

I.N.I.

Second mid-week Lent

Matthew 26:57-68

Feb. 24, 2010

In Christ Jesus, Who suffered at the hands of His own people, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In our sermon text this evening we hear of one of the most appalling, one of the most shocking, one of the most painful events in the Passion History. God's Word had promised more than once, both in the Old Testament prophecies as well as in Jesus' own words, that He would suffer at the hands of people. But what is the source of the suffering in our text for this evening? Who would have believed it? Those who should have been the first to welcome Jesus and follow Him, to believe in Him, love, trust, and worship Him, were the very ones who hated, rejected, and persecuted Him and even called for His crucifixion.

Jesus was arrested and taken before Caiaphas, the High Priest. The High Priest was to be the man closest to God in the whole world. On the great Day of Atonement he was the one who brought the blood of the sacrifice into the Most Holy Place of the temple—God's throne on earth—and sprinkled the blood twice on the Mercy Seat, once for the sins of the nation and once for his own sins. That sprinkling of blood was a picture of the work of the Messiah, the Savior, who would shed His blood to blot out sin and guilt once and for all. The High Priest knew that. He was the overseer of all the ceremonies and sacrifices in the temple, most of which, in one way or another, pictured the coming of the Savior, whose one great sacrifice would redeem the world.

If anyone should have known that Jesus was the fulfillment of all those ceremonies and sacrifices, it was the High Priest. As one who knew by heart, all of the promises in the Old Testament that pointed to the Savior, the High Priest's behavior should have been far different from the behavior we hear about in our text. He should have stood up in front of all the people and shouted the words of John the Baptist: **"BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD, WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD!" (John 1:29).**

But just the opposite is what we see and hear from Caiaphas. We see him breaking Jewish law by calling for this corrupt court in the middle of the night, arranging for and accepting false testimony. We see him ripping his robes in rage and calling for the death penalty when Jesus admits to being the Messiah, the Son of God. Even before the trial began, Caiaphas declared that this Jesus must die because it would be better for Him to die than for the High Priest and his cohorts to lose their place and power (cf. **John 11:50**). It's shocking. And so we ask:

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS GOD--- IN THE SAVIOR'S REJECTION BY HIS OWN.

He is nowhere to be seen, for He has been rejected by these church leaders, but

I: THAT REJECTION COMES FROM THOSE WHO SHOULD KNOW BETTER.

But what about the rest of the officials, of the Jewish high court? That court consisted of the leading priests and Pharisees and scribes, all experts in the law and the promises of the Old Testament. They had all memorized word for word large parts of the Old Testament. It's been said that many of these experts knew the exact number of words and even the exact number of letters in the Old Testament Scriptures. What about them? If the High Priest was corrupt, shouldn't we expect an outcry from them, at least from the majority, or at the very least from a few? No! Not one rises to defend the law and legal process, nor is there a voice heard to defend Jesus. And again, that is not because they did not know what Jesus had said and done. They had sent spies to watch His every move throughout the three years of His earthly ministry. They

knew all about His miracles: the raising of the young man of Nain and the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. They knew all about the cleansing of the lepers, the giving of sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. They knew all about the feeding of the thousands with a few loaves of bread and some fish. They had heard about the raising of Lazarus just outside of Jerusalem about a week earlier. They had even admitted after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, "**What shall we do? For this Man works many signs.**" (John 11:47).

What should they do? They should have believed in Him. All the evidence was there that this was indeed the Son of God, the promised Messiah. But they hardened their hearts against the prophecies about the Messiah that they knew by heart from the Bible, and hardened their hearts as well to the evidence that Jesus was indeed that promised Messiah. Instead of believing, they filled their hearts with hatred and called for Jesus' death.

Jesus and His cross stir up hatred and hostility from the most surprising areas. It was so in the first Lent. It has been so down through the ages. It is so to this day that His glory as God and Savior is **hidden under the rejection by those who should know better**, who should be the first to listen to His Word and follow it. The Jews continued their hatred of Jesus and His Word long after He was dead, as we have heard in our Sunday morning Bible study of the book of Acts. And the rejection by most of His own people, the Jews, continues to this day.

But it is by no means confined to the Jewish people. Year after year after year, without interruption, one group after another rises up from inside the church to hate Jesus and to persecute His Word. If we had the time this evening, we could go through every century since Pentecost and could find that some of the most bitter persecutors of Jesus and His Word were those who claimed to be His followers. The Nicene Creed, which we confess on communion Sundays, was written to defend the truth that Jesus is true God and the only Savior against Arias and his followers who denied the true divinity of Christ and were trying to take control of the church in the fourth century. The Athanasian Creed was written by believers against the heresy that God is not Triune. That heresy was perpetrated by those within the church. At the time of the Reformation, the persecution of the Gospel and even wars against those who faithfully preached and taught it came at the insistence of Roman Catholic leaders.

Today in our country the Gospel can be preached in all of its truth and purity. But that does not mean that everyone who calls himself a Christian loves the cross of Christ and its message that Jesus alone is the God/Man born of the virgin and that He is the only Savior of the world. On the contrary, as you know, many churches that call themselves Christian want nothing to do with that message. For some, Jesus is no more than a great teacher of the law who shows us how to live a good life. For others, Jesus is the one who made salvation possible, so if we follow Him, we can, by our own good works and merits, finish the work He began. Even the largest Lutheran synod in our country, and its pastors and seminaries, and publishing houses preach, teach, and print books that deny that Jesus was born of a virgin and that He rose bodily from the dead. They write papers, and publish books and magazines that openly reject many of the teachings of the Bible and, of course, that reject the divine inspiration of the Bible itself.

We see it everywhere. So-called Christian churches defending and excusing homosexual lifestyles and sexual immorality; the acceptance and even the promotion of abortion as an acceptable "choice" and "right" for pregnant women. Many churches that call themselves Christian today go so far in their denial of Jesus that they even say that essentially no matter what religion you are—Jews, Muslim, Buddhist, or whatever—we all worship the same God. They say such an outrageous thing even though those religions deny that Jesus is God and the only Savior!

These churches are not just content to preach and promote their poison either. Like the High Priest and the Jewish high court, they heap scorn and ridicule on the Jesus of the Bible and on those who still proclaim the message of Christ and Him crucified for the sins of the world. Such believers, they say, are narrow-minded bigots from the dark ages and the world would be better off without them. And all this in the name of religion! All this even while wearing a cross around their neck and claiming to be Christian! Isn't it shocking? Isn't it tragic? So...

II: WE NEED TO HEAR, “WATCH AND PRAY SO THAT YOU WILL NOT FALL INTO TEMPTATION.”

It is shocking and tragic. But it is more than that. It is a warning to us. As Jesus told us in the Garden of Gethsemane, **“WATCH AND PRAY SO THAT YOU WILL NOT FALL INTO TEMPTATION” (Matthew 26:41)**. There is no guarantee that we will always belong to the right church. Nor is there any guarantee that our church will forever teach God's Word in all of its truth and purity. The High Priest was in the right church. The heretics who attacked Jesus at the time of the Nicene Creed started out in the right church. At the time of the Reformation there was only one recognized church. But those churches all fell away. They all turned aside from the Word and ended up being numbered with those who despise the cross. And yes, the Lutheran churches of Germany and the rest of Europe and so many in this country as well have also fallen away from the truth.

“WATCH AND PRAY” therefore. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and His Word, and see to it that your church (and that your pastor) does too! We do not hate false teachers or followers of false teachers in other churches. We have no desire to persecute them. But we also have no desire to invite them into our churches and homes, nor to let them stay, should they arise from our own midst. Jesus said, **“I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE. NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER EXCEPT THROUGH ME” (John 14:6)**. Jesus said, **“IF YOU ABIDE IN MY WORD, YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES INDEED” (John 8:31)**. Jesus said, **“BEWARE (WATCH OUT) FOR FALSE PROPHETS” (Matthew 7:15)**. Paul also echoed Jesus words and the words of all of God's prophets when he said repeatedly that we should have nothing to do with false teachers and false teachings (**cf. Romans 16:17-18; 2 Corinthians 6:17; Galatians 5:9; 2 Timothy 2:17**).

Yes, we need to **“WATCH AND PRAY”** so that we are not sucked into the belief so common among those who call themselves Christians today that doctrine, the “teachings” of the Bible, don't really matter. We need to watch out that we are not seduced by such an attitude and become upset when our own church rebukes error and insists on teaching all of the truths of the Scriptures, no matter how unpopular they may be, no matter how many people may not like it. In our weakness, we all may be tempted to turn aside from the cross in favor of the glory we want to see; we want the glory of being popular, of being a larger church or synod, or the glory of the easy path that runs away from the cross to whatever is convenient. Those who fall into that temptation are essentially saying that what we believe, teach, and confess is up to us, that it is like some kind of buffet menu from which we can pick and choose whatever suits our fancy at the moment.

So where in the world is God in the Savior's rejection of His Own? He is nowhere to be seen by those who rejected Him, but by us who **“WATCH AND PRAY”** with Him we see Him in the glory of the cross. We see Him in that lowly sacrifice that forgives us of all of our sins. We see Him as the object of the spitting and the beating and the ridiculing of the Jewish Council. We see Him in the sentence of death that was given to Him.

Watch Jesus before the High Priest and the Jewish council, and *pray* that in His Word we find and keep the whole truth of God's Word. Watch Jesus before the High Priest and the Jewish council, and pray that we may be filled with such love for Him that we willingly take up our cross and follow Him. For we can be sure that just as Jesus was ridiculed and persecuted, so too His faithful followers were ridiculed and persecuted when they followed the truth and carried the cross, so too will we taste that hostility that comes from faithfulness. Don't be surprised by it. Don't be scared off by it. For that is what Jesus has prophesied.

But He has also promised that He will not forsake us or abandon us when we cling to Him and to His Word. There is glory in that rejection; since it is a rejection that we share with Him and that He shares with us. He has promised that even in persecution we will learn more and more of His love and grace. As we bear the cross after Him, our knowledge of His love and grace will only deepen and increase. These may indeed be hard lessons to learn. People don't want to hear these lessons. But Jesus goes the way of the cross out of love for us to bring us salvation by his sacrifice for us and to teach us these lessons. Oh, that we might follow Him up to the cross, gladly bearing ours after Him in love and faithfulness to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us (**Galatians 2:20**).

May God grant this to each of us for Jesus' sake! Amen.