

Faces Around the Cross

LENT MID-WEEK 3

Text: Matthew 26:57, 59-68, 27:1-2

March 3, 2021

Caiaphas

As we continue our Lenten journey walking with Jesus in the shadow of the cross, we maintain our focus on the people who were involved in the events that lead to the crucifixion of Jesus.

As we see their responses to Jesus,
we seek to draw upon their experiences
to help us better understand the meaning of the cross for our lives.
We hope to learn from their experiences
so that we can faithfully and successfully
complete the journey to the cross with Jesus.

Today, we look at one of Jesus' antagonists,
Caiaphas,
the High Priest of the Jews.

It was just after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem
that Caiaphas and the council of priests realized
they had a serious problem on their hands.

As Matthew's gospel points out,
Caiaphas and the council found themselves
caught between a rock and a hard place.

They had a tough decision to make.
How were they going to deal with Jesus of Nazareth
and his ever-growing popularity?
How were they going to silence him
and the teeming crowds that followed him
shouting their *Hosannas* in the streets?

I'm not sure we can truly appreciate
the threat Jesus posed to Caiaphas
and the ministry of the priests.

These leaders of the Temple walked a fine line
trying to maintain some semblance of civil order
among the Jews
balancing the Messianic and nationalistic hopes of the people
with the unpleasant reality
of the Roman occupation of their land.

While it is true Caiaphas and the priests
 had feathered their own nests
 cutting a sweetheart deal with the Romans,
 they were legitimately trying to keep the peace
 so that the Roman army that occupied their land
 wouldn't lash out and destroy the nation.

Caiaphas and the priests
 played this delicate balancing game
 with great skill and cunning.

But now with rising Messianic hopes swirling around the palms and *Hosannas*,
 they found themselves facing a formidable challenge:

How to deal with the problem of Jesus!

There was another factor at work here too.

Not only were the priests concerned about protecting the nation,
 they were concerned about protecting their religious turf as well.

In the very act of playing up to the Romans,
 they had made a mockery
 of the worship of Israel.

Their actions were diametrically opposed to the fundamental faith of Israel
 which affirmed the exclusive claims of God
 upon the lives of his people.

God alone,
 who had rescued Israel from slavery and delivered them through the sea,
 was to be the protector and savior of the nation.

God alone
 was the one to whom they were to
 pledge their allegiance.

The priests furthered that mockery
 by the way they conducted themselves
 in running the business of the Temple.

They had quite a racket going
 selling the priestly services
 of the Temple
 charging the people healthy sums of money
 to offer up the prescribed sacrifices
 and burnt offerings.

These priestly services were absolutely essential for the faith.
 They were the means by which atonement was made
 for the forgiveness of sins.

Apart from the sacrifices offered in the Temple,
 there was no way for people to have access to God's grace
 that brings the forgiveness of sins.

And then along comes Jesus
 threatening the peace of the nation
 and challenging the self-serving religiosity of the priests
 preaching a simple faith of absolute obedience to God—
**a faith rooted not in the institutions of the Temple
 but in the devotion of the heart.**

Surely his entrance into Jerusalem amid all the palms and praises
 threatened Caiaphas and the priests
 and everything they stood for.

*All the people will believe him;
 they'll turn away from us, they say..*
 And so, they plotted to kill him.

Well today, we don't plot to kill Jesus as they did,
 but how much does it threaten us
 when the simple faith in God Jesus proclaims
 challenges us?

How much are we threatened when Jesus' vision of the God's kingdom
 challenges the systems of society, culture and religion
 which we have established and espouse?

A quick look back at the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.
 —remembering the terrible images of hatred and brutality that were rampant
 throughout the nation in the Civil Rights movement of the 60's—
 shows us how violently people can react
 when the gospel of God's all-embracing love
 collides with prejudicial attitudes that are so deeply rooted in our lives.

The racial violence inflicted on the Black community
 reached its peak one hot summer day in Birmingham, Alabama
 when a Black Church was bombed and four innocent children lost their lives.
 Because that hatred and violence is so contrary to the gospel Jesus proclaimed,
 it is hard to believe that much of the violence against Blacks came at the hands
 of White Christians who thought they were doing God's will.

Certainly. Caiaphas and the council
thought they were doing God's will
when they plotted to have Jesus killed!

That raises an intriguing question!

How do we know
what God's will is?
How do we know
where God wants us to stand on the great issues of our time?

In the powerful hymn, *Once to Every Man and Nation*, we find these compelling words:

***New occasions teach new duties
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth.***

Caiaphas and the priests were so focused on their sweetheart deal with the Romans
they lost sight of the purpose God had set before them to be stewards
of the gracious covenant of love God had given them in Israel's redemption.

That becomes a very important message for us
because, like Caiaphas and the priests,
we are entrusted with gifts of grace,
and we are called to be good stewards
of the gracious love
God has entrusted to us in Jesus Christ.

Are we faithful stewards of that grace?
Or are we so protective of our turf—
our institutions and preconceived ideas about God—
that we attack every prophet of God
that calls us to
repentance and faithfulness?

What we learn from Caiaphas is that it is dangerous for us when we get stuck in the rut
of our religiosity and self-righteous piety and fail to recognize the fact
that new occasions teach new duties and time makes ancient good uncouth.

Our faith in Jesus Christ must never become so stagnant
that it becomes stuck in the same old rut
putting the importance of institutions and systems
above the Lordship of Christ
failing to follow where God leads
in paths of service to our fellow human beings.

While Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever,
God opens up new opportunities to each generation
to share that timeless, changeless love with others.

While that love is constant,
our expressions of that love and faith
change from age to age.

Like Caiaphas and the council,
we can so institutionalize and systematize the love of God we share in Christ
that, in the process, we push God far away from the center of our lives.

For our faith to be meaningful and alive and at the center of our lives,
we must pledge our allegiance not to nation...
nor comfortable social orders...even institutional church structures.

For faith to be vital and alive and at the heart of our lives,
we must pledge our allegiance to Christ...
and Christ alone.