

13 Death and the Messiah

The Passover festival was near, the day of unleavened bread and the sacrificial lamb, when Israel would celebrate the story of their rescue from Egypt many centuries before. You could say that the Passover was the very foundation of their personal, social and political consciousness. It was surely the first and truest celebration of that consciousness, at once religious, recalling the revelation of God to Israel; and social, reaffirming Israel as a community; political, celebrating their national liberation from Egypt; and personal, binding every Jewish family together in a shared and sacred memory, in the values of the story.

The Passover, and its succession in the Eucharist, is a profoundly social and political act. It recognises and celebrates the whole of personal reality, which is social, political and religious. At our most real and fundamental, we are human beings not as isolated individuals, but together, living our lives in relationship with one another. Family, nationhood and worship, these are the fullness of personal existence, the whole in which we are fully ourselves because we relate to others. We are who we are together, and everything depends on the story, the account we can give of our togetherness. The history of our people, enacted in ritual, is the truest and fullest account of ourselves. That is the human reality reflected both in the Christian Eucharist and in the Jewish Passover.

The Passover festival drew together the whole Israelite nation as a social, political, religious community. The humblest and most devout would be celebrating that day, as would the most powerful and corrupt, and altho it was a family celebration, the temple and its priesthood, thru the rules of sacrifice, maintained their pre-eminence too, as leaders of the people and their representatives before God.

The poor, perhaps, would have celebrated in hope, remembering the promise of God's liberation to come. The powerful would have celebrated Passover as a vindication of their status, and, except for the most cynical, with some hope of liberation from the only power that over-powered them, the Romans. All the Jewish people celebrated their feast as the commemoration of great events that gave them their identity in freedom, both as individuals and as a nation.

And because there was no boundary between the civil-religious and the political-economic, the Roman governor too, was there. He too had come to Jerusalem and was stationed in the Praetorium with his troops. I doubt if he intended to celebrate, but he would keep a close eye on those who were doing so.

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Jerusalem's priests and council were more than worried. The Passover was a difficult time when they in particular were responsible for the good behaviour of a crowded and volatile city. But now they had Jesus of Nazareth, with the worst possible timing, challenging their authority. They did not know what he intended, tho he spoke openly every day in the city and the temple. He was worse than John, and if they didn't handle him quickly, they mite come to look ridiculous. In fact, ridiculous was the best they could hope for, for who knows what trouble he might stir up, or what trouble the unruly crowds might let loose, if one of them decided it was time for a revolution. The council were scared, and in their fear they knew they had to get Jesus killed. A pity he was too smart to attack Herod and get himself executed by the king, like John. Jesus, unfortunately, was targeting them, and they would have to deal with him.

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They knew they would have to arrest him and have him done away with - but warily. Because of his popularity, anything done in open daylight might provoke a riot. But he did not stay in the city overnight. He slipped away each evening protected by his disciples, and was gone before they could have him followed. Altho it was difficult, they would have to act quickly before the festival was upon them – or postpone it till after the celebration (and in that case, it might come to be too late). But they couldn't act during the festival. With everyone crowding into the city for Israel's liberation day, that would be no time to antagonise the people. They might stir up the very trouble they intended to prevent.

A couple of days before the Passover, Jesus went to dinner at the house of Simon the leper. (All kinds of skin disease were covered by the word we translate as "leprosy".) Perhaps he was a recovered leper, certified as clean, but still carrying the ignominious tag. While Jesus and several others were there at dinner, a woman, not invited, came in with a jar of expensive ointment which she broke open and poured over his head. What was the woman playing at?! It was pure nard!

The gesture was extremely dangerous. Anointing the head was a traditional sign of kingship conferred, and such an anointing of a popular figure like Jesus could be a public declaration of rebellion. It was very like a famous incident long ago, when a prophet had gate-crashed a meeting of Israelite generals, to anoint Jehu like this. On that occasion, it was the signal for a bloody revolution and the overthrow of an unpopular dynasty.¹ So the woman's actions could be interpreted very dangerously. And, of course, "messiah" means "anointed". So what did the woman mean? Was she consciously proclaiming their new king, or had she just blundered, with her sentimental gesture, into an accidental reference that was political dynamite? The guests, perhaps in embarrassment, chose to ignore this meaning of the anointing and to focus on the sheer cost of the ointment: that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. It was much safer to carry on about the three hundred denarii it might have fetched, hiding their fear and embarrassment in concern for thriftiness, than to take up any of the political implications. Perhaps they were also annoyed (they would all have been men) that a woman had dared to proclaim what none of them had had the courage to say.

