

“1st Station of the Cross: “Jesus Before Annas, Caiaphas, and the Jewish Sanhedrin”
John 18:12-14, 19-24; Matthew 26:57-67
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Following his betrayal and capture, Jesus was taken from the Garden of Gethsemane, down the slope of the Mount of Olives, and along the path that followed the brook Cedron. Before them stretched the city's great stone walls which they followed until they reached the Fountain Gate. Ascending the steep hill, they marched up the same steps Jesus had gone down earlier that evening when he had gone to Gethsemane. At the top of the hill was a large mansion, the residence of the high priests Annas and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, only about 200 ft. from the Upper Room where Jesus had eaten the Passover a few hours earlier. Annas was a Sadducee and the most important religious leader in Jerusalem. He was a man of about sixty years of age, of whom the Roman historian Josephus wrote, "was a bold man in his temper and very insolent; he was also of the sect of the Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews."

The Sadducees, not to be confused with the Pharisees, were a minority party- they were the high priests who controlled the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court. While anyone could be a Pharisee, no one could be a Sadducee unless he belonged to one of the high-priestly or aristocratic families. As aristocrats, their duties were political as well as religious. They were the CONSERVATIVE party of Israel, wanting to preserve their power and the status quo at all costs. They developed close ties with their Roman rulers for both shared the primary objective of preserving the social and political order. Their aim was the welfare of the State as a secular institution, unlike the Pharisees who saw the nation as a religious community that needed purifying. The Sadducees held to the strict letter of the written Law as contained in the Pentateuch (or first five books of the Bible) and rejected most of the rest of the Old Testament, including the later prophets. They entertained no illusions about resurrection, personal immortality or a future judgment. They dismissed the existence of spirits and angels. They denied the providential power of God and thus held out no hope for a messianic deliverer. In fact, the very LAST thing they wanted was a deliverer, some zealous reformer to rise up and upset the system- THEIR system.

Annas and his family had strong reasons for preserving both the religious and political order as it was- they were probably the wealthiest family in the country. The Romans, who had the option of appointing high priests, would often sell the office to the highest bidder. In Annas' case, he must have put out a lot of money to secure the office of high priest for not only himself, but for his five sons, who were also high priests, and for Caiaphas, who was his son-in-law.

Annas could best be compared to a modern-day Mafia godfather. His financial empire had been built on graft, extortion, bribery and loansharking in the Temple place. At the time of Christ, the sacred area around the Temple had become a banking center and market place. Every adult Jew was obligated to make regular contributions to the support of the Temple. Because there were so many different kinds of currencies from the different Pilgrims arriving from all over the world, money-changers had booths set up there to change the money into the main Jewish currency. Not only did they charge a fee for this service, they also took advantage of the strangers' ignorance of

local currency to defraud them.

The high priests also profited from the merchants who sold the various birds and animals for the sacrifices at unreasonable prices. Pilgrims could not make long trips with their own animals and so were forced to buy them from these unscrupulous merchants for many times their true worth. The sacred area around the Temple had become an open-air bazaar where sellers shouted their wares, cheating unsuspecting customers. Two hundred later, rabbis would still refer to the Temple Market as the "bazaars of the Sons of Annas." Jesus had just cause to feel outrage when he scourged the money-changers and merchants, accusing them of transforming his Father's House into a den of thieves. This was, no doubt, one of the main reasons Annas and Caiaphas and the other Sadducees wanted Jesus dead- his cleansing of the Temple represented a grave threat upon their prestige and revenues. With his growing influence and following, Jesus threatened the status quo, the established order from which they had all profited so handsomely.

Jesus never had much contact with the Sadducees and hardly referred to them at all except when he referred to the chief priests whom he denounced. This was in part because Jesus spent most of his time with the lower classes, persons the Sadducees would NEVER associate with. Jesus' dealings were far more extensive with the Pharisees who were the REAL religious power in Palestine. They represented the authority of the Scriptures in home, school, synagogue, courts of law, and daily life. They were pious and patriotic, who stood for the people against rulers and hierarchies. They preached the keeping of the Law and heavenly rewards for obedience to it. The Pharisees were everywhere active in molding Jewish life according to the scriptures and their traditions. Though Jesus was not a Pharisee himself, his sympathies were definitely more with them than with the Sadducees. There were great differences between both parties yet those differences could be laid aside and the two could come together on this evening for the purpose of destroying one man- Jesus of Nazareth.

According to John, Jesus was first taken to Annas and THEN on to Caiaphas. This shows that Annas was really the one directing the proceedings against Jesus. Annas wanted to finally meet him- to size up this man and begin making the necessary preparations for the formal trial before the Sanhedrin presided over by his son-in-law, Caiaphas. Questioning him about his disciples and teachings, Jesus said little other than that his teachings were always public, either in the synagogue or the Temple. If he really wanted to know what he was about, he should ask those who heard him. Jesus knew that Annas was not really interested in his teachings nor in understanding the truth. He was merely looking for some evidence with which to incriminate him. Jesus' remark was interpreted as insolence and a guard reprimanded him with a smack in the face.

