

“In the High Priest’s House”

Mark 14:53-72

We have been using the Gospel of Mark as our biblical cue, taking passages from chapters 14 and, in a little while, chapter 15, in order to follow Jesus through the steps of his suffering to his death and then to his Resurrection. Last week we had an intense vision of what the nature of sin is. I'm hoping that in such a vision we also saw how dearly we need the forgiveness of our Lord.

This week, as Jesus stands before the Sanhedrin and the high priest Caiaphas, we get another vision. Here we see the true nature of the Messiah, the Christ—exactly who Jesus as the Messiah meant to be and what he meant to do on the earth for our sakes. Stay with me, then, as we look at Jesus standing alone in Caiaphas' room, all by himself, in glory and in solitude.

Mark 14:53-65

And they led Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes were assembled. And Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest, where he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council sought testimony against Jesus, to put him to death; but they found none. For many bore false witness against him and their witness did not agree.

The city has not yet awakened. The night is starless now, and cold, Jesus, surrounded by a tired guard, walks back through Jerusalem's streets. No one says anything. Jesus' eyes are steadfastly forward, his mouth is closed.

He is led through the courtyard of the high priest's house. People glance up from firelight as he passes. He ascends the steps to an upper room, saying nothing.

This room is lit by yellow flame and oil light. It's crowded. All around its walls men stand and stare. The air stinks of hasty waking. No one is carefully dressed. No one cares. They number enough to make a quorum; that's what matters: their vote will represent the whole Sanhedrin.

Jesus is led to the center, facing a table. He stands straight and solitary, saying nothing.

Caiaphas—politic, smooth, long-tenured and shrewd: High Priest Caiaphas sits at that table, presiding. He nods. Jesus does not. Caiaphas is robed in a rich red. Jesus is roped.

The trial begins.

One by one, men move from the walls, formally to testify against the prisoner. But as one by one they return to their places; it becomes apparent that they are annoying the high priest. His eyelids droop with contempt. Their stories contradict each other. Their evidence is inadmissible. Caiaphas knows the verdict that he wants. Everyone knows, so why can't two idiots agree on a single story?

His anger shows in the white of his lips, in his furious silence. Men flick glances toward one another. The air crackles with fear. Jesus gazes straight at Caiaphas, waiting, saying nothing.

"I he," says a fellow creeping forward. "I heard him say he would destroy the temple—"

"When did he threaten to destroy the temple?"

"Oh! Well, maybe three days ago?"

"No, no! " says another man, trying to be helpful, "I heard him say that at least three years ago—"

BOOM! The high priest strikes the table, dismisses these fools, rises, and takes the floor himself.

To Jesus directly he hisses, "Have you nothing to say in your own defense?"

But Jesus continues to gaze at Caiaphas, steadfastly still and silent.

"What? What?" the high priest sneers, his voice an oil of irony: "Are you the Messiah then?"

Nervous giggles flee through the room.

But now the prisoner speaks, and what he says stops the laughter altogether. He says: "I am."

For an instant, the high priest freezes. Everyone freezes. Then, both horror and hilarity in his small eye, Caiaphas explodes.

"Blasphemy!" he roars. He takes the robe in his two hands and tears it and shows the pieces to the council. "Blasphemy!" he sings. "So, what is your verdict?"

Ah. The council is beaming now. The room is relieved. The thing will end well after all.

"Death," says the council. "Of course, death!"

So heartened are the folks by this turn of events, so sure of the prisoner's folly and of their own superiority, that quite fearlessly they begin to spit on him. And he takes it! Well, then they cudgel their brains to think up rather more complex games of scorn. They blindfold him, and they hit him, and they ask him like some folktale messiah, to prophesy: "Figure it out," they say. "Who hit you."

Jesus looks out the window. The sky is streaked with gray. Morning is coming. He says nothing now. He says nothing at all.

Mark 14:61-62

He was silent and made no answer. Again, the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven."

Oh, what a message comes in the timing here! And what a caution to Christians who want a hero for their Christ!

Only now, finally now, does Jesus publicly claim the office of Messiah, Now! Why, any fool could choose a better time than this, right? Wrong! Anyone who did would be a fool indeed, for he would pervert the character and the intention of the Christ.

Now is the best time. Now is Christ's time, because this is the Christ, a prisoner, and a failure.

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus charged those who experienced his power to say nothing about it. Wonders and miracles, evidently, were not the central purpose of his coming. They may have been signs pointing to the Messiah; but they were not the definition of that messianic office.

And when he was at the height of his ministry, (as the world assesses height,) he demanded that no one say he was the "Christ." When he was dazzling crowds, confuting enemies, causing shepherds and lepers and kings to ask, "Who is this man?" when masses were astounded beyond measure, saying "He does all things well, the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak!" even when Simon Peter explicitly confessed "You are the Christ,"— then Jesus commanded them "to tell no one about him." Apparently, none of this was the real work of the "Christ."

Even when Peter, James and John saw his celestial glory in the transfiguration—saw Jesus revealed as the fulfillment of the whole Old Testament—he told them to shut up.

The world would have misunderstood the glory then.

The world might have expected a warrior-king, someone triumphant in its own terms. A winner, you know. A number-one, against-all-odds, pride-inspiring, tear-in-my-eye, flat-out, all-round, good-guy winner! A hero!

Only when that characterization is rendered absurd and impossible does Jesus accept the title "Christ."

Oh, Christian, come and look closely: it is when Jesus is humiliated, most seeming weak, bound, and despised and alone and defeated, that he finally answers the question, "Are you the Christ?"

