

MATT 26.1-5, 57-67; 27.1-2, 41-43: THE PRIESTS WHO HATED HIM
[Chelmsford 3 March 2013]

Hatred, said Martin Luther King, paralyzes life; love releases it.
Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it.
Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.

As part of our Lenten series on the Passion, I want to speak about the priests who hated Jesus. The priests in question were not local clergy – rather they were the chief priests, and they, together with the elders and the scribes formed the Jerusalem religious establishment of the day.

In some ways the Pharisees were more akin to local clergy. They were to be found everywhere. Never more than 6000 of them, they were the God-squad. They were not so much Bible-bashers, as Bible legalists. All too often their devotion to details of the Law resulted in them missing out on the big picture. This was why Jesus so often clashed with them.

The priests were very different
These priests were called Sadducees – a word which probably was derived from Zadok, a notable priest in the time of David and Solomon.
Theologically, they were much more conservative than the Pharisees – for unlike the Pharisees they accepted only the written law, and not the traditions of the elders; also, unlike the Pharisees they denied the doctrine of the resurrection.
But the key difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, is that the Sadducees were less concerned for religious observance than with power.
Based in Jerusalem, they were the religious aristocracy.
What's more, not anybody could become a Sadducee – you had to be born into a priestly family.
At the time of Jesus, leader of the Sadducees was Joseph Caiaphas: he held the office of high priest for 18 years – from AD 18 – 36. It was in his palace that the chief priests and the elders met together and “**made plans to arrest Jesus secretly and put him to death**” (26.2).

Why? you might ask. What had Jesus done to get up their noses?
The fact is that any popular religious teacher wouldn't have found favour with them.
But almost certainly what really maddened them was that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he went into the temple and “**over-turned the tables of the money-changers and the stools of those who sold pigeons**” (21.12). For these two businesses belonged to the Sadducees.
Called the ‘*bazaars of Annas*’, after another high priest, these temple businesses provided the Sadducees with some useful income.
When Jesus cleansed the temple, he was in effect stepping on their territory – that was why they hated him, that is why they wanted to get rid of Jesus. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was a trouble-maker, who threatened not just their financial interests – but also their position.

But how would they get rid of Jesus?

They couldn't arrest him in broad daylight – for that would create trouble with the crowds who followed him (Matt 26.5).

Fortunately at this point Judas Iscariot turned up with an offer to betray Jesus (Matt 26.14-16). He it was who led the temple guards to Gethsemane – and there, without any crowds present, the guards were able to arrest him and take him to Caiaphas.

And what did Caiaphas and his minions do? They put Jesus on trial.

Matthew tells us: **“The chief priests and the whole Council tried to find some false evidence against Jesus to put him to death”** (Matt 26.59)

The Council, which was called the Sanhedrin, was the supreme court of the Jews.

It had jurisdiction over all Jews. In the days of its independence it could impose the death penalty either by stoning, burning, beheading or strangulation.

It was composed of 70 members, for that was the number of elders whom Moses had appointed to aid him in his task (Num 11.16) – the High Priest was an additional member of the Council, and he acted as the president of the court.

The court sat in a semi-circle, in which every member could see every other member.

The accused man would stand facing the court – behind the prisoner was the equivalent of the public gallery, normally filled by would-be rabbis.

Somewhat unusually, normally the interests of the accused were put first, in the sense that the members of the Sanhedrin would act more as members of the defence team, rather than of the prosecution.

Even if there seemed to be no extenuating circumstances, it was the task of the judges deliberately to try to find some.

The scales of justice were weighted toward the defendant.

So, e.g. in capital cases, where a man was on trial for his life, a member of the court could speak against the accused, and then change his mind and speak for him – but he was not allowed to speak for him, and then change his mind and speak against him.

When a verdict was due, each member of the court had to give his own individual judgment. For acquittal a majority of one was all that was necessary; for condemnation there had to be a majority of at least two.

Furthermore the sentence of death could never be carried out on the day on which it was given; a night had to elapse so that the court could sleep on it, just in case they changed their minds and decided to take mercy on the individual concerned.

Now at the time when Jesus appeared before the court, the Sanhedrin had lost its power of imposing the death sentence.

But that apart, the rules designed to encourage mercy were still in place.

However, in the case of Jesus, it is quite clear that the Sanhedrin deliberately set aside these rules. They were determined to find Jesus guilty.

For the Jewish hierarchy of the day found Jesus a threat to their position.

As a result, when Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin, he was effectively brought before a ‘kangaroo’ court, where the last thing on the mind of his accusers was justice.

They first accused him of threatening to tear down the Temple.

Matthew tells us that “**many people came forward and told lies about him**” (Matt 26.60)
But Jesus refused to defend himself.

Clearly this refusal to engage with the process, made Caiaphas hopping mad
“**Have you no answer to give to the accusation against you?**” (26.62)
But, says Matthew, **Jesus kept quiet** (26.62)

Finally, almost in desperation, Caiaphas says: “**In the name of the living God I now put you n oath; tell is if you are the Messiah, the Son of God**”. (26.63)

But Jesus refused to give a straight-forward answer: he simply said “**So you say**” (26.64a).

In giving this reply Jesus wasn't denying the charge. Rather he was deliberately fuelling the fires of any suspicions his accusers might have had about his identity.

In a very real sense, Jesus turned the tables. *‘You may think that I am on trial, but actually you are on trial – the issue is your integrity, and your faith.’*

The story is told of a young man who went into an art gallery and began to rubbish the pictures. *‘Excuse me, sir’,* said one of the attendants, *‘the pictures are not on trial – rather you and your response are on trial’.*

Sadly, the priests did not acquit themselves well.