During Jesus' interrogation, messengers were sent to round up the other members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court. This was the supreme civil and religious authority of the Jews. This body of aristocrats, not democratically elected, represented the wealth, the learning, the political and religious power of Judea. Though they had their own police force and made arrests on its own authority, they had no jurisdiction over Roman citizens nor could they put anyone to death. Only the Roman governor over the region, Pontius Pilate, had that power. No doubt the members of the Sanhedrin were on standby, aware that Jesus would be seized some time during that night.

After this preliminary audience, Jesus is now shuttled from the hall of Annas into the

presence of Caiaphas in another part of the same house. The upper room of the palace was large and lavishly furnished, suitable for large meetings as they would have that night. Not all the Sanhedrin had been summoned for there were some, notably Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who were sympathetic to Jesus' cause. We can assume that only those members mostly hostile to Christ's ministry were in attendance for the hastily called meeting. Only twenty-three were required for a quorum.

Seated in semi-circle, these judges called for their witnesses to be brought in. They had been carefully selected and groomed during the preceding days. Our text, however, informs us that "the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin were seeking false witnesses against Jesus, that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward" (Matt. 26:59-60). Things weren't going according to plan. Perhaps, the witnesses had gotten cold feet or overcome with guilt before the presence of Jesus. If they couldn't get the witnesses to agree, the priests were in danger of their whole case against him collapsing.

In desperation, two men rose up and alleged that Jesus had threatened to destroy the Temple of God and to rebuild it in three days. This was a serious accusation, as the prophet Jeremiah had found out when HE foretold the destruction of the Temple and of the holy city- the people and their leaders became so upset that they cried out against him, demanding HIS death (Jer. 26:1-19). For the Sadducees, there was no graver threat. The existence of the Sadducees as a party and their authority over Judea was tied to the Temple and its priestly system. This was demonstrated some 40 years later when, with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the priesthood vanished and the Sadducees subsequently disappeared from history. The idea that this one man, Jesus, could destroy such a massive edifice by himself was inconceivable but if he could mobilize a large enough ARMY, the Temple and its entire priesthood COULD be toppled just as it had 600 years earlier by the Babylonians. If Jesus HAD made such a statement, any reluctance on the part of some Sadducees to prosecute him would now be gone.

Of course, that's not what Jesus had meant. St. John in his gospel tells us that when Jesus had said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," he was referring, not to the destruction of the Great Temple, but to the temple of his body, prophesying his resurrection from the dead. Yet, by itself, that statement was not enough to condemn Jesus. They needed to hear from Jesus' own mouth whether he had in fact made such a statement, but our text says that he refused to open his mouth and speak.

Frustrated over how the trial was proceeding, Caiaphas knew there was nothing left but to drive straight to the heart of the matter, to come right out and challenge Jesus as to the claims he had made about himself. He knew that Jesus had declared himself to be the Messiah. Invoking the name of God, Caiaphas forces Jesus to swear before God and that court to tell them whether he was the Christ. "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." An answer in the affirmative would close their case and seal Jesus' fate.

Jesus responds, "You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." The term "Son of Man" was a distinct term used in prophecy to designate the Messiah. This was a clear, unequivocal answer that left no doubt to the assembly. Under oath, before the high priest and supreme court of

the land, he declares that he is the Messiah, God's own Son, that he shares divine power with the Godhead. He is telling the Sanhedrin that the day will come in the not too distant future when their roles will be reversed and that HE will be the one judging THEM before the judgment seat of God.

Caiaphas knows they don't need to proceed any further with the trial- Jesus has incriminated himself by his own words. With a sense of smug satisfaction, they feel that they now have all the proof they need to put him to death. Tearing his robes in mock protest, Caiaphas declares, "He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy" and he calls for an immediate verdict from the court. With one voice they deliver a clear judgment, "He deserves death!" They had waited a long time for this moment. For some time, they had planned and plotted and schemed- but all in vain. They had been unable to silence him- in the synagogue, in the market place, in the Temple area, from denouncing them as hypocrites and white-washed sepulchres. But with the action that had been taken that night, he would now be silenced FOREVER.

As they rose to leave, they took turns mocking and spitting and striking Jesus, exhibiting their pent-up contempt for him. He was bound and taken to the prison, possibly the one in the cellar of the palace, to await his next trial that would occur with Pilate in the morning. Only Pilate had the authority to put Jesus to death and he would never execute a man on the basis of blasphemy. There was no more idolatrous and blasphemous religion in the world than the one practiced by the Romans. To get Jesus crucified, they would have to further lie and convince Pilate that he was a dangerous revolutionary intent on overthrowing the forces of Rome.

