

against Him. Jesus did not respond, and did not have to, as Caiaphas well knew. So Caiaphas cut through the game that was being played about bogus charges, and asked Jesus directly, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' There is no doubt what Caiaphas meant, for he really wanted to know whether Jesus was prepared to answer not just to being the Messiah, but also the Son of the 'Blessed One'; these last two words being a Jewish way of saying 'God', without committing the blasphemy of saying God's name! The stakes were dramatically raised, and without hesitation or delay, Jesus replied 'I am!' This is an extraordinary moment in Mark's Gospel because Jesus had previously avoided making any direct personal claim as Messiah; but this moment was different. Jesus had only hours to live, and no personal stance to defend. Speaking directly to the man who held the highest office amongst God's people and a descendant of one of Israel's oldest families tracing back through Zadok to Aaron to Levi, Jesus made His one confession; Yes, He was the Messiah.

This was enough for Caiaphas; and when Jesus added force to His statement by saying that He would be seated at the right hand of God in His glory (14:62), Caiaphas was utterly scandalised. He had never heard such blasphemy before and was unable to accept that the man standing before him could possibly be the 'Son of God'. He appears to have immediately abandoned the show trial being conducted to bring proceedings to a halt. From his point of view he had heard enough, and was prepared to condemn Jesus on the spot. The rest would have to wait to the morning (see 15:1f.)

Application

Jesus was treated appallingly with what appears to us to be the beginnings of a political show trial, and in that respect, the same had happened before and happens now, to this day. Jesus' honest truthfulness, surprising us by His open admission of being God's Messiah, is an inspiration to us to stand in firmness and honesty when all else around us appears to be falling apart. God's plans for us and for the world are far greater than the political necessities of our day. But this passage is about far more than that, however impressive Jesus is as an example of right against wrong. The truth is that Jesus faced death, and he knew it. The penalty for blasphemy was death, and He was unjustly accused of it because He was indeed the Messiah and God's Son, as Mark's Gospel has made clear from the very beginning (1:11). But Jesus knew that death was not the end, and in the light of what Jesus has done for us, by faith we can say the same.

Whatever circumstances we face, we can do so in the knowledge that when everything fails and even death stares us in the face, then we can have confidence in the Lord our God for what will happen next. Jesus was raised from the dead, and we can trust in God to save us as well, whatever the human odds. In life, we easily become bogged down in what we call 'the trials of life'; but what are they compared to the ultimate questions of life and death posed by what happened to Jesus? We must learn from what happens to us that we can stand tall through all our trials because our God will bring us through safely, and when we do that, people take notice. Jesus' quiet dignity in the face of death is quoted as one of the most impressive things about Him, according to non-Christians. Now if what Jesus did is such a testimony, how much more should we be like Him, so that others might know what He has done for us all?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Could Peter have done more for Jesus than merely keep close by and associate with those who abused his Master?
2. Discuss why you think it was important for the authorities to obtain a simple charge to detain Jesus?
3. What is blasphemy? Was Jesus' confession strictly blasphemy?

Discipleship

Those who are following the series of discipleship suggestions in Lent are writing a series of reflections on what Jesus felt as He came closer to Easter. What an astonishing moment it is when Jesus finally confesses with His own lips that He is the Messiah! But why would Jesus say this before the high priest when He would not say it in front of anyone else? Did Jesus have a vision Himself at that moment when Caiaphas confronted Him? He spoke out the words of the prophet Daniel which come from a remarkable vision (Daniel 7:13,14f.) Write down what you reckon Jesus was thinking.

Final Prayer

Jesus, forgive the casual way we approach our faith. Challenge us to learn from the story of Your death that what You did stands unique in human history as Your personal sacrifice for us, and the only means of our salvation. Open our hearts to praise Your name Lord Jesus: AMEN

Prayer

We praise You, God of grace; for by Your amazing generosity, You have decided to accept us even as repentant sinners. May we never belittle the grace by which we were saved and by which we may come into Your presence. Make us worthy of this grace which has been poured out on us, and open our mouths in testimony to amazing grace. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Peace

Pray for the place where you live and its surrounding countryside. People have always sought out places where they can find peace, in parks or woodland, in open countryside or in gardens; so pray that such places be either left alone or properly maintained and be 'places of peace' for all who need them. If there is a particular place which is special to you, pray for that place.

Meditation

Dream about the things of God;
See beyond the things you now experience,
And let the Spirit guide your mind
To where you've never been before.

Dream, and let the Kingdom of God
Break through to every area of your life,
Exposing the wrong and honouring the good,
And turning everything you know, upside down.

Dream, and let the hope of glory
Fill your soul and inspire your mind;
See the gates of mercy open to meet real need,
And find all things possible in Christ your Lord.