But Jesus himself was in a very tight spot, more awkward than anything that had been sprung on him in the temple. He had no intention of leading a Jehu type revolution or of having himself proclaimed Messiah in any other way than God would proclaim it. The last thing he wanted was people carried away with their own enthusiasm and trying to push him into a role that was not his. But here was a vulnerable person, a woman who had braved all to show her affection and her belief in him, however misguided. How to deflate the whole dangerous suggestion of a king's anointing, and still deflect any criticism from the woman?

He said to the guests, "Leave the woman alone. If you're concerned about the poor, you will always have the poor with you, and you will always be able to do something for them. But I will not always be with you. What she has done is one of the recognised good works: she has anointed my body for its burial." Deftly, Jesus had turned the whole disastrous gesture on its head and given it a totally unexpected, but valid interpretation: she was anointing him in anticipation of his death, in the way that a body is prepared for burial. Jesus had come to the defence of his over-enthusiastic supporter, had deflected the suggestion of a royal revolution, and had pointed his friends to a much more sombre and profound anticipation: his coming death.

Jesus was no fool, and he was no slower than the priests to recognise the inevitability of what was coming, however long he managed to avoid it. He was safe as long as he had places where he could

¹ II Kings 9: 1- 13

elude the authorities when he needed to, places known only to him and to his closest followers. But that nite, one of those followers went to the chief priests with an offer that delighted them. As soon as he got the chance, he would lead them to where they could arrest Jesus without any of the public around to cause a disturbance.

Jerusalem was now deadly dangerous for Jesus, but into this explosive environment he now went with some of his followers to celebrate the Passover festival. He had made arrangements with a friend in the city for a room where they could share the meal and there some of his disciples got everything ready. In the evening, at the time when he would usually be leaving the city, he came to the house with his closest circle of disciples and there they settled down to eat and drink, following the Passover rituals.

Perhaps they were in high spirits, as anyone would be on such a festival day, but perhaps they were also a little afraid at this unusual stay in Jerusalem after nitefall. Whatever their mood had been, Jesus broke into it with a startling announcement: “One of you eating with me tonite is going to betray me.”

It is customary to hear Jesus’ pronouncements about his coming betrayal, trial and death, as if they stemmed from some kind of divine foreknowledge, but I don’t think there is any reason to think so. Anyone who had a perceptive and realistic grasp of the situation would have seen the all-too-likely outcome. He had come right into the enemy’s stronghold and on the way he had dismissed every army that offered. He was discouraging or deflecting every demonstration of material support. And yet here he was, openly challenging the highest powers in his nation, without any power to back him up, unless it was God’s. Only those who naïvely hoped for intervention from the power of God would still expect a victory for Jesus, and Jesus, who knew God and trusted God, had no expectations that could be called naïve. Jesus knew his followers, and it is difficult to imagine that, whatever dissatisfaction had led to Judas’ decision, Jesus had failed to notice anything. And he would have known that the authorities would make every attempt to suborn one of his inner circle – it was the only way they could get him.

What the disciples made of his predictions is hard to say. The gospels tell us only how they understood them with hindsight. I would imagine that they heard and were troubled by his warnings – but they also heard him now, for the first time, clearly identify himself as the coming “Son of Man”. “The Son of Man is going to the end in store for him, as the scriptures say he will, but woe for that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!” The disciples were horrified. They could hardly believe it. I would think that, putting together what Jesus had said about his coming arrest and prosecution, his death and now his betrayal, they imagined some terrible betrayal of Jesus into the hands of the authorities who would attempt to put him to death, but of course, then God would come to his aid. He would be vindicated and his kingdom at last established. Whatever they believed, they believed that Jesus would be in control as it seemed he always was. What we do know is that they were totally unprepared for events as they actually came about.

Nor did Jesus welcome the disaster. He does not ride serenely aloof from the pain and the horror of what is happening. He is horrified at the thought that one of his followers would betray him. He relied on them for his safety at those times when the authorities could strike, and he did not want to be captured, tortured and killed. Jesus did not go calmly and gaily into death, but in horror avoided it. He took every care he could not to fall into the hands of the authorities. And if one of his friends was about to betray him and Jesus did not move to stop him, it was not because he calmly accepted the inevitable fulfilment of a prophecy. It was because Jesus was not in the business of preventing or forcing his enemies.

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(The death of Jesus is at the heart of Christian faith, the belief of those who recognise him as the Messiah. It is enormously important that we understand what we are told about that death, and important that here, above all, we let each gospel, each witness, speak for itself, telling its story whole before we try to reinterpret or balance it with views from another source. The story of Jesus' death sounds very different in John's gospel from what we read in Mark's. But I believe that nothing in the gospel according to John should be allowed to undo what we are shown by Mark, just as, ultimately, nothing in Mark should undo what John shows us.)

While they were still eating the Passover meal, Jesus took some bread, pronounced the usual blessing over it, then broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take this. It is my body." Then he took the cup, said a prayer of thanks, and gave it to them to drink. "This is my blood," he said, "the blood of the covenant which will be shed for many people." Then he made a solemn declaration: "I shall drink wine no more until I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Three crucial parting statements. They stand among Jesus' final words to his disciples. Two of them have been recalled, re-enacted and treasured thru all the generations since. They have become the ground of spiritual identity, of belief and of community, the framework of prayer and sharing and fellowship for a whole new civilisation, they have become the act of worship for a world religion; and for millions who follow Jesus they are the context of our meeting and communion with God. The third statement has been respected and sometimes wondered at, but we don't know what to make of it; as it stands, it's too Messianic altogether.

The broken bread is his body. In Mark's gospel, nothing more is said about the bread. They are to share and to eat the bread which is his body. A body which is broken has been killed. The life goes out of it and it can only be burnt or put into the ground, for the person who it was, is no more.

No one is willingly killed, giving up their body to be broken and disposed of. But somehow (and we should never lose sight of this when we get into controversies over what exactly Jesus ment – for the puzzling, challenging mystery of what is sed and offered is far richer in spirit and meaning than any of the explanatory dogmas on offer) Jesus was making a positive, parting gift of his life, his self, making, in a way that can never be explained, a body that will soon be dead, food and life to his friends.

This is my body. Popular science has made us familiar with the "food chain". Plants and animals lower down the chain become, whatever they felt and enjoyed as their own life, food for the animals that prey on them. We have learnt to accept this as the way of nature and of animal evolution. Where previous generations saw only horror: "nature red in tooth and claw", we see something to understand: that the "higher" forms of life exist by taking advantage of what is produced in the lower: proteins, vitamins, reserves of energy that they then do not have to gather or manufacture for themselves, because they take them from the creatures whose bodies these things are. Nature programs, some of the best on television, have taught us see with sympathy, to understand, to respect and to want to preserve, the hunting cats, the shark, even the wolf.

But we see too, and we feel, the fear, the shock, the pain of the victim, the desperate struggle to escape. And we still do not know why there must be such horror and such pain in the universe, or even if it makes any sense to be asking why. The flesh that can be broken and crunched up into a rich soup of proteins, vitamins, and reserves of energy was a living, feeling, enjoying body. For the killer and the eater to live, it had to die.

When Jesus broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, "This is my body," he identified with all creation that is killed and eaten, and turned the whole pattern upside down. He the leader,

the highest, the Son of Man who was coming in glory to judge the world, was giving himself, his body, and becoming, like the lowest creature in the food chain, food and life for others.

Then he took the cup and said, “This is my blood.” And his blood is to be shed. Jesus now makes it very clear that he is to die, and to die violently. If his body is to be eaten, like the sacrificial lamb they have just been eating, his blood is to be shed like the lamb’s. He too is to be killed.

For more than a thousand years the blood of the lamb had flowed in Israel, generation after generation, back to the night that was already ancient in ancient times, when Egypt’s oppressed minority, crying out for freedom, were liberated, when the blood of the Passover lamb protected them from the Angel of Death and God broke the power of their powerful rulers. The blood of the Paschal Lamb had flowed with their liberation.