Jesus went on to say to them: “**But I tell all of you: from this time on you will see the Son of Man sitting on the right of the Almighty and coming on the clouds of the heaven!**” (26.64)

That did it – that really did it.

For Jesus by placing himself at God's right hand overstepped the boundary

His claim to be so closely associated with God was tantamount to blasphemy.

What's more, he implied that he would return his judge – he was effectively reversing roles – on that day, Caiaphas and his associates would be in the dock.

In horror, the High Priest tore his robes and cried out: “**Blasphemy! We don't need any more witnesses! You have heard his blasphemy! What do you think?**

The Council replied: “**He is guilty and must die**”

They proceeded to spit in Jesus' his face and beat him. Then the chief priests and the elders “**put him in chains, led him off, and handed him over to Pilate, the Roman governor**” (Matt 27.1).

But that wasn't the end of their dirty work.

The chief priests and the elders went on to accuse Jesus before Pilate (Matt 27.12)

Then when Pilate comes up with the bright idea of offering to set free either Barabbas or Jesus, the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to opt for Barabbas (Matt 27.20)

Finally, when Jesus is on the Cross, they came and jeered at him (Matt 27.41)

It is not exaggeration to say – they hated him.

It was their hate which caused them to ensure that Jesus died at Calvary.

Hatred is a dreadful thing.

It is all the more dreadful when hatred becomes a tool of religion.

Amazing as it may seem to us, Caiaphas and his friends probably slept well the night of Good Friday. They probably kidded themselves that they were doing God's will. For if God was on their side, then Jesus was undoubtedly a pawn of the Devil. It is sad how deluded religious men and women can be. Indeed, it amazing how deluded we can be.

However, I don't want to end this morning's sermon by focusing on the priests who hated Jesus – for that is depressing. I want instead to focus on how Jesus responded to their hate. For instead of angrily protesting his innocence, "**Jesus kept quiet**" (Matt 26.63).

Many years later Peter wrote a letter to a group of Christians who were suffering for their faith. When you suffer unjustly, he said, remember Jesus and the example he set for us. "**Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no one ever heard a lie come from his lips. When he was insulted he did not answer back with an insult; when he suffered he did not threaten, but placed his hopes in God the righteous Judge**" (1 Peter 4.21-23).

Jesus has left an **example**. The underlying Greek word literally means "*a pattern to be traced*".

- It was used of letters which had to be copied out by children. I'm not sure how children are taught to write today, but children used to be given an exercise book in which at the top of a page there was a sentence to be copied. Teachers used to construct sentences containing all the letters of the alphabet which the children would have to copy out: e.g. "*The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog*".
- It was also used of an outline sketch which an artist leaves for his pupils to fill in - the equivalent of a painting-by-number kit. I.e. Jesus has set the pattern for our living. He is to be our **example** - not least when we are wrongly treated by others.

We are to "**follow in his steps**" - literally in his footprints.

We clearly cannot reproduce all the particulars of the life and death of Christ.

Nonetheless, when life is unfair to us - we are to remember how life was unfair to Jesus - and what's more, we are to exhibit the same qualities which he exhibited.

Peter goes on to mention two particular aspects of the life of Christ we are to emulate.

1. We are not to hit back

"When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten"

Our natural instinctive response is to get even with those who treat us unfairly. We seek to hurt those who hurt us. But not Jesus. Jesus kept quiet -

- even when all kinds of trumped up charges were brought against him at his trial;
- even when the chief priests and elders accused him before Pilate;
- even when they jeered at him on the Cross.

Jesus did not threaten to get even at some later date.

Jesus was the suffering servant 'par excellence'. In the words of the Servant Song of Isaiah 53: "**Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its**

shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Is 53.7).

When things get rough, says Peter, remember Jesus, and follow in his steps.

2. *We are to "let God set things right" (Peterson)*

"He entrusted himself to the one who judges justly"

Peterson: *"He suffered in silence, content to let God set things right"*.

More accurately: **"He kept on entrusting himself"** to God, the righteous judge.

We have here an imperfect tense depicting an ongoing activity, rather than a simple past indicating a one-off act.

The implication is that it took repeated effort for Jesus to commit the situation into God's hands. For Jesus was no unemotional robot. He was a man of flesh and blood like you and me. And yet he refused to allow the hurt and the injustice of his treatment to gain the upper hand.

At his trial before the Council, at his trial before Pilate, and on the Cross itself, he entrusted himself to God, knowing that God would ultimately right all wrongs.

There may be little justice in this world, but there will be justice in the world to come!

Jesus kept quiet. Jesus refused to respond to the injustice meted out by those who hated him. But Jesus went even further.

He not only failed to respond to hatred – he absorbed their hatred.

An old army chaplain once put it this way: *"There are dozens of ways to deal with evil and several ways to conquer it. All of them are facets of the truth is that the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being. When it is absorbed there like blood in a sponge or a spear into one's heart, it loses its power and goes no further"*.

Jesus responded to hatred by loving

Jesus, hanging on the Cross, exposed himself to the hatred of the priests

He suffered its full force, and in doing so, he drew its sting.

Hatred did not have the last word – love did!

In the words of the hymn with which we shall end our service:

Pull back the curtain that hides what is holy;

Tear it in two as Christ did from the hill;

See at the centre of Good and bad Friday

Something no mob or marauder can kill.

Love's the secret! Love's the secret!

Love is God's way and God's witness,

God's worth and God's will, God's will.

What an example Jesus set us. The priests were full of hate – but Jesus was full of love.

Let us ensure that in our thinking and acting love, not hate, has the last word!