

This Lent I'm skipping over our regular Sunday readings and focusing in on our Holy Week readings about Jesus' Passion.

This week I'm focusing in on the Sanhedrin, the 71-member Jewish ruling council, and its role in the accounts of Jesus' trial.

There were two predominant factions in the Sanhedrin: the Pharisees, and the Sadducees.

The Sadducees were a small group in Israel. But they were elite. And in spite of their small numbers they dominated and controlled the Sanhedrin. The Sadducees were an aristocratic faction made up mostly of priests and priestly families.

The number of priests was small. But they controlled the Temple. And this gave the Sadducees quite a bit of power. And because the Romans were in charge politically, they Sadducees cozied up to the Romans in order to protect and preserve the Temple.

The Pharisees, on the other hand were largely a lay movement, though there were a few priests who joined the Pharisaic party. They believed that lay people, regular Jews, could and should try to observe all of the Jewish Law. They believed that the Law was not just there to keep priests in a state of ritual purity so that they could serve in the Temple. They believed the Law was also there to help ordinary Jews live more fully in relationship with the God.

Both groups ended up opposing Jesus. There were some exceptions I'll talk about in a bit. But both Pharisees and Sadducees found themselves wanting to stop Jesus.

The Pharisees were worried that Jesus wasn't strict enough in his observance of the Jewish Law and that he was leading the Jewish people astray.

The Sadducees were worried that Jesus' growing popularity would upset the status quo. It might even lead to a revolt. Then the Romans would intervene. And that threatened the Temple, which threatened their power base, and their livelihood.

So, when it comes to the arrest and trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and the Sadducees found themselves as strange bedfellows with a common enemy. They both felt that Jesus had to be stopped.

And so they had him arrested and brought to trial before them.

And presiding at the trial was the High Priest, who at that time was Joseph Caiaphas.

Caiaphas had an incredibly long tenure as High Priest. In order to exercise control, the Romans had put an end to the old practice of having high priests serve for life. Instead, the Romans dictated who the high priest would be. And when they decided they needed a new high priest they would appoint someone else.

Caiaphas must have really good at playing the political game appeasing the Romans, because they kept him in office for 18 years. By contrast, the 3 high priests before and 3 high priests before after Caiaphas served 1 year, 1 year, 1 year, and 1 year, 4 years, and 2 years.

Caiaphas would have been of the Sadducean party. And he was quite clear about protecting the Temple from Jesus. During one meeting of the Sanhedrin, someone said about Jesus, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place (out Temple) and our nation."¹

And Caiaphas said, point blank, "It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."² And so, these members of the Sanhedrin sought to put Jesus to death.

Eventually, they have Jesus arrested. And Jesus undergoes two sets of trials. The first set is religious. The second set is civil and involves the Romans. I'll talk about the latter next week.

But the first set of trials that Jesus undergoes are religious in nature. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell of Jesus being brought before the council, the Sanhedrin, and the High Priest.

But John speaks of yet another trial. Before Jesus is brought before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, he is brought to Annas.

Annas is largely off of our radar screen. But his biggest mention in popular culture is wrong. He is a character in the popular musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. But as much as I love *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber really blow it when it comes to Annas.

They portray Annas as an assistant to Caiaphas. He's almost a fawning sycophant. He actually reminds me of Igor in relationship to Dr. Frankenstein. He sings, "Good Caiaphas, the council waits for you. The Pharisees and priests are here for you." And then the sinister bass voice of Caiaphas takes over: "Ah gentlemen—you know why we are here. There's not much time, and quite a problem here." And they decide Jesus must die.

But Annas is not a lackey to Caiaphas. In fact, he may be more powerful than Caiaphas. Annas was a former high priest himself. He got kicked out of office by the Romans. But then he managed to get 5 of his sons to serve as high priests at various times. And Annas was also able to get his son-in-law into the office of high priest. And that son-in-law was Caiaphas. So Annas is also a power player, perhaps the "power behind the throne" when it comes to the Sanhedrin.

And in John's Gospel, Jesus is taken to Annas first for a pre-trial interrogation, before he is brought before Caiaphas and the rest of the Sanhedrin.

¹ John 11:48

² John 11:50

In any event, when Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin, they are soliciting testimony from various witnesses. And the content speaks volumes. The initial charge is that Jesus said that he would destroy the Temple. Since the Sadducees were concerned with preserving the Temple at all costs, this is a loaded charge.

And to be fair, Jesus does say this in John's Gospel:

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."³

And interestingly, this is also the charge against him repeated several times in Matthew and Mark, that Jesus said he would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in 3 days.⁴ But we're told that Jesus was not talking about the Temple building. He was talking about himself, the Temple of his body. This was a prediction of the Resurrection: destroy me, kill me, and I'll be back in three days.

