

27 The Trial

22: 39 – 71

Jesus and his disciples left the room of the Passover meal and made their way, as they had done before, to the Mount of Olives. When they reached it, he said to them, “Pray that you do not come to the point of testing.” He went a little way apart from them, knelt down and prayed: “Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from me – only not my will but yours be done.”

He had taught his disciples a long time ago to pray: “Do not bring us to the time of testing.” To face the full weight and reality of evil, to be tested by all that evil can raise against us is more than the human spirit can bear. To have the reality in us, our integrity, tested by the hurricane of malice that evil unleashes to hold its territory and maintain its rule, is more than we can take. We would crack and fall and be blown away. To be tested in our own poor selves, pitched against the full fury of a state, a society, a powerful establishment defending its interests, would crush and break us. Ask of the poor souls who perished in the Bastille. Ask the people of Dili who voted for self-determination and felt the power and violence of the Indonesian army. Ask the prisoners of Abu Ghraib, Bagram or Guantanamo or any who survive the dungeons of Cairo. Ask those who encounter the wrath of the Communist apparatus by defending the rights of Chinese people. I think they will tell you, “Pray that it doesn’t happen to you.”

Jesus told them to pray that they would not be put thru such a trial, and he did not except himself. Even for him, the ordeal was too much, and he prayed that the cup might be taken away from him.

And if we cannot endure the harsh testing of evil, how could we endure the blinding test of good, if our own poor self is confronted with the utter integrity of God? Who could stand under the searching judgement of God? We can only pray, “Do not put us to the test; help us, save us.” If the integrity of God, that complete holiness of which the innermost holiness of the Temple was only a representation, is to confront at last the malice and evil of human self-interest, consolidated in the closed ranks, the fearsome power of class and national interest, and yield nothing to their claims – in such a clash, what hope is there for any one who must stand at the point of encounter?

The fear that Jesus experienced was something more terrible than anything Zechariah or Miriam or the shepherds had felt. The angel who now

appeared to him brought him strength, but still he prayed in anguish of spirit, for it seemed that the will of God was for him to face and endure the conflict. Swet poured from him as if his life blood were dropping to the ground.

He got up and went back to his disciples, but found them asleep. They had found escape from depression, from the bewildering uncertainty and fear, by curling up and going to sleep. It was entirely the wrong recourse. "What are you sleeping for?" he sed, "Get up and pray that you will not be put to the test."

While he was still speaking, a crowd appeared, led by Judas, who came up and greeted him with a kiss. Jesus sed to him, "Judas, will you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" But the betrayer had done his work. He had quickly identified Jesus so that the temple police could arrest him and have him out of the way, under guard, before any news got out to disturb the crowds with whom he had been so popular.

There was a scuffle. Some of his followers thought of the swords they had brought and struck out with one of them, cutting off the right ear of the High Priest's servant (not a very expert thrust!). Jesus sed to them: "Let them be!" and he touched the man's ear, healing him.

There would be no more violence in defence of the Kingdom or of the Son of Man.

As this was an important arrest, no ordinary criminal, representatives of the priests and the elders were there as well as the temple police, to see it carried thru to their satisfaction: the leader taken out and conveyed to a secure place in the city where members of the Sanhedrin would have him under their control. All done quietly, neatly, a precision job, and without any alarm arising.

But it was done by nite and by force, because they were afraid of the people. Jesus challenged them: "Am I a bandit, that you come to take me with swords and truncheons? I was with you in the Temple every day, and you didn't arrest me. But this is your moment. Your way is to work in darkness."

They have triumphed. Their plan has worked and they have captured Jesus at an unguarded moment, away from all his popular support. By the time the crowded city gets to know what has happened, it will be a fait accompli; the authorities will have demonstrated their power and the people will be

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persuaded to accept it. But their victory itself is their defeat. Put forward as the legitimate rulers of Israel, the representatives of God in the covenant that makes Israel a nation, they have proclaimed themselves the guardians of the Law, but they have not shown the courage to assert their law in the full light of day. It is they who are in charge of the Temple, but they have failed to make good their authority there. Instead, they creep about at night and capture Jesus as if they are ashamed of the act.

The very success of their ruse is an abdication of real authority and an admission of failure. It's like the British government boasting of its stand against terrorism, and then conducting its examinations through the torture chambers of Pakistan and Morocco, or that of America using the blanket of "state secret" to keep its deeds hidden.¹ It's like the President of the United States, pretending to stand as defender of the liberties and laws of the American people, yet doing his work not in Congress or open court, but secretly in an illegitimate corner of Cuba, impervious to the scrutiny of American justice and out of reach of American law. It's like any of our governments that loudly claim to uphold the proudest and strongest principles of liberty and law, but do their deeds in the night and shut their victims away in state-imposed secrecy.

