hasn't fallen for them time and again? - the notion that bending or breaking a command of God will result in something good? "Let us do evil that good may come of it". It's Satan's oldest deception, the one our first parents fell for. It never works out that way. Sin always leads to bitter consequences and death.

But the amazing thing is to step back and see that the Lord even uses the evil of our pragmatism to work his good and gracious will. Though Caiaphas does not know it, in saying that Jesus must die so that the nation not perish, he is actually performing his sacred function as high priest. He's designating Jesus the sacrificial goat whose blood will atone for sin. When he faces Jesus in the trial, the illegitimate high priest sitting in judgment over God's one and only Great High Priest, his pragmatism gets Jesus to confess the truth for which he is condemned. And then at the trial before Pilate, by accusing Jesus with crime upon crime he is in fact confessing the nation's sins on the head of God's True Scapegoat - the one who bears away the sins of the world - bears them to the cross and to the grave.

It really is amazing: in our hands, the ends never justify the means. But in the working of God's great wisdom, the evil means of Caiaphas have justified us all. Therefore to our God and to the Lamb be our thanks and praise forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!