So this talk of Jesus destroying the Temple seems to be the thing the Sanhedrin is most concerned about. But even then, the witnesses that came before them didn't agree. And they falsified parts of their testimony. So they couldn't build a coherent case against Jesus.

In fact, at this point, they would have probably had to release Jesus. But Caiaphas intervenes. And he asks Jesus point blank if he is the Messiah, the Son of God. And remember, at this time, Son of God is not a title for a divine human being. It is a title for a human messiah, a new King David who would rise up to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression and to lead a revolution.

And Jesus answers in a fascinating way. He changes the question. Here's the way Matthew tells it:

"Then the high priest said to (Jesus), 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.'"⁵

What's key here is that claim to be the Son of Man. It's counter intuitive to us, but in Jesus day, the Son of God was a title for a human being, a Messiah like King David. But Son of Man was an angelic, or even quasi-divine being sent from God to judge the heavens and the earth.

So Caiaphas basically asks, 'Are you the human Messiah?'

And Jesus basically answers, 'That's your category, but you will see me coming as the divine Son of Man—I'll be seated at God's right hand, and I'll be coming back on the clouds of heaven.'

In other words, Jesus is claiming to be more than just a human Messiah. He's claiming to be God's divine emissary.

³ John 2:19

⁴ Matthew 26:61, Mark 14:58

⁵ Matthew 26:63-64

And at this, Caiaphas tears his robes as a symbol of mourning. Jesus has claimed to be equal to God. That is a capital offense. It is blasphemous for a human to claim to be God. And he has claimed that in front of the council.

So the council condemns him as deserving death. They didn't officially have power to carry out a capital sentence. They could have taken Jesus out and lynched him by stoning him to death. But instead they choose to take him to the Romans for sentencing. And I'll say more about that next week.

But I do want to talk briefly about 3 other members of the council who are mentioned in scripture. They were certainly outnumbered. But they all acted with integrity.

All 4 Gospels speak of Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph is a member of the Sanhedrin, but Luke says point blank that he did not agree with their actions regarding Jesus.⁶

John adds that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because he was afraid of the rest of the Sanhedrin.⁷ But Joseph really steps out in all 4 Gospels. After Jesus dies on the cross, Joseph goes to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and asks for permission to take Jesus down from the cross to bury him. Pilate grants that permission, and Joseph puts Jesus in his own tomb.

John also mentions that Joseph was aided by Nicodemus, another member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus appears two other places in John. In chapter 3, he secretly goes to Jesus under cover of darkness to have a theological discussion. And in chapter 7, when the Sanhedrin is talking negatively about Jesus, Nicodemus tries to run interference for him. He's a bit like a shy turtle—he sticks his neck out just a bit for Jesus, but when he hits opposition, he withdraws back into his shell.

But after Jesus' death, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea very publically out themselves as followers of Jesus by taking possession of his body and seeing to his burial. These two council members put their positions and their reputations at stake in order to do the right thing. And they showed great courage.

Before I close, there is one other member of the Sanhedrin I want to mention. He's not mentioned in the Gospels, and there's no evidence that he was part of the trial of Jesus. But he is mentioned in the book of Acts. He is the great rabbi, Gamaliel, still regarded as one of the greatest Jewish figures of his day. Gamaliel was one of Paul's teachers when Paul was training to be a Rabbi.

In the 5th chapter of Acts, the Apostles find themselves on trial before the Sanhedrin. And Rabbi Gamaliel makes a powerful argument. He talks about previous Messianic movements that fizzled out after the deaths of their founders. Then he says this in reference to Jesus' Apostles:

⁶ Luke 23:50-51

⁷ John 19:38

"In the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"⁸

And I believe this is an important point when thinking of the Sanhedrin and their relationship to Jesus. And it's important for us and the way we live.

Yes, the Sanhedrin are antagonists in the Passion accounts. But they are not villains. They thought they were doing the right thing in trying to stop Jesus. They thought they were defending God and defending the faith.

But from a Christian standpoint, they went too far. As Gamaliel would later say, they over-reached, and placed themselves in a position where they were opposing God's plan. They were trying to defend God. And they ended up in opposition to what God was trying to do in Jesus Christ.

This is always an important warning. New things occur. We are in the midst of tremendous changes in our society and in the church.

And it's easy to make a knee-jerk defense, and to push back against any and all kinds of change.

And I am very certain that some changes that we're experiencing are not good. But, and this is important for me to admit and to remind myself... BUT some changes may be from God. After all, over and over again in history, God has led his people into new things.

So I always like the advice and the warning of Gamaliel:

"If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow (it)—in that case you may even be found fighting against God."

It is important to do the right thing.

But it's also important to be discerning—to make sure that the right thing really is the right thing.

May God give us gifts of courage, AND gifts of wisdom.

⁸ Acts 5:38-39