Now, for the record, he says, "Yes. I am."

It is only in powerlessness that he finally links himself with power: "And you," he says, "will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power." Because any display of messianic power is far, far in the future—in his future and in ours: on the last Day. *The last day of the world, not today!*

This, then, is the Christ that Jesus would have us know and accept, and (O Christian!) imitate:

One who came to die.

One who, in the assessment of this age, failed—an embarrassment, a folly, a stumbling block. An offense!

One crucified.

Here in the world, the Christ and his followers hang ever on a cross. The cross is foremost because a faithless world cannot see past it to the Resurrection.

And even for the faithful the cross must always be first, because the Resurrection is only as real as the death was real first.

What then of our big churches, Christians? What of our bigger parking lots? Our rich coffers, our present power to change laws in the land, our political clout, our glory for Christ, our triumphant and thundering glory for Christ? Why, it is excluded—all of it. It befits no Christian, for it was rejected by Jesus.

If ever we persuade the world (or ourselves) that we have a hero in our Christ, then we have lied. Or else we are deceived, having accepted the standards of this world.

Jesus came to die *beneath* the world's iniquity. The world, therefore, can only look down on him whom it defeated—down in hatred until it repents; and then it is the world no more.

Likewise, the world will look down on us—down in contempt until it elevates the Christ it sees in us; but then it won't be our enemy anymore, will it?

Mark 14:66-72

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the maids of the high priest came; and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway.

There is a war inside the strong disciple. (The stronger the disciple, the worse the war.) There is a struggle in Peter between good and evil, between these two commitments: to his Lord and to his own survival.

The man is here, after all. Whether boldly or secretly, he has entered the den of the enemy. He's allowed himself to be enclosed in the high priest's courtyard. Love is stronger than fear right now. Maybe the nap in Gethsemane – especially after his bully boast never to leave the Lord – maybe that nap shamed him into some sort of action. He is here, staring into the fire..

What can he do for Jesus? Can't raise an army. Can't even draw his own sword anymore. Pray, maybe. Support the Lord by his presence. Be here. Being here is a witness, isn't it? *Yes, if it becomes known.* Well, even if it isn't known, it takes courage just to be here, hunched by an alien fire, the flames on his face.

He's trying to decipher the voices behind him, that murmuring in the upper room. How is it going for Jesus --?

But suddenly a woman is talking directly to him. "You were with that Nazarene," she says. And suddenly Peter is frightfully aware of himself, his immediate situation.

"No," he says to her searching gaze, "I don't even know what you're talking about."

She does not stop staring at him.

So., he gets up and walks to the gateway. He is exceedingly aware of himself right now. Of his *self*. He has lied to save that self. On the other hand, despite the staring, Peter has not actually left the place. Even when the woman tells others of her suspicion, he is staying. Her voice carries to the gateway. The eyes of the others are turning in his direction; he tries to deflect the public awareness by a small shrug, a chuckle at the woman's error, and a second denial. "I, I don't know that man."

The war must be horrible now: part of him is desperate to save himself; a second denial cannot be involuntary; he has sundered his fortunes from those of his Lord.

Nevertheless, that he should make a second denial at all proves that he still intends to stay. Even now, in the midst of explicit danger, his cover blown, his presence then a witness after all, Simon Peter sweats it out and loves the Lord and does not leave.

Right now—after the second denial, before the third one—the forces warring in Peter's soul seem terribly equal: a tremendous, selfless love for Jesus keeps him there, while a consuming self-interest keeps him lying. He denies himself to stay by his Lord, but he denies his Lord to save himself. Both. Good and bad, is Peter.

Peter is paralyzed between the good that he would and the evil that he is.

I see this. I recognize this. I cannot divorce myself from this—for Peter's moral immobilization is mine, too. I am in the courtyard with him, watching. I, too, am good and evil in terribly equal parts—and helpless.

Two things alone can break the impasse for Peter and for me.

First, the dreadful, merciful word of the Lord which calls a sin and sin and mine: my fault, my own most grievous killing of Christ in my life to keep that life my own.

When Peter's denial reaches such extremes that he draws down death in "a curse upon himself," then Jesus intervenes: "And immediately the cock crowed a second time," and Peter "remembered" what Jesus had said. Peter may have left Jesus, but Jesus, by wonderful means of remembering him, by rooster's crows like sacraments—Jesus has not left Peter.

And the second thing that can break the impasse between good and evil in us is our sorrow when we see the sin, our personal repentance.

Rather than striking back at the Lord, spitting on him, blindfolding and despising him, we, Peter and I, we rush out to a private darkness. In the alleys, in the shadows of Friday's dawning, we both break down and burst into tears.

And so, we have seen two things: The nature of the Messiah, who has come to suffer failure, to suffer death, to suffer crucifixion on our behalf; and two, our very need of that forgiveness that was worked out on the cross, because we are Peter, and, yes, we are those who know our sin and who weep our repentance. It's the cross that assures us that repentance shall definitely be met by forgiveness. We, down so low in our sin, shall surely be elevated to life again in the love of Jesus.

Prayer

O Lord Jesus, continue to walk with us as we walk with you. These weeks until Easter we shall watch your suffering, but you are here, too. You are continuing to whisper in our ear; "I am with you. I am with you and I love you. "For that, O Lord, we thank you. We who are burdened or lonely, or suffering the consequence of our sin, we thank you for your love. It sets us free. AMEN

#340 – A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth