

What Shall We Do with Jesus?

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel reading is surely one of the most fascinating passages in the entire Scripture. In it we see the most sublime wisdom of God and the most criminal foolishness of fallen man intersect and come together in agreement on one vital point: that Jesus must die to save the people. They agree, though they get to that point for entirely different reasons and for opposite purposes. So, allow me to cast some light on what's going on:

We've got an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin in progress. That's the seventy member governing body of the Jewish nation. Of course, absolute legal authority rests with the Roman proconsul, Pontius Pilate, because Judea is an occupied country. Still, the Sanhedrin wields a lot of power. The Jews consider it to be the legitimate government. Now, the Sanhedrin is headed up by the High Priest, and consists of influential scribes, priests, teachers of the law, and a few wealthy businessmen. The body is unevenly divided among two parties. You've got the Sadducees, who are in the majority. They are the more worldly theological and social liberals (you might think of them as the Democrats). And then you've got the Pharisees, who are the super-orthodox, rightwing reactionaries (not just Republicans, but "Tea Party" Republicans). Normally these two groups can't agree on anything, but right now they have a mutual problem that needs to be addressed, and soon.

That problem is Jesus. Three years ago when they first heard about him, he was just an itinerant preacher in Galilee making something of a stir with his radical interpretations of Scripture *and*, so they heard, ability to perform healing miracles. Back then they had sent a few teams of agents to check him out and see where he stood on the issues; but the reports that came back were always confusing, and they could come to no agreement on what they should do about Jesus (if anything at all). The reports said that he spoke in obscure parables, that he quoted Scriptures and applied them in startling new ways, that he was sympathetic to sinners, that he answered questions with even harder questions, and that he opposed many of the traditions handed down by the Rabbis ... and oh yes, that there were miracles, some performed right before the eyes of the people they had sent.

A lot had happened in the three years since. Jesus even visited Jerusalem a few times. He taught his provocative teachings right in the temple courts, and he had had several confrontations with the authorities. Last time he was in the city, some of the members of the Sanhedrin were present when he claimed to be the Lord. They picked up stones to kill him on the spot – but somehow he managed to walk away. We heard in our worship last week how right after that, while he was leaving the temple, he gave sight to a man who had been born blind, and how that threw them all into a tizzy. The formerly blind beggar was called to stand before the assembled Sanhedrin. When questioned, he said that Jesus must be a prophet of God. When they tried to argue with him about it, the man said, "Look, all I know is that I used to be blind, and Jesus made me see. You guys are the teachers of Israel; you tell me how he could give me my sight if he were not from God." That made them so mad that they excommunicated him. Which, in a way, is strange. One of the things the leaders kept demanding from Jesus was that he give them a sign to prove that his claims were true. Giving sight to a man born blind right under their noses should have done it, you would think. But it didn't.

Well, then Jesus left Jerusalem for several months and things seemed to cool off a bit – or so they thought. In fact, the whole movement around Jesus was gathering momentum like an avalanche crashing down a mountain. And right now it was about to fall on Jerusalem. Jesus was heading back to the city for the Passover celebration – Jewish Independence Day. The whole city was abuzz with the news. People were openly talking about the possibility of Jesus being the long expected Messiah, even though the Sanhedrin had threatened to punish anyone who spoke of it. Thousands were certain that the age of the kingdom of God was upon them, and that Jesus was going to lead them in a war of liberation from their Roman oppressors. The council worried that would bring the Romans down on them like a ton of bricks, and then they'd lose everything: the whole nation would be destroyed. In their view the city was like a powder keg, and the Sanhedrin feared that one little spark from Jesus could set the whole thing off.

And earlier on this day of their emergency meeting, Jesus lit the fuse. In Bethany, just a couple miles from the city, he raised to life a man who had been dead for four days. There were hundreds of eyewitnesses. Even some of the council's staff people had been there and seen it. As soon as they did, they came running to Jerusalem with the news. It was their worst nightmare: if expectations were high before, they would reach fever pitch when word of this got around. And that's why we find the full council of the Sanhedrin in session now. The big question on their minds is, "What are we going to do with Jesus?"

That's a question we all ought to consider, because it's important even today. Just as the rulers of the Jews were faced with the fact that the coming of Jesus would radically upset their lives, so also Jesus' coming in our time causes a lot of impact. He would like to gain access to the life of every person alive today – including yours. Each day Jesus wants to come to you anew. He comes with power to change you – to give you a new life just like he did for Lazarus whom he raised from death. And so each day you are confronted by the question: "Here comes Jesus. What am I going to do with him?"

But while you think about an answer, let's stop and consider the response of the Sanhedrin a little more. First consider who they are. Too often we imagine them to be a group of black-hearted villains filled with irrational hate; but that would be selling them short. The truth is that they are all well educated men and thoroughly grounded in Scripture. Though not without selfish ambition (everyone has it), they have made it the goal of their lives to serve God and his people. They are, for the most part, upright, respectable men who have what they believe to be the best interests of the nation at heart.

But looking back at them with what we know and believe, we find it hard to understand their blind unbelief and opposition to Jesus. We think, who better than they should have seen Jesus as the fulfillment of God's plan? They knew the Scriptures. They believed in a coming Messiah. At this point, they even believed in the miracles that Jesus was doing. In today's text they aren't arguing about *whether* Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead – that's a given. They accept that it's true. They are wondering *what to do about it*. And we marvel that they don't say to themselves, "Hey, if this guy Jesus is raising people from the dead, if the power of life over death is in his hands, then he's the guy we should all be listening to. Let's invite him in here and ask him to set us straight." We wonder, "Why don't they do that?"

