

JESUS AND THE PRIESTS

by Ray C. Stedman

These studies in Mark's gospel have taken us to the action packed week of our Lord just before the cross and the resurrection. To some of you, these events that occurred 2,000 years ago and so far away may seem rather remote from your own experience. Sometimes we are so caught up in our daily lives that these events seem rather dull because of their familiarity, especially in contrast to the exciting events of this week, such as the capture of Patty Hearst, the continuing trend of inflation, the events of the Middle East, and the visit of the President to our community. But all these current events will be nothing but a dim memory ten years from now. Just think back to the things that were happening ten years ago and how unimportant they seem to us now. Little will be changed by what happened to us this week.

But the events around the death of Jesus are the most significant events in all history -- already every person in all the world who ever lived has been affected by these events. If we believe the Scriptures, this event is the focal point of history, not only on this planet, but on every galaxy, every star, every solar system, every planet in all the vast reaches of space. These are the most crucial events that have ever taken place. It is therefore very important that we carefully study what has been recorded about these events.

After Jesus was captured in Gethsemane Garden, he was led away by the soldiers to the high priest. Mark doesn't record for us the appearance of Jesus before Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest, but moves directly to the courtyard of Caiaphis, the current high priest, in Verses 53-54:

And they led Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes were assembled. And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, and warming himself at the fire. {Mark 14:53-54 RSV}

Notice the very careful way Mark sets this scene for us. Jesus is in the inner room with the Sanhedrin. This assembly consisted of the high priest, all the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders -- 70 members of the Sanhedrin plus their helpers and advisors, etc. So it was a considerable crowd that gathered in the inner room in the residence of Caiaphis, the high priest. There was Jesus in the midst of the Sanhedrin, while just outside, in the outer courtyard, where he could look in and see all that was happening, Peter sat with the guards around the fire on that chill spring night in Jerusalem. Mark is very careful to point out that these two situations occur side by side.

There is a reason why Mark contrasts these two situations, and we will see it as we look at this account very carefully. The trial before the priest proceeds in two stages. First, there is the testimony of the witnesses in Verses 55-58.

Now the chief priests and the whole council sought testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, and their witness did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet not even so did their testimony agree. {Mark 14:55-59 RSV}

This trial is clearly a farce. The outcome was determined long before the trial was convened, for Mark records that the chief priests sought for testimony because they were determined to put him to death. This reminds me of those accounts of the early western vigilantes who announced to their victims that they would be sure to give them a fair trial and then hang them. This is what the chief priests did to Jesus.

The trial was illegal right from the very beginning:

- First, it was held at night, and Jewish law insisted that all trials of criminals before the priests be held in the daytime.
- Second, it met in the wrong place. The Sanhedrin was to meet only in the hall set aside for its purposes, and only meetings held there were valid. But this meeting was held in the residence of the high priest.
- Third, the Sanhedrin was prohibited by law from reaching a verdict on the same day that the trial was held, and here the verdict is passed immediately at the end of this farcical trial.

Yet, despite all this connived, contrived testimony, things are not going well for the priests, because, as Mark tells us, though many bore false witness against him, the witnesses did not agree. As these witnesses, one by one, would recount even the same event, there was such a discrepancy that it was obvious that they either were telling a lie or had not been there or that something serious was wrong in their testimony.

These were the best witnesses money could buy, and yet everything was falling apart and the priests were getting uneasy and restless because the testimony of these witnesses did not agree. But finally, two men stood up -- Matthew tells us it was two -- who partially agreed, for they said, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands,'" {cf, Matt 26:51}. Now that was the closest any witnesses had come to agreeing. It was the strongest point in the case against Jesus, for there was an element of truth in what was said here. In John 2, early in Jesus' ministry, when he first cleansed the temple, three and a half years before these events, he said to the Jews, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," {John 2:19}. He meant, "If you destroy this temple, then in three days, I will build it up again." He was pointing out in sharp contrast their destructive powers and his constructive efforts.