In celebrating the Passover and in sacrificing the Passover lamb they now commemorated and re-enacted that liberation, with profound thanks to God. Over the cup, Jesus gave thanks. For gratitude is the meaning of this feast, a deep sense of God’s unearned goodness and kindness which has set his people free to serve him, to be before him without fear or shame all the days of their life. Such is the liberation of God, and thanksgiving for God’s liberation is the meaning of the Passover ritual which gave to the Jewish people their meaning. It is now our meaning, the meaning of the followers of Jesus the Messiah in their defining commemoration and service, the Eucharist.

But why blood? Why should a lamb be slaughtered? Was it to atone for sin? There were sacrifices for sin, offerings of expiation in which, too, a lamb or another beast would be slaughtered, but the Passover sacrifice was a grateful commemoration, not a sacrifice for sin. And in any case, why should the living God, the God who created life, be appeased by death? Where and why is it written in the laws of all things that blood must be shed for freedom or forgiveness?

When we ask the question in these terms we can see the direction in which an answer may lie. As Mark tells it, there is no direct reference to the forgiveness of sins. Jesus’ blood is to be shed for many as the blood of the covenant, and if we are to understand his death, it has to be in terms of the covenant. Now the covenant was precisely the bond established between God and God’s people, when he intervened to liberate them. It was, at Shechem¹, an agreement freely entered into, and as such their commitment into a lasting relationship. But above all it is God’s commitment to his people as their liberator, or savior, calling for their commitment to him in a bond that gives them, beyond anything that could arise from themselves alone, meaning, value, reality, identity. It is a marriage forever, a binding together in the deepest dimensions of personal being. It is the making of a people, God being with God’s people.

The last two or three years of Jesus’ life had been spent showing what that relationship was, and how it involved the forgiveness of sins: that it was a relationship not of observance, where the law is meticulously carried out and upheld by sanction against those who would break it, but one of trust and love, in which sin is forgiven and the law serves the need of the people. It is a relationship with God who delights in free-flowing forgiveness and positive new beginnings that set people free. “Your sins are forgiven. Pick up your stretcher and walk.” And that understanding of the covenant had been his falling out with the authorities. He had not maintained the boundaries by which the authorities defined their authority and distinguished the righteous from the unclean. He had related to the people as the love of God reaching out to them, even in their sins and their breaking of the Law.

The relationship Jesus embraced was the true and wide relationship of God’s covenant. That had been his life, and in the end of it Jesus identified his blood, or his death, with that covenant – not as

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the appeasement of divine anger, but as the true founding of the covenant, the sealing of God's relationship with a rebellious people.

¹ Jos. Ch. 24

The bloody working out of that relationship, that which incurred the shedding of blood in torture and death, was not an arbitrary decision of God's, but, then as now, the social and political dimension of human nature, in which sin finds its fullness and its scope to be sin indeed. Blood was shed because the Messiah would not let go of his people but pursued them even into the labyrinth and slaughterhouse that was their national political self. The covenant was to be affirmed, and at last fully and utterly enacted, in the Messiah's encounter with sin. The reconciliation of God's people with God required the death of Jesus, not because of God's stern justice or anger, but because the Messiah would only be the Messiah, at one with them in everything that constituted their being as a people, when he embraced their whole national and political reality: those very dimensions of human being where we are accustomed to maintain and defend our position by torture and death.

His body is the bread for them to eat. His blood is the blood of the covenant. And, as I mentioned, there was one other thing Jesus said: "I declare to you solemnly, that never again will I drink from the fruit of the vine until I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

This was the promise of a man committed to the coming kingdom of God and confident of its imminence, his commitment to do and to go thru whatever might lie ahead in that road, knowing that the road was now short and the end of it near. In the past, wine had flowed freely in the ministry of Jesus around Galilee – he had even been criticised for being too fond of it. If you go thru the gospel noting the scenes of Jesus' teaching, the places where he engages with people and draws them out into an understanding of the rule of God, you will find that it is fairly equally divided between open country, the synagogue meetings and dinner parties (and parties of course always meant wine). Jesus' declaration, therefore, is not a metaphor – he means that that ministry, that way of mixing and engaging with people is now over for him. It has come to an end in this intimate supper they have just completed and in the wine they have just been sharing. He will not be going back to Galilee to wander thru the towns and villages, enlivening the hospitality of their houses, for they are even now on the verge of the kingdom of God.

Jesus' teaching, his ministry, his life had been a renewal of the covenant between God and his people. It had been, as God's covenant with Israel had always been, a total and unreserved commitment of himself to his people. And that is why he is in Jerusalem now, and will not leave Jerusalem, for here, however truly and deeply he engages with his people around the towns of Galilee, is ultimately – religiously, socially, politically, psychologically and emotionally - their heart. Jesus will not leave Jerusalem, because unless he engages them here, he will not have engaged them.

The kingdom will be, as God's relationship with God's people was from the beginning, an engagement, and it will be here, in Jerusalem. A window has opened in the universe and divine glory is pouring thru, a glory that defies explanation and leaps free of every interpretation, but not into some dark mystery of divine vengeance or divine justice. From here on the way of Jesus is pre-eminently and utterly the way of God's utter commitment to his people, engaged and bound to them to the very end, and so to the uttermost beginning, in the kingdom of God. For that is what the covenant had always meant.

Jesus did not want to die. He wanted, if at all possible, to avoid it. He had dodged the authorities as much as he could without leaving Jerusalem altogether. It's possible that he even deliberately anticipated the Passover date, to evade them. John's gospel tells us that Jesus' final supper with his

disciples was the day before the Passover, although the other gospels state that it was on the Passover itself. A possible explanation is that Jesus purposely celebrated the Passover a day early to frustrate any attempt to capture him on the one occasion when he would still be in Jerusalem well after dark.

However that may be, the fact is that Jesus faced a real danger and in that danger he was about to be betrayed. It was a real betrayal. Later, Christian teachers were concerned to show that, at the deepest and most important level, this betrayal was not a thwarting of God's plans but the way to their fulfilment. But that should not lead us to underestimate the frustration, the bitterness and the horror of the betrayal as it was. Jesus had no death wish. He was taking every precaution not to fall into the hands of the authorities, who he knew would kill him if they could. He knew that he was safe in Jerusalem only so long as he was in the eye of the public with whom he was popular. By night, and relatively alone, he was vulnerable if the authorities knew where to lay hands on him.

But he also knew that there was no alternative strategy which would avoid Jerusalem. God's way, and so his way, had brought him to Jerusalem. He knows who he is up against, and what little he can do against them. He knows the evil he has fallen into, the desperate fear and the ruthless power of his society, that he has already done all he can to win it over, and all he can to resist or evade its attacks, and he knows now that he cannot evade them any longer. He lives for his people, for God's people, reaching out to them with God's offer of friendship and lasting love, with the hope of God's kingdom. With that commitment of love he has come to their heart in Jerusalem, and where else is there now to go?

They ended the supper with the traditional psalms, and left for the Mount of Olives, a quiet garden called Gethsemane where Jesus knew they should be safely alone. But he was full of foreboding. Perhaps he knew why Judas had left them. He knew there would be trouble and he knew that none of his disciples were able to stand by him in real trouble. They were not ready. As scripture had foretold,

"I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." (Zec 13:7)

In the darkest moments there is sometimes a brilliant flash of hope, even if it is immediately swallowed up again by the darkness. Something beyond all betrayal, failure and pain was momentarily before him, and he said to them: "After I rise, I shall go ahead of you to Galilee." It was a word of enormous promise and future. Back to Galilee after all! The scene of so much hassle and trouble, it had once seemed, but now, in comparison with the nightmare Jerusalem had become, a haven of safety and peace!

Jesus spoke of rising, but that moment of insight was soon buried, perhaps for him as much as for them, in the present bitter reality. The shepherd would be struck down and they would be scattered. Peter was protesting that, even if all the others deserted him, he, Peter, would stand by his master. Peter, the first to recognise the Messiah, would not lose faith in him now. But Jesus knew that Peter was made of no stronger stuff than any man: "Tonight, before the second cock-crow, you will three times deny that you know me." Peter protested, and all the others joined in a chorus of protesting loyalty.

They came to the garden, where Jesus wanted to be alone, and to pray. But not too much alone. He left most of his disciples close to the gate (perhaps they were meant to be on the lookout) and he took Peter, James and John (the Rock and the two would-be leaders!) further into the garden. And there, Jesus who had gone without fear into the temple and confronted the very priests and their officials, was suddenly very afraid. He could protect himself no longer, and he was terrified of what he saw

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ahed of him. He spoke to his friends of a deep sense of depression, as horrible as death itself. “Wait here,” he said, “and keep awake.” Then he went a little further into the garden, alone.