Quite simply, it's because they're afraid. The Sadducees fear being called to take their faith seriously and give up their worldly, self-indulgent lifestyles. They know that Jesus wants his followers to trust in the Lord and to serve others in humility and in the true spirit of the law of love, and they don't want to do that. They fear having to give up their worldly wisdom and the

sins and comforts they love. The Pharisees, on the other hand, fear giving up their self-righteous attitudes and their disdain for those whom they feel are less holy than themselves. They know that Jesus doesn't care a bit for their legal traditions by which they imagine that they earn favor in God's eyes. He says it's all nonsense. He says that even the best Pharisee must come to the Lord with a broken heart and true repentance just like the worst public sinner. They don't want to do that. They fear seeing their own sins or having anyone else know the truth about them.

Both groups have this in common: they fear what other *people* will do. Specifically, they fear the Romans. Though they know by heart the *promises* of God, and they can see that Jesus displays the *power* of God, they still fear what the Romans might do. They fear men more than they fear God.

And within the Sanhedrin there's another small group of fearful men that I should mention. There are a handful who are secret followers of Jesus: men like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. They are afraid of everything the others fear, and on top of it they are afraid of being honest about what they believe about Jesus. They are afraid to speak up for the truth.

And because fear is the order of the day, the one thing that all share in common, what they decide to do with Jesus is really a foregone conclusion. They do not want to change or be challenged. They don't want to repent. They don't want to trust the Word of God. So Jesus must be destroyed. For the sake of not upsetting the status quo in their lives, his message must be silenced, his miracles must be stopped, and he must be discredited and put to death. Such is the conclusion of the Jewish Sanhedrin, apparently without any dissenting votes.

But before you shake your head in disgust at them, perhaps you should consider the frequent decisions of your own *internal* Sanhedrin. I speak of the decision making council of thoughts, impulses, desires, and fears that deliberates in your own heart as you consider the question, "What should I do with Jesus?" You know the Scriptures and promises of God. You believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of those promises. You know what Jesus taught, and you believe that Jesus performed all the miracles the Bible records and more. You know a whole lot more about him than the Sanhedrin knew.

And yet, how often do you come to the same conclusion that they did? You listen to that part of you that says, "I'm quite content with my worldly way of life. I like my pet sins and don't want to stop doing them. So Jesus, you're not welcome here." Or you listen to the pharisaical part of your soul that says, "I don't want to admit that what I'm doing is wrong. I like thinking of myself as a good person. And I like others to think that of me too. And so one thing I'll never do (for example) is apologize to that person for what I did. He had it coming. And besides, I'd never go begging forgiveness from the likes of him. Nor will I ever forgive so and so for what she did to me. No Jesus, you're not welcome in this corner of my life either."

And then there's the fear of what others would do if I actually started living the Christian life. That's the part that says, "Why if I were truly loving and forgiving as Christ calls me to be, people would take advantage of me every way they could. No, I have to look out for myself." What is that but to assume that God can't take care of you? What is that but having greater fear of what people might do if you obey God, than fear of what God will do if you disobey him? And finally, there's quiet little Nicodemus and Joseph in there – secretly faithful, and planning to keep it a big secret. "Speak up for Jesus? At a time like this when everyone else is speaking badly about him? You've got to be out of your mind!"

I'm afraid that's often the way it with us; and I'm sure you see it too. Jesus comes every day with the power to give us all new lives, and instead of welcoming him with open arms, we plan to silence his message, stifle the miracle of recreation, discredit his person and work, and effectively decide put him to death in us. The sinful nature is stubborn and clings to life for all its worth, and the faithful part keeps its little secret. It nods in silent assent when with Caiaphas, the high priest, we come to the final conclusion, "It's better for Jesus to die than me."

And the amazing, staggering truth is that the Lord God agrees completely with that decision. We come to it because in our blind, hateful rebellion against God we can only think of ourselves and what's best for us – and Jesus can be damned for all we care. The Lord comes to the same conclusion because in his boundless love, he can only think of us and what's best for us, no matter what it costs him – and Jesus, his Son, can be damned *for our sakes*.

But the result of it is not what we hoped it would be. We decide to put the Lord Jesus to death because we are afraid of what he wants for us. We kill him to avoid having to change. But God has other plans. He knows that the death of Jesus does change everything. He dies for our sin. He is damned for us. And that's what makes his life changing forgiveness possible. When Jesus dies, suddenly we see Nicodemus and Joseph are no longer silent. They are ashamed of their behavior and are given courage they didn't have before. Disregarding the personal risk, they secure the sacrificed body of their Lord at the cross—just like we do when in shame and repentance for our sins we gather at the communion rail. And now the rest of the Sanhedrin is finally afraid of what *God* is going to do. They want a guard placed on the tomb to prevent Jesus from rising, as if that could make a difference. It doesn't.

Jesus does rise again, as he promised. And now he comes to us with his powerful message of forgiveness. It's the message that you killed the Lord of glory, his blood is on your hands; but God has raised him to life. And now, despising yourself and your part in that horrible crime, he forgives you for Christ's sake and grants you his Spirit and the strength and will to live as his child. That is how God's divine wisdom brings salvation to us even through our own stupid, faithless, sinful folly. And it's also how he is working now to change us, overcoming by the power of his love our fears and our stubborn resistance to be transformed into what he would have us be.

Every day Jesus wants to come to us again to raise us to a new and better life. May it be that when we consider the question, "What am I going to do with him?" that we answer, "Let him take away my sins and fears, grant me his Spirit, and make me like him." In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!