John tells us that he was talking not about the temple of stone and brick, but of his own body, and this was an early reference to the resurrection. He had not said, "I will destroy this temple," as these witnesses testified. Yet there was a germ of truth to what they said. Tennyson said, "A lie that is wholly a lie can be met and fought without right, but a lie that is partly the truth is a harder matter to fight." These witnesses had enough truth to make something stick; but even then, Mark said, they couldn't agree in their details. So the case was falling apart, and the priests, I am sure, were feeling frustrated at this point, for it looked like they could not find a legal ground by which to accomplish the murder of Jesus.

At this point, the high priest saved the occasion, from the Sanhedrin's point of view, by doing something entirely illegal. He attempted to put Jesus on the spot and force him to incriminate himself. We have that account in Verses 60-61:

And the high priest stood up in the midst, and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But he was silent and made no answer. {Mark 14:60-61a RSV}

Isaiah had prophesied: "As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth," {Isa 53:7}. Evidently our Lord understood that the testimony against him was so fragmentary, so weak, that it required no answer. He made no effort to defend himself or to answer the lies of the witnesses, but remained silent. The high priest was stunned by Jesus' silence, and so he did something absolutely illegal. He put Jesus under oath to testify against himself.

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am; and you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." And the high priest tore his mantle, and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard this blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to strike him, saying to him, Prophecy!" And the guards received him with blows. {Mark 14:61b-65 RSV}

Matthew said that the high priest put Jesus under oath. He said to him, "I adjure you by the living God," {Matt

26:63b RSV}. This was a very solemn oath. In response to that, Jesus breaks his silence and answers the high priest's question, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Now what the priest is really asking is, "Are you the one who the Old Testament predicts will come, the Messiah, the Promised One? Are you the Son of God?" This is a clear-cut question directly placed and the high priest puts Jesus under oath to answer. Jesus responds very simply, "I am," {cf, Matt 26:64}.

There are many critics of the New Testament and liberal scholars who insist that at no time did Jesus ever claim to be the Messiah or the Son of God. They tell us that these claims were made about him by his disciples. If you ever hear anyone say that, just turn to this passage of Scripture. There are other places where Jesus clearly claims to be the Messiah and the Son of God, but this one is the clearest, because he was under solemn oath to tell the truth, and he simply and clearly states, "I am the Messiah -- I am the Son of God." There is no doubt about it.

The rest of his reply is directed to the high priest personally, for he says to him, "And you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven," {cf, Matt 26:64c KJV}. In saying this to Caiaphas, Jesus is informing him of his own destiny.

We know from other Scriptures that when people die, whether they are believers or unbelievers, they step out of time into eternity. Events that are long distant yet in time are suddenly present in eternity. The Scriptures reveal that the event for which we believers are being prepared and are waiting for here on earth is the coming of the Lord with thousands of his saints for his own.

I believe that this explains why oftentimes when believers die, in the last moment of life they break out in a big smile and a sense of expectation comes into their eyes. Sometimes they will even cry out, because what they are seeing is the Lord coming with his saints for his own.

Unbelievers, too, step out of time into eternity when they die; and the event which they see is what Jesus describes here. "You will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming ..." as a judge upon the earth. They see him as the judge. They see the great white throne, the impressive scene described in Revelation 20 when all the dead are gathered together and the books are open, and men stand before the judge of all the earth. To this high priest in his arrogant unbelief, Jesus says, "Now you are the judge, I am the prisoner; one day I will be the judge, you will be the prisoner." With this he answers the blasphemous unbelief of this high priest. The high priest, in a hypocritical gesture, tears his garments when he hears Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. That gesture indicated that this was blasphemy, and he supposedly rends his garments because he is so outraged. This is hypocritical because that, of course, was exactly what he wanted Jesus to say. He knew that when he made a claim like that in the presence of the Sanhedrin, his doom was sealed. And so the priest, by this hypocritical act, indicates a phony outrage and demands the verdict, and the Sanhedrin immediately pass the sentence and condemn Jesus to die.

