

Our Transformation in the Journey to Easter: Jesus & Caiaphas **Matthew 26:1-5, 57-67; 27:1-2**

On our journey of spiritual transformation through Lent together we have in the last two weeks looked at the lives of two characters who were very much a part of Jesus' journey to the cross, Judas who betrayed Jesus and then Peter, who denied him. From our scripture reading this morning we move on to the character in the story who was primarily behind and responsible for Jesus' arrest, trial and being handed over to the Romans to be put to death. The high priest who convicted Jesus was Joseph Caiaphas. He was from the Jewish priestly tribe of Levi. He was a Sadducee. At the time of Jesus the Sadducees were comprised of a small group of wealthy aristocratic families who controlled worship at the Jerusalem temple and, because of their majority over the Pharisees and others, the Sanhedrin as well, which under Roman rule was responsible for the civil and religious rule of the Jewish nation. Caiaphas had done well in life and marriage for he was a son-in-law of Annas, the high priest who had been deposed in AD 15. Caiaphas was appointed by the Roman procurator Valerius Gratus, under Tiberius, in AD 18 and he ruled the nation as high priest until AD 36, when he was deposed by the same ruler proconsul Vitellius who had removed his father-in-law Annas. I share these names and details so that we can place firmly in history Caiaphas with these other characters.

In November 1990, what was believed to be Caiaphas' family tomb was discovered by archaeologists. His ossuary, which is a limestone chest or "bone box", contained the bones of a man of about 60 years old, a woman, two children and two infants. It was the custom in ancient Israel to store the bones of the dead in ossuaries gathering them up about a year after burial. Whether they are his bones or not, Caiaphas was one of the first of his time to have in mind and moot the idea that the Sanhedrin should plan to put Jesus to death. We have in words in the gospel of:

John 11 ⁴⁹Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, 'You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.'

⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵²and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³So from that day on they plotted to take his life. **(NIV)**

Caiaphas was a straight shooting non-empathetic character when he spoke which is typical for a Sadducee. They were known not only for not believing in the

existence of the spiritual realm or the resurrection of the dead but for their extreme rudeness to one and all treating Gentiles and foreigners as they would with their very own peers, along with the Pharisees of course. The Pharisees may have been the group in Israel who continually lead and fronted the opposition to Jesus throughout his three year public ministry but they lacked power until they came together with the Sadducees who held the majority in the Sanhedrin, which in itself lacked political freedom under Roman rule.

So, Caiaphas was forever concerned with the politics of the situation, not only in order to retain and keep power for himself in his position, which he may have even have paid the Roman's to have, but how he and the Sanhedrin could grow in power and influence under Roman rule. Therefore political expediency was the name of the game for him and as a result he had no conscience or concern when it came to the question of the guilt or innocence. Caiaphas believed that it was better that one man die, even if he was an innocent man, rather than the Jewish nation be put in jeopardy. However, if you know history then the irony becomes apparent when we remember that in AD 70 the Jewish nation perished, including the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple, which was in itself the very demise and end of the Jewish Sect of the Sadducees!

Caiaphas may have prophesied or predicted Jesus' end but little did he realise where his strategy was headed in the future. He believed that Jesus' death would unify the Jewish nation against the threat of Rome.

The people had always looked to the time when the nation would gather together in their homeland under the Messiah as written in the Psalms and by their Prophets. And now Caiaphas as their high priest predicted that the growing popularity of Jesus would bring people from all over the world to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. And he was right. But what he failed to both believe and understand was that Jesus might actually be fit and qualified to be the Messiah (John 7:45-52). To him, this incredibly popular Galilean carpenter guy who'd come out of nowhere and was drawing the masses to him, honouring and praising him, listening to his teaching and witnessing his miracles, from a political point of view this situation provided the opportunity to bring the nation together and unify their power against their Roman oppressors. But only if the Sanhedrin could turn the crowds against Jesus? Then Caiaphas and his cronies could demonstrate their own power over the nation while under the rule of the Roman Empire.

Through this secular and political motive it was so easy for Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin to not only deny that Jesus was the long awaited political Messiah who was coming to deliver Israel from the tyranny of Roman rule, but to disown and betray Jesus to the Roman's because of their personal and political motives.

So Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had to work out how they might stop Jesus in his tracks with his great rise in popularity and favour with the crowds of people, while their's was in decline. As the Jewish authorities they had become increasingly concerned and threatened by Jesus and his movement. So their opposition to Jesus was clearly and easily motivated by pride and position. They were jealous of his popularity with the people, so that even Pilate could tell that "it was out of envy, self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him" (Mark15:10). And they were intensely motivated to protect their position. If Jesus' movement became a threat to the Roman authorities, the Empire would hold them responsible. They would be seen as weak and ineffective in controlling their nation, and might be removed and even executed. So, Caiaphas and the leaders of the Sanhedrin, the legal body which ruled Israel under the authority of Rome, decided just how to deal with Jesus.