Dream, and in the vision set before you,
See the magnificence of the power of God
Transcend the limitations of this tired world,
And set you free by truths you've never known before.

Dream, and let God change your world, through His.

Bible Study - Mark 14:53-65

⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, elders, and scribes gathered together. ⁵⁴ Now Peter followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he sat with the guards, warming himself at the fire.

⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were searching for evidence against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. ⁵⁶ Indeed, many gave false evidence against him, but their statements did not agree; ⁵⁷ some stood up and testified falsely against Him, alleging, ⁵⁸ 'We heard Him say, "I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands."' ⁵⁹ But they could not even agree on this evidence.

⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer? What are these accusations they are making against you?' ⁶¹ But he was silent and said nothing. The high priest questioned Him again and said to Him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' ⁶² 'I am,' said Jesus, 'and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.' ⁶³ At this, the high priest tore his robes and said, 'What further need do we have of witnesses?' ⁶⁴ You have heard blasphemy! What decision do you make?' They all condemned Him as deserving to die.

⁶⁵ Then some began to spit on Him; they blindfolded Him and struck Him, saying to Him, 'Prophecy!' And the guards also took Him and beat him.

Review

After Jesus was taken captive by the religious authorities, He was taken to a preliminary hearing (see also Matt. 26:57-68; Mark 14:54-65; Luke 22:66-71; and John 18:12-14, 19-24). Clearly, a 'council' of sorts was convened late at night at the house of the high priest (14:53) to deal as swiftly as possible with Jesus. A late night council was unusual, but the authorities wanted to give a show of doing things properly, and they needed to give a reason for holding Jesus for fear of any backlash amongst His supporters in Jerusalem. From personal experience, they knew that Jesus was capable of defeating them in public, so they used the only means available to them to get Him off the streets and engineer the charges by which they could have Him killed. Jesus threatened the authority of high priests and the establishment, and He spoke against everything they believed about God according to their traditions.

The religious authorities were wrong about Jesus and Jesus was right about them; they were truly a 'wicked and twisted generation' (8:38). As we will find out in this passage and the rest of Mark's Gospel, the proceedings to which Jesus was subjected were a caricature of justice and did not meet the proper standards of the day. The proceedings at Jesus' trial can be compared to regulations found in the Mishnah, a second century document which set out legal processes based on the book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 17:8-13, 19:14-18 etc.). Most studies of this conclude that at almost every point, due process was slipshod, cut short, manipulated or otherwise abused in order to meet the key objective that Jesus was to be killed. It was all a parody of justice, as the Roman governor Pilate eventually realised after it had become too late to do anything about it (15:14,15).

Some books about what happened to Jesus during His trial cast doubt on whether parts of the story of Jesus' trial actually happened, suggesting that what is recorded in Mark's Gospel cannot have happened because it was against Jewish law. Such arguments have led some to doubt the historicity not of Jesus' eventual death, but the reasons why He died. However, written codes of practice are not a good guide to how the law is applied in any particular society or culture. Even in our own day, those with money manipulate the law to achieve their own ends, and the poor often get 'rough justice'. If this happens now, and it happened in Jesus' day, and for this reason, the Gospels cannot be dismissed. Jesus was committed to trial and death on a miscarriage of justice.

Technically, it was illegal to bring charges in the middle of the night (14:55-59); they should have been brought before a full council meeting held during the day. In the event, the high priest had to discuss everything with his officials the next morning! (15:1). Then, when daytime hearings were held, the witnesses lined up to accuse Jesus were unable to produce acceptable evidence (14:56-59). The shambles was so great that the high priest himself (Caiaphas – see Matthew 26:3) had to intervene and ask Jesus to impugn Himself (14:61)! At that point, Jesus not only told them directly that He was the Messiah (14:61), but quoted Daniel, and in so doing claimed equality with God (14:62). By quoting Scripture, Jesus gave Caiaphas all he needed to charge Jesus with blasphemy. At the very point where Jesus could have argued His way out of a conviction, He yielded and accepted the charge.

Then while all this was happening, a fascinating contrast between Peter and Jesus was emerging. At the beginning, Peter followed Jesus at a distance, hiding amongst the crowd and the soldiers of the guard, waiting to see what would happen. At the end, the soldiers with whom Peter had stood and 'warmed himself' (14:54) were abusing Jesus, mocking Him and beating Him. As the terrible story continues we will see how Peter responded to what happened, and remember, Mark's Gospel is commonly regarded to be the account of Jesus' life as seen by Peter, and written by Mark.

Going Deeper

It is painful for us to have to read this part of Mark's Gospel, but it is surely a dereliction of duty for a Christian not to become thoroughly acquainted with the details of what happened to Jesus when He was hauled out of liberty into human captivity. The phrase 'like a lamb to the slaughter' comes to mind (Isaiah 53:7) because as we have seen, the legal processes were merely a means to an end, and the authorities knew exactly what they wanted from the start. However, it was a little more devious than we often think.