Then a strange thing happens. Mark tells us that upon the passing of the verdict, the forces of restraint that had been upon these priests and scribes and elders seemed to be lifted, and they again committed a wholly illegal act. They began to vent their hatred upon Jesus and pour out in venomous abuse all the pent-up jealousy and hatred they had gathered against him. They began to spit on him -- that is the ultimate form of insult. They spat upon him; they beat him; they covered his face with a garment, and while his face was hidden, they hit him, and they said, "Prophecy! Tell us who hit you." Thus they mocked him, and scorned him, and insulted him. Seven hundred and fifty years before this, Isaiah had spoken the words that Jesus must indeed have been thinking:

I gave my back to the smiter and my cheeks to those who plucked out the hair. I hid not my face from shame and spitting, {Isa 50:6 KJV}.

Outside, Peter was watching this, and he never forgot it. In his first letter, he tells us that we are to remember that scene and take heed to it, for Christ was our example:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. {1 Pet 2:23 RSV}

This is how Christians are to respond when they are falsely accused, when they are unjustly vilified and abused. Instead of retorting and trying to justify ourselves, Peter says, we are to return good for evil, revile not in return, but commit ourselves to him who is able to judge things justly -- God himself.

In Verses 66-72, Mark takes us to Peter, outside the court:

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the maids of the high priest came; and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him, and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway. And the maid saw him, and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. And after a little while again the bystanders said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." And immediately the cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept. {Mark 14:66-72 RSV}

We are all familiar with how Peter's bravado had caused him to vow that he'd never deny the Lord. In the Garden of Gethsemane, it was Peter who drew his sword in an attempt to defend Jesus. But now his determination to show himself faithful to Christ has carried him right into the courtyard of the high priest where he is warming his hands around the fire with the very guards that had arrested Jesus and brought him there. That was a brave thing to do; he was in terrible danger. I think it was the pride of Peter's heart that brought him this far. He was so determined not to let the Lord down, so determined to show that Jesus was wrong when he said Peter would deny him. But now that he is there in the midst of the enemies of Jesus, fears begin to possess his heart, and the bravado melts away -- his courage is gone.

The young woman who had let him in the door, a servant of the high priest, recognized him and said, "You are one of the Nazarene's followers, aren't you?" John, writing years later, tells us that there was another disciple present. Many of the commentators think it was John himself, but I think it was Mark. If, as I have already suggested, Mark was the rich young ruler, he would fit John's description of a disciple who was known to the high priest and who had spoken to this maid to let Peter into the courtyard. Therefore, when Peter came in and the maid saw that a man whom she knew to be a disciple had let him in, she was sure that this was also one of the disciples, and so she accused him of it.

Right away, Peter's defenses have gone. He immediately says, "I don't know who you are talking about." He tries to turn off this inquisitive maid. Leaving the fireside, he goes outside to the gateway so he will be less visible. But the pesky little girl follows him and keeps pursuing the subject, much to the discomfort and embarrassment of Peter. The maid says to the people standing around, "This man is one of them." I'm sure Peter could have choked her gladly. But she kept pursuing him. As he protested, they heard his accent. Peter was as outstanding in that crowd as a Texan in Peoria. His accent gave him away. So the people said, "You must be one of them; you're from Galilee." Once again, Peter denied it vehemently. It says he cursed. Now that doesn't mean he began to blaspheme and swear. It means that he pronounced a curse upon himself. He said, "God curse me if what I say is not the truth." He took a solemn oath.

I think Mark is careful to point out the contrast between Jesus speaking under oath in the inner courtroom and Peter's oath in the courtyard. Jesus said he was the Messiah, the Son of God, and Peter denied that he knew Jesus at all. That was a solemn and very serious oath, and just then, Mark says, "the cock crowed a second time." Peter's conscience smote him. He knew what he had done, and, according to the account here, he broke down and wept. The word for "broke down" is very strong in Greek. He literally went out and threw himself down on the ground in agony and tears of repentance and remorse began to flow as he thought of what he had done.

