

## **Good Friday**

**Father Evan**

### **Jesus and the Sanhedrin, Matthew 26. 57-68**

We have come from the garden. Jesus and his disciples have spent much of the night in Gethsemane, that 'place of the olive press', where rustling leaves were the chief accompaniment to agonised thoughts of the heavenly Father's will. Arrested now and taken by soldiers into the city, Jesus stands alone before the high priest Caiaphas. Arrayed around him are the seventy elders of the Sanhedrin, or at least as many as could be roused from their beds in the middle of the night.

They, the Sanhedrin, are the descendants of the seventy elders appointed by God to serve under Moses as judges of the people of Israel. Caiaphas, anointed high priest of God Most High, is successor to Aaron the first high priest who sprinkled the blood on the Ark of the Covenant when Israel wandered in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. This is a most illustrious and solemn assembly. Or so it appears.

But let me introduce you to a man named Valerius Gratus. Valerius Gratus was the fourth Roman prefect of the province of Judea. Of his successor, Pontius Pilate, we will hear more later. Like other prefects before him, Gratus was responsible for the appointment of the Jewish high priest. Caiaphas was one of his appointments, as were the three previous high priests who each followed in quick succession after the deposition of Annas who was appointed by Quirinius. You may remember it was Quirinius who called the census which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem.

Now why, you may ask, am I making a point of introducing Valerius Gratus? Simply for this reason: to point out the compromised position the Jewish high priest occupied. For the Roman province of Judea to operate smoothly, it was necessary that the Imperial government and the local provincial government get along. Caiaphas was the fourth in a quick succession of high priests appointed in order to ensure the continued subjugation of the Jewish people to Roman rule. His lengthy tenure- some eighteen years- suggests he was especially good at compromising with Roman officialdom and smoothing relations with the Sanhedrin who otherwise dominated Jewish internal affairs. This is the man before whom Jesus stands accused.

According to ancient Jewish tradition, the office of high priest descended by lineage of blood from father to son. With a few notable exceptions who were appointed at the instigation of one of God's prophets, this tradition lasted until about 200 years before the birth of Jesus at which point a number of well-placed priestly families came to dominate an increasingly political office. It was from one of these families that Caiaphas was chosen. And that Caiaphas was more a politician than a priest is plain from our text.

First, he presides over a false court. *The chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death.* For a long time Jesus had rankled the Jewish authorities, upsetting the delicate position of power they had carved out for themselves under the Roman occupation. False messiahs were not uncommon in Jesus' day, and each one risked bringing down a heavy hand, curtailing the freedom of Jews in their own homeland and calling into question the ability of the Sanhedrin and the priestly elite to maintain order. It was not in Caiaphas' interest for the messiah to be revealed. So he seeks to condemn, not to discover the truth. Though lying witnesses are discovered, they are not punished, despite the law being clear: *If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.*

Second, when Caiaphas questions Jesus, he puts him under oath, not out of respect for God but out of a desire to entrap. *'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.'* Either Jesus is forced to admit that he is not the messiah, in which case he can be publicly exposed as a liar and a cheat and a blasphemer, or he claims messiahship which, so far as the Sanhedrin are concerned, is likewise blasphemous and therefore deserving of death. No matter how Jesus responds to Caiaphas, he loses. Under oath there is no escape.

Finally, Caiaphas' response to Jesus declaration of messiahship breaks one of the oldest rules regarding the behaviour of the high priest. *Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy.* I wonder if any of the Sanhedrin raised their eyebrows at this, for after appointment of Aaron as the first high priest, the instruction was given: *The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing-oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the vestments, shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments.* The high priest was always to maintain a ritual purity, a dignity of office, an apartness from common behaviour showing excesses of emotion. Yet Caiaphas breaks tradition and Law by tearing his garments.

The successor to Aaron, surrounded by the elders and judges of the people, orchestrates a mocking trial in which the Law he so vociferously pretends to defend is contravened and undermined at every level. What a mockery of the high priestly office! What a demeaning of a great tradition! What a histrionic parody of a solemn assembly!- meeting in the middle of the night to condemn an innocent man in order to keep peace with Rome, thus retaining both the boot of the oppressor and the associated social status. What injustice perpetrated by a man who should have been committed to honour, his sacred duty, and God's people.

*What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death.'* Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, *'Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?'* So Jesus leaves the court of Caiaphas vindicated in innocence by a false trial and a mocking jury to face a second judge, Pontius Pilate.