Peter, warming himself at the fire, and the real witnesses to what happened

Just as the story of Jesus' trial is told in all four Gospels, so is the story of Peter and his ultimately disastrous attempt to follow Jesus during the unfolding tragedy of His death. In each Gospel, we are quietly introduced to the fact that Peter was attempting to follow Jesus, as is done here in verse 54, before we come to the famous incident in which Peter denied his Lord (14:66-72). It is a story which strikes a chord with us because we can appreciate Peter's

earnest desire to do what was right, but just as we all do so often when attempting to go beyond our abilities, Peter gradually dug himself into a hole from which he could not escape. In this passage, Mark highlights the paradox of Peter 'fraternising with the enemy' by warming himself by the fire alongside the very people who would soon be insulting Jesus and abusing Him.

It has been suggested that Peter's presence in the court of the high priest enabled him to hear about what was happening, which made him an invaluable source of information about what went on in the court proceedings which convicted Jesus. It is impossible for us to know this for sure, but we do know that at least two people who became early Christians were on the council convened by Caiaphas that night; the Pharisee Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38-42). Given the intense interest there must have been in what happened to Jesus at this time, it is remarkable that the story we have in all four Gospels is as consistent as it is, so there must have been powerful and influential testimony about what went on from someone like this.

The gathering of the council and some false accusations

The high priest gathered together a quorum of council members (called a Sanhedrin – see Mark 13:9) in order to deal with Jesus (14:53,55). This is a little surprising because it would have been hard to gather the whole membership of the governing council after sundown, and (according to the Mishnah) it was illegal to conduct hearings at night. It does appear that people were lined up to make allegations against Jesus which, comically, did not agree.

Mark quotes one of the allegations; 'we heard Him say "I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands."' (14:58). Jesus had never said this exactly, and the only occasion Mark records anything like this was when Jesus had left the Temple one evening and the disciples looked back at Jerusalem to admire the Temple building. Jesus then said 'not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' (13:2). In addition to this, John's Gospel records Jesus as saying 'destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.' (John 2:20), but goes on to say that Jesus 'was talking about the temple of His body'. Even to this day, we are not sure exactly what Jesus said, but it is quite clear that once the allegation was made, it was repeated back to Jesus again and again during His final hours on the Cross (Matt 27:40,63, Mark 15:29 etc.).

It is easy to see why the authorities fixed on this issue which was for them, an obscenity. The great Temple of Herod the Great was only recently finished, and had taken many years to build, and Jesus had already made a scene within it by overturning the tables of the money-changers (11:15-19). Also, when Jesus had previously spoken about the destruction of the Temple, He went on to describe His own resurrection almost within the same breath (as in 8:31, 9:31 and 10:33,34), it is easy to see how the accusation came about. But still, no-one could agree exactly what Jesus said, and it was a basic legal requirement of the Old Testament Law (Num 35:30; Duet. 17:6; 19:15) that two witnesses had to agree for an accusation to be accepted as accurate, certainly one on which the death penalty might eventually be imposed.

The truth was most likely that just as the council gathering at night was a bending of the rules of the council, the whole matter of the charges was intended to be a holding measure to get Jesus legitimately held. This would then allow Jesus' opponents time to have Him handed over to the Romans, who had little compulsion in crucifying anyone who was accused of upsetting the general peace of the Empire. It was technically possible for the Jewish council to pass down a death sentence, but it seems as if the high priest and the other Pharisees and scribes were intent from the beginning on finding a strong enough reason to get the Romans to execute Jesus for them. They were not interested in the law, only in achieving their political ends

The revelation of the messiah and the rage of Caiaphas

It is just possible that Caiaphas did perceive that the issue of the Temple was more than an excuse, and was connected to the coming of the Messiah. He would have known that in the Old Testament, Zechariah 6:12 and Ezekiel 40ff both spoke of the building of a new Temple when the Messiah came. He also knew full well that the reason the authorities were pursuing Jesus was because of the claim that He was the Messiah. Caiaphas would have dealt with people who claimed to be the Messiah before, but Jesus was different. Jesus had the ordinary people talking about Him as Messiah and had performed remarkable deeds, and He did not conform to the zealous image of a Messiah which people previously held. He may even have been aware that Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah; generally, He invited people to reach that conclusion for themselves.

Now, if Caiaphas was as astute as this, what happened next in Mark's story begins to make complete sense. Caiaphas rose to his feet, observing that the chaos amongst the witnesses was not achieving the desired results. Firstly, he challenged Jesus to answer the various but unsubstantiated allegations made