Annas, Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin were cold, calculating, power-hungry men who would go to any extreme to hold on to their power and all the privileges that went along with it. These clerics were responsible for the moral and spiritual development of a nation but instead, they ABUSED that authority by stealing from their people, by burdening them with oppressive religious regulations, by using their power to thwart reform and destroy their enemies. They cared nothing about the people nor the true religion of Jehovah. They cared only for preserving their own power and prestige at any cost.

What a frightening picture the gospels give us of the religious establishment of Jesus' time- how the moral and spiritual leaders of God's people cared more about perpetuating their personal privileges of power, status, and wealth than in guiding the Jews in the ways of Divine Truth and Light; that they would preserve their lives of luxury, entitlement, and ease AT ANY PRICE, even if it meant treacherously taking the life of the Son of God, the very One whom their Law and the Prophets had pointed to. And sadly, this deplorable situation has been repeated again and again over the past two thousand years- occurring whenever secular power and religious authority have become wedded to one another. Religion is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth. Throughout history, religious ideas and commitments rooted in love and self-sacrifice and service to others have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend their own narrow self-interests in pursuit of higher values and truths. But the opposite is ALSO true, that religion has often been linked directly to the WORST examples of human behavior. It is somewhat trite but nevertheless true that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.

Any student can tell you that history is replete with instance after instance of dictators and demagogues who have co-opted or used religion for their own selfish ends to advance their own personal power. But it is also a fact that religious leaders have done the same with political leaders in order to advance their own agenda or cause, as recent history has well shown. Power, wealth, status- these are DEADLIEST of all narcotics, and people will sacrifice their families, their friends, their principles--in short, their own SOULS--in order to hang on to it.

When members of either the religious right OR the religious left wed their theology with a conservative or a liberal political agenda, they have created a most toxic cocktail. For many, such a philosophy does not serve the interests of the truth nor Christ and his kingdom but rather, it becomes an excuse to protect their own privileges and self-interests, and I can't help but believe that the same spiritual rot that helped put Christ to death is alive and well in 2021, and it can even be found in our own congregations TODAY as surely as it was 2000 years ago.

Of course, this is not to say that there weren't some who were sympathetic to Jesus' cause- Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were certainly among the exceptions. But by and large, the majority had become SO comfortable in their lavish lifestyles, SO accustomed to the authority and prestige they possessed over the people, SO wedded to the graft that lined their own pockets, that to PRESERVE those privileges, they abandoned all commitment to the poor, the sick, and the disenfranchised of Israel. Instead, theirs was the cause of the rich and powerful- the cause of the upper classes who benefited at their expense, and to PROTECT those interests, they would resist any and all change to the status quo. Because Jesus was so fearless in his attacks, so relentless in taking up the cause of the lower classes, the people's confidence in their religious leadership had been undermined. Sensing early on the threat Christ's ministry would become, the Pharisees and Sadducees, whose relationship had ALWAYS been difficult, had finally been united over this one realization- that sooner than later, Jesus would have to go. Now, with his arrest and impending execution, they had finally won- or so they thought. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, it is with smug satisfaction we find ourselves tempted to look upon these clerics, these religious and spiritual leaders, and say, "God, we thank thee that we are not like those Pharisees or Sadducees." But Lord, we know better. We know our own hearts well enough to say that as Pastors and Elders and Deacons and members of your church that there is much that is fraudulent and insincere about our OWN lives, that the sanctimonious smiles and pious tones in our voice are often a disguise behind which we hide. Instead of regarding your church as a mighty force ready to fight for those who are marginalized and disadvantaged, for those who are poor or voiceless or considered of no account in this world, we say, "That is none of OUR business. GOD will take care of them" and like the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we continue on our way without a bit of sympathy for the plight of one beaten and robbed and left beside the road to die. The fact is that we don't want to upset the apple cart or appear to others as too radical for our utmost obligation is to preserve the status quo at all costs. And so the preacher's topic Sunday after Sunday becomes, "God helps those who help themselves." He encourages his congregation to become "positive thinkers" rather than "practitioners of faith". His sermons are on "Don't worry, be happy" rather than confronting them with the uncompromising demands of the cross. The bottom line is that we found it much easier to be conformed to the world than to struggle to transform it. In effect, we had become Sadducees ourselves!

Father, help us all to return to the basics, to master the fundamentals of honesty, humility and simple trust. Guard us from ever thinking too highly of ourselves, of harboring contempt and hidden resentment towards our people, of using our unique privilege as pastors and preachers and teachers and leaders to further our own ends rather than the goals Christ has set before us. Guard us from the curse of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Like the publican, may our own profession of faith be nothing less than a confession of our own inadequacy, "God, please be merciful to me a sinner!" In Christ's name we pray. Amen.