

Midweek Lent 2: March 4, 2009

False Witnesses at the Trial

Mark 14:55-61

The Eighth Commandment: You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

Their minds are made up. Jesus must die. But how to build the case? There must be a crime. And to convict of crime there must be witnesses. Sir Walter Scott said it best: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive!" The tangled web begins to unravel as witness after witness comes forward only to contradict each other on the nature of Jesus' crime. It's a kettle of fish and the people know it. But their minds are made up. Jesus must die. Bring on more witnesses...

The trial of Jesus before Caiaphas is a case study in human behavior. It goes like this. We begin our careers wanting to achieve significant goals. Along the way we experience some success but also recognize that there are others competing for the same goals, and that everyone cannot win. We also learn that truth and expedience can be totally different things. It's not a stretch from that to conclude that the ends justify the means. To protect my job I may have to lie about my credentials, cheat on the examination, falsify my work history. After all, God wants me to support myself and my family. Sometimes I may have to help God do his job...

Whether the chief priests and Jewish council felt that way or not is open to debate. What is not in question is that Caiaphas felt threatened by Jesus and the instability he brought to the Jewish council. The fact of the matter is that Jesus had developed quite a following. Caiaphas could still hear the shouts of the people from the prior Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the adulation of the people. Why, *Caiaphas* had never received such a warm welcome, and he was the very high priest of Israel! To add insult to injury, Jesus had proceeded from this festal reception to a court cleansing as he vanquished the Temple grounds of vendors and currency traders. Whether intentional or not, Jesus was usurping authority from the religious establishment. This could not be tolerated! Jesus had passed the point of no return, had done so long before. He had put a capstone on his ministry by raising that dead man from Bethany, Lazarus was his name. Even Caiaphas' own people were connecting the dots: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." Such a conclusion frightened Caiaphas to his very core and compelled him to issue his infamous verdict: "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50) Little did he know how true those words would be!

But he pressed forward in the ignorance of unbelief. The Sanhedrin is quickly convened even though the lateness of the hour precluded a legal gathering. Jesus has finally been apprehended and the Sabbath presses upon us. There must be a trail with judge and jury, charges, witnesses, and verdict. Much to be done and little time to do it. The difficulty with this trial was that there were no witnesses to any crime that Jesus had committed. Oh, there were some that came forward with this charge or that, but they could not agree on their testimony because they did not understand what Jesus had said. Jewish law required the corroborating testimony of *two* witnesses to establish guilt. If anything, the confusion of the witnesses only sustained Jesus' innocence. This trial is going nowhere. Time to take decisive action. If coaching the witnesses is necessary, then coaching it shall be.

Step back from the scene for a moment and reflect upon how it is that sin, once entertained, begets more sin. What begins as a small lie becomes progressively larger as more and more care must be taken to cover the tracks of the lie back further and further. We've all been there.

Perhaps in a moment of weakness or embarrassment we lied about an action we did or a statement we made. As soon as the word is out of our lips it takes on a life of its own. Peter's denial of Jesus comes quickly to mind. It ultimately forces him to perjure himself: "I don't know the man," he exclaims. We wince at his lie because we know it to be our lie. How many times have we not denied Jesus by our questionable conduct, our offensive language, our silent witness, our outright rejection of that which is honorable and righteous? When we view this catastrophic descent by famous personalities such as Bernie Madoff or Tom Daschle or Alex Rodriguez we are stunned. When we view our own catastrophic descent we come to a crossroads. We can despair of our wretchedness and forsake hope, such as did Judas. Or we can plead along with the jailor at Philippi, "What must I do to be saved?" God the Holy Spirit would seek this latter response, for in it is fertile ground for the seed of the Gospel.

But back to the trial at hand. With no credible witnesses available, then false witnesses must be engaged. A statement from Jesus' early ministry is recalled, when Jesus said "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). Jesus gave it as a sign of his authority, that he would be raised to life in three days after the temple of his body is destroyed in death. But the false witnesses again confuse his words and at best suggest that Jesus is mentally deranged to think that he can do in three days what took laborers 46 years to accomplish. Even these coached witnesses failed in this final desperate effort to accuse Jesus of unlawful behavior. It is recorded: "Even then their testimony did not agree." The crowning touch to the whole sordid affair is Jesus' response. *He remained silent.* And though the ears of the Sanhedrin were stopped by unbelief, we can hear loud and clear. "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7) The stage is set for the duplicitous high priest, from whom we shall hear next week.

What must I do to be saved? It is the question of the one who has been exposed to be a liar and a false witness. It is our question during this Lenten season. And it is exactly the right question. Jesus did indeed say, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." It would be his definitive sign that he would undo all things. All the questionable conduct, the offensive language, the silent witness, the outright rejection: All would be undone. Not ignored. Not condoned. Undone. His temple would be destroyed when his body was fastened on the beams of the cross. Not just his body was destroyed. Sin was paid. Satan was defeated. And *death* was destroyed. Such the destruction on that fateful day we call "Good." "And I will raise it again in three days." This the glorious sign that God judged the scales of justice satisfied. Death could not hold Him who is the life, life which is the light of men. With sin paid there is no more condemnation. What must I do to be saved? *If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)* This is the work of God. To change false witnesses into good witnesses who make the good confession. Like you do this evening. Thanks be to God. Amen.