Now we know that it was Judas' willingness to betray Jesus that provided them with the opportunity, so they seized Jesus in the privacy of the Garden of Gethsemane so as not to cause a stir with the people. But now they had to move quickly to justify their arrest before the crowds learned of their action. It was imperative that they be able to convict him of a capital crime so that the crowds would turn against him and the Romans would execute him. Jesus' arrest had been made under the Sanhedrin's authority and as their prisoner would be tried under their jurisdiction. Roman rule allowed the Sanhedrin autonomy and authority to try cases and prescribe punishments except for capital offenses where Rome must agree and carry out the execution. So then Jesus is brought to Caiaphas' palace to appear before him and the Sanhedrin, the ruling court of Israel.

What followed was one of the greatest travesties of justice and legal proceedings in history. We are well aware in NZ of such things with what happened in the case of Arthur Allan Thomas' trial for murder and as the case maybe this week with the news of Teina Pora twice convicted for rape and murder had the conviction quashed by the Privy Council with the case now under review to determine whether he is to be retried again. Not so well known about Pora is that he became a Christian 11 years ago in Paremoremo prison. With a new found faith in his Lord and Saviour who has been through the same, even worse things, he has said from that time that he'd settled into a confidence that one day, things would work out. If he is retried, for the third time, the proceedings will be more just for him, unlike at his first two trials.

Unlike Pora, Jesus never had the chance of a retrial let alone a fair trial. In bringing Jesus to the palace of Caiaphas that night for his one and only trial some of the officials had broken the rules and betrayed their objectivity by arranging for Jesus' arrest and participating in it.

Trials according to Jewish law were to be conducted in public in front of the entire assembly of the court which was to meet only during the day with the proviso that no conviction could be entered on the day the trial began.

Now they collected witnesses and coached them to give false testimony against the accused (Matthew 26:59), not only violating their impartiality but obviously compromising the integrity of the proceedings.

However, even their arranged witnesses did not agree with each other according to Mark 14:56. The court could not find two witnesses in agreement with each other, the minimum required by their law Deut 19:15. Now the entire strategy of Caiaphas and his cronies was in danger. If the crowds learned that they had arranged for Jesus' arrest and mistreated him in custody, only to find no basis for a conviction, his popular standing would only increase while theirs would be destroyed.

So the desperate high priest pleaded with Jesus to betray himself:

"I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God" Matthew 26:63. Since no person could be made to testify against himself, if Jesus had remained silent he would have been acquitted. Instead, he pronounced the very words which he knew would incur the wrath of the court: "'Yes, it is as you say,' Jesus replied. 'But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven'" Matthew 26:64.

Even then Jesus could not be convicted on his testimony alone. Nonetheless, Caiaphas and the court pronounced him guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death [vv65-66]. All of which had been conducted illegally under cover of darkness. In fact, every step and detail of Jesus' Jewish trial violated the laws of his nation. Caiaphas then reconvened the court in daytime to ratify their decision [vv 67-68]. However, their court had no right to impose the death penalty. Annas had been deposed as high priest by the Romans in AD 15 for executing a prisoner without the consent of the procurator, and Caiaphas didn't want the same thing happening again to him. So the court took their convict to Pilate. And Good Friday continued.

Where do our lives cross with the story of Jesus and Caiaphas?

Imagine yourself as Caiaphas. What desperation in your own heart and mind would serve to fuel such irreverence, disrespect and profanity- what we can call sacrilege? [Has desperation ever driven you to sacrilege?]

What motives would lead him to commit acts that he knew were illegal?

Forget NZ policeman who may have framed or planted or used evidence in an unjust or unfair way in the pursuit of a guilty verdict, another conviction.

All we each have to do is to consider the last willful, intentional sin that you and I committed, and then ask ourselves, "Why did 'I' disobey our Lord?" And after we have answered this then there is the all important question to consider of, "How will you and I respond to Christ's atoning love now?" [Jesus dying in our place on the cross for our sin]

Caiaphas is relevant to our lives today. In actuality, Jesus did not stand trial before Caiaphas—Caiaphas stood trial before Jesus. If the high priest had admitted his egotistical ambition, pride and sacrilege, he could have been forgiven and granted eternal life. As it is, his name is known to history for his scheming and tyrannical persecution of the sinless Son of God.

Today there is no shortage of men and women like Caiaphas. Atheist Richard Dawkins claims that religion is "the root of all evil" and calls it a virus in the software of humanity that must be expunged. Fellow atheist Stephen Hawking was confident that there's no afterlife. Like Caiaphas, they and others who are so convinced that Jesus is not God will one day learn that their ego-driven rejection of the Lord has not affected his actual existence one iota.

To wrap things up this morning:

Today it remains that while anyone can visit the ossuar of Caiaphas, the tomb of the one he convicted is empty, now and forever. Because of Easter, the man treated as a criminal by the Jewish authorities will return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16), and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11). Including those who reject him today! Caiaphas shows that our beliefs regarding Jesus do not change his reality. The high priest was certain that the Galilean carpenter's claims to divinity were heresy. Rather than investigate these claims for objective evidence and biblical truth, he dismissed them based solely on his opinion. He was like Stephen Hawking who said, "I don't believe in heaven or hell," as though his opinion has anything to do with their reality. Tragically many in our world share Caiaphas' belief that their beliefs are relevant to God's existence and glory. I say to you this morning, "Do not sin and make the mistake of being one of them". Instead let us each repent of the sacrilege of our own sin and then pray for and be witnesses to the truth that we have found in Christ, to those who share Caiaphas' belief.