I think we can see why Mark has so carefully weaved this story together for us. Nothing intrigues me more in this account in the gospels than to see the careful way the writers of Scripture choose incidents that belong together and put them side by side. Mark has done that here so that we might see the contrast. Here is a band of priests who hate Jesus. Their hearts are filled with venom and anger and jealousy and bitterness against

him. And all of it comes spilling out in the spitting and buffeting that follows the verdict. Contrasted to this is a man who loves Jesus with all his heart and is determined to defend him to the end. And yet, in the moment of crisis, he fails Jesus, he denies that he even knows him.

Now why does Mark put these two situations side by side? I think he does it so that we might understand that both of them manifest the same thing; both are a manifestation of the undependability of human nature -- the flesh, as the Bible calls it. These priests were men of the flesh, men who lived according to the ways of the world, men who thought as the world thinks and who were seeking for status and prestige and position. Jesus was a threat to their position and awakened their hatred and their anger, which they expressed in this terrible accusation and mockery and violence against Jesus. That is the flesh at work. Everybody recognizes that hatred and anger and vehemence are wrong, and we know those things come from an evil, perverted heart. But what Mark wants us to see is that the love of Peter was no better. It, too, was depending on the flesh, on human abilities and human resources, to carry him through. In the hour of crisis, it was no more effective than the hatred of the priests. Love and loyalty and faithfulness mean nothing when they rest on the shaky foundation of the determination of a human will. That is why Mark puts these two examples side by side so that we might see their similarities.

To me, the most hopeful note here is the tears of Peter. The priests didn't weep; there is no record that Judas wept, though he did display a degree of remorse and of despair. But Peter, when he denied his Lord, threw himself down and wept. Somebody said this morning that they had learned a lesson about failure. They had learned that failure is never the end of the story. This is true of Peter. Peter's tears speak of another day that is yet to come when the Lord will deliver him and restore him, having learned a very sobering and salutary lesson.

There is great beauty in the lines of the poet, Charles Mackay, who says:

Oh, you tears,
I'm thankful that you run.
Though you trickle in the darkness,
you shall glitter in the sun.
The rainbow could not shine if the rain refused to fall;
And the eyes that cannot weep are the saddest eyes of all.

Remember the resurrection morning when Jesus met the women at the tomb. He said to them, "Go and tell my disciples and Peter -- and Peter -- that I go before them and will meet them in Galilee," {cf, Mark 16:7}. After he denies Christ, Peter drops out of the picture; we know nothing more about what happened to him until the women come with the good news of the resurrection. The only difference between the denial of Peter and the hatred of the priests was the tears that Peter shed. Those tears meant there was life that could be restored; his failure could be forgotten and forgiven.

When I look at Christianity today, I am sometimes appalled at the degree that we depend upon the flesh. I am amazed and intrigued as we look at the Scriptures to see that God always works in simplicity and with a low-keyed approach. God loves that. Our attempts, and the flesh's attempts, are almost always characterized by high gear, high promotion, and complexity. I learned long ago that when things start getting very complex, when you need finely tuned organizations to carry them out and hundreds of people -- somehow you've missed it; for God's work is characterized by simplicity. Paul wrote in Second Corinthians 11:3, "I am greatly concerned about you lest Satan should woo you from the simplicity that is in Christ." It is only by a sense of weakness that rests upon the power and wisdom of God that we can accomplish anything. When we do, we don't need high gear, high power machinery. We don't need expensive approaches. One of the things that turns me off about Christendom is to see how much of it depends upon the power of money. I believe that God never needs money, but He uses money. Money is always available when God is at work. But if a project depends on money and people are thinking in terms of money, they have missed the simplicity that is in Christ. May the Lord teach us from this simple story the utter undependability of the flesh and the constant victory and triumph of resting in the spirit.

Prayer:

Our Father, there may come times in our lives when we will be confronted with failure. We may find ourselves, like Peter, doing the very thing we didn't want to do, denying the Lord who bought us. Thank you for the assurance that this story gives us, that if love is in our hearts, we will not be cast aside. But restoration and forgiveness are certain. Lord, help us to understand that we must not count upon the power of the world and human wisdom and human machinery to accomplish your work. Teach us how to use these things, but not abuse them. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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