In an agony of dread, he faced the fact that there was now nothing more he could do. He had come where his whole life had been leading and there he found that he could do nothing. Hatred and the nite of failure was closing in on him. In helplessness and horror he could only cry out to his father, God. “Abba” he prayed – and “Abba” is a familiar, trusting term, like “Daddy” – “Abba, everything is possible for you. Take this burden away from me.” He neither wanted nor welcomed what he foresaw, but prayed God to release him from it. But he also knew in his helplessness as in his strength, that God must choose the way forward. “Let it be as you decide, and not as I want it.” Whatever came of the mortal struggle between Jesus and his enemies, it should be neither what they intended, nor what Jesus, in his fear and desire for life, wished, but what God had in mind.

He came back to his disciples and found them asleep, and he rebuked them, perhaps remembering their earlier protestations. “You should be awake and praying not to be put to the test!” The gospel account of the garden and the two groups of disciples can be read as a prudent placing of lookouts so that Jesus would have plenty of warning if there was any hostile approach, and on that reading, the disciples were failing Jesus, were failing to be ready, in a very mundane but important sense. If so, that dimension has rightly been forgotten, swallowed up in the far deeper sense in which they failed him and failed to be ready for the Now of God when the kingdom came upon them. In any case, as we shall see, Jesus resigned himself to the fact that they were not going to be ready and that, in spite of their company, he was unguarded.

“You should be praying not to be put to the test,” he told them. “Your spirit is willing, but your bodies are very weak.”

He went away again, and again in agony he prayed to be released. Again, like one who does not know which way to turn, between his desire to be alone with God, even when God does not answer him, and his desire for the tangible comfort of his friends, he came back to them, and found them again asleep. When he woke them, they didn’t know what to say.

He went to pray a third time, and this time when he returned, he knew it was too late to be waking them up. There was something as near to panic as Jesus could suffer. One moment he was commenting resignedly: “You can sleep on now. It’s all over.” And the next, perhaps with a last fleeting thought that there was still something to be done, “Get up! Let’s go! I’m already betrayed.”

But he soon knew that it was too late. In the dark, the garden seemed to be swarming with men and clubs and swords. They had been sent by the chief priests and the elders. The most powerful men in Jewish society had struck, and Judas, one of the disciples, had enabled them to do so. He had given away the place where Jesus would be lying low, and he had one more service to render. It’s not hard to imagine the difficulty the authorities were in. They had the resources to arrest a man, but they knew how many were with Jesus. If they sent a force large enough to overpower and arrest a dozen men it could attract too much attention. It might cause the very disturbance they wanted to avoid. Besides, the watchful Roman garrison would be sure to notice that this was more than a routine bit of local policing, such as lay within the responsibility of the Jewish leaders, and awkward questions might be asked. Their scope was restricted, especially at this nervous time, by the occupying power, and they needed to be very sure of their man before they risked the Romans knowing what was up. Everything was very urgent, but they needed those few valuable hours of time and secrecy to get everyone on board and everything sewn up to their satisfaction.

Judas provided them with a heaven-sent opportunity. In a world without television or photographs, a person could be famous, as Jesus was, without many people knowing what he looked like. If the

raid was to succeed, they needed someone to identify Jesus quickly for the arresting officers, in the hope that once they had grabbed the leader with a sufficient show of force, his followers would give up and run away.

The plan worked, almost perfectly. Judas greeted his master with a friendly kiss and the temple police arrested him at once. There was some resistance. Someone drew a sword and wounded the High Priest's officer. Someone else was grabbed but ran away leaving his coat in the hands of the officers. Then Jesus spoke, but it was not to command his forces or encourage their resistance. Instead he protested to the arresting officers: "Why have you come to capture me with swords and clubs as if I were a terrorist? I've been teaching openly in the temple every day and you did not lay hands on me."

But he gave no further sign of resisting them. The words of scripture, whatever people had thought they meant, were being fulfilled. His disciples, terrified, ran away.

Jesus was taken to the High Priest. A full council of the priests and elders, with their lawyers and recorders, had been hastily assembled. They had been nervous about acting, as authorities often are, but once the opportunity was there, they could act quickly and decisively. If necessary, they could think on the run. They were able to show what made them rulers in Israel.

They knew what they wanted: the death sentence. But they themselves were legal authorities and it had to be done legally. At least they had to be able to show such legality as would quieten the doubts of the more scrupulous members of the council and provide them with the right "spin" should there be arguments afterwards. So they looked for evidence, calling "witnesses" who could testify that he had blasphemed the temple or tried to stir up a riot. The claim was made that he had threatened to have the temple destroyed – but the evidence given was found to be conflicting.

One wonders how it was found to be so. It would appear that not all the leaders were convinced in their hostility to Jesus, and some at least were prepared to cross-examine the witnesses, exposing inconsistencies. In the end, it was clear they were not going to succeed along these lines, so the High Priest himself intervened. The trial would have to be taken in hand from the very top. The High Priest challenged Jesus to answer his accusers, but Jesus knew that from the mess of stories they had put forward he had no case to answer. He kept silent.

Then the High Priest himself put his own direct question to Jesus: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" It was rightly and legally put, and Jesus would not refuse to answer it truthfully: "I am."

At last, all that the gospel has searched to say, to ask and to make clear; all that the people had wanted to know and all that the authorities had not wanted to think, the word that was most dangerous and most full of hope was out in the open and clearly spoken by Jesus himself: "I am." In the end, challenged by the High Priest, Jesus declared his claim: "I am."

Unless you believed it (and who would believe it?) it was an outrageous claim, a disgraceful act of madness or arrogance. But it was not blasphemous. (We should not imagine that when the High Priest used the title "Son of the Blessed One" - God - he was suggesting any claim to divinity. It was a recognised title of the Messiah.) In the hearing of the whole court Jesus proclaimed himself the Messiah. And he reminded them of the danger they were in, that they would see the "Son of Man" seated in power and coming in the majesty of heaven. It may have been deeply offensive to their opinions and to their idea of what the Messiah would be, and where they would stand in his presence, but you had to blur the boundaries between Messiah and God to make it a blasphemy, however much you hated or disbelieved it. Tho he had got his answer, the High Priest was not on

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firm ground, but he was not High Priest for nothing. He had learnt one of the first principles of effective rule: when in doubt, make a very public demonstration of authority and certainty.

The High Priest tore his robes in a gesture of outrage. “Who needs witnesses now?” he said. “You yourselves have heard the blasphemy. What is your verdict?”

The High Priest understood that other principle of effective rule: Keep your questions rhetorical - when you do display your authority, give no one time to reflect on it or consider whether they are bound by it. Demand an instant response, before anyone has time to think whether they dare disagree with you, or whether any one else would support them.

“What is your verdict?” And the high priest’s authority carried the night. Jesus was found guilty and deserving to die.

The Sanhedrin continued meeting, for they had further important decisions to make, particularly how to have him executed. But they no longer needed Jesus’ presence. He was “remanded in custody” which meant, as it often still does, handed over to bored or spiteful guards who had fun beating up on him, blindfolded to intensify his fear, and spitting on him, with mocking invitations to do some prophesying.

Meanwhile, in the courtyard of the high Priest’s residence, Peter had come in and stood among the servants, trying to keep himself warm. One of the servants recognised him and blurted out: “You were with him – that man from Nazareth!” As quickly, Peter leapt to his own defence: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He hurried out to the forecourt, where there were less people and it was darker, but the girl followed him and started telling everyone that he was one of the gang. He had to deny it. The girl gave up, but various people lounging about with nothing better to do heard what she had said and noticed that Peter spoke with a Galilean accent. After a bit, they also had a go at him: “You’ve got to be one of them. It’s obvious you’re a Galilean!” Peter was thoroughly frightened now. He began swearing and protesting: “I don’t know this man you’re talking about!”

I don’t think Peter was a coward. After all, he had followed the temple guard into the High Priest’s courtyard. I think that if he had been arrested and then questioned some time after he had got over the first rush of fear, he would have recognised that he was being challenged to acknowledge or disown his master. And then, I think, aware of what Jesus had told him that evening, he would have screwed up his courage to confirm that he was indeed a follower of Jesus. It was the suddenness of it that threw him. No time to think. He was caught off guard by an interfering servant and instinctively defended himself.

Three times he had denied Jesus. The night had worn on and the cocks were roused to their second crowing, and Peter remembered. He wept bitterly.