They took Jesus to the High Priest's house and Peter followed them at a distance. When they lit a fire in the courtyard, to sit around it for warmth, Peter sat among them. A girl servant saw him by the fire and pointed him out, saying, "This man was with him." He denied it, saying, "I don't know him, woman." A little while later someone else saw him and said, "You're one of them, aren't you?" But Peter said, "Man, I am not." About an hour later, another person put it more strongly: "This man was with him for sure. You can see he's a Galilean." Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" and while he was still speaking, a cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter, and Peter remembered what he had said: "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times."

The men who held Jesus made fun of him and beat him. Blindfolding him, they asked him: "Come on, prophesy: who was it that hit you?"² They had no end of insults to pile on him.³

¹ I refer in particular to the case of Binyam Mohammed, an Ethiopian British resident who was tortured, apparently with the connivance of British intelligence services, and imprisoned in Guantanamo. The "state secret" is still used as a cover by the Obama administration.

² It is interesting that the bullying temple guards (probably Levites of a lower rank) had a clearer understanding of prophecy than most Christians have. Prophecy is

When day broke, the elders of the people, the priests and the scribes assembled. He was brought before them and told to answer: "Are you the Messiah? You must tell us." He said to them "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I ask you questions, you do not answer me. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of God's power." So they said, "Are you the Son of God then?" and he answered them, "You have said that I am." Then they said, "We need no witnesses now; we have heard it from his own mouth."

(22: 54 - 71)

What Luke tells us about the trial of Jesus is the bare essentials: a question, an answer, the question rephrased, the answer re-phrased, then judgement and condemnation. The leaders of the Sanhedrin had long since determined to destroy Jesus, wanting only something to give the veneer of legality to their actions. So they challenged him to say clearly whether he was the Messiah - to deny it or to claim the title. But the "Messiah" is the bearer of complete authority over Israel, the one anointed by God to govern the people in God's name. Jesus reminds them of their previous failure to discuss the question of authority, when he raised the matter of John's. Their question is bogus. They are not interested in any real investigation into claims of authority; their only interest is to achieve a condemnation and maintain at all costs their own hold on power.

The trial questions and Jesus' answers explore the title that Jesus might claim or does claim: Messiah or Son of Man or Son of God. It's not that we should try to distinguish a distinct political or theological meaning for each. Now especially, when they come together in the trial of Jesus, they interact and merge, each adding dimensions of meaning from their use in the prophets or the psalms or later Jewish writing. But the trial and the death of Jesus is now fulfilling and defining them all.

He and the Sanhedrin were not just at odds over whether he was right to claim the title Messiah or Son of God, but over the whole issue of what was now happening and how they should encounter it. That is why the questions and answers don't harmonise. They want him to make a claim for which they can condemn him, so they challenge him with the title "Son of

not primarily foretelling the future, but being able to interpret present events correctly.

³ We might have thought this was all just the ordinary brutality of ignorant police, if we had not recently been shown in Basra and Abu Ghraib how British and American investigators rely on the "softening up" process of humiliation and torture to get what they consider the appropriate response from prisoners.

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God” (Messiah). He wants to show them that they must encounter the imminent kingdom of God, in which God will appoint and vindicate, and so he speaks as Daniel had done, of the Son of Man confirmed in authority at the right hand of God. For them it is a matter of affirming or denying claims within the structures of power as they know them. For Jesus it is a matter of being open to the energy and resources of God whose kingdom is breaking upon them with an authority that will date and relegate all their structures of power.

The priests, descendants of the great families of the Maccabean revolt and other priestly families, are now an elite, unscrupulous in their determination to preserve their power. The holiest in Israel have become a corrupt leadership and the approach of real authority, God’s authority in the kingdom of God, has met their fixed hostility. By the kind of irony that only the sad and sinful state of humanity can produce, the descendants of those who were to overthrow the great blasphemer, are about to accuse the Son of Man himself of blasphemy.

The gospel opened with Zechariah, a good man, but even so one not equal to the challenge of a message from God, burning incense in the innermost and holiest court of the temple. And it draws to an end with the exposure of the priesthood and Israel’s leadership in Jerusalem as the kind of self-serving autocracy of power that we find in the governments of most times and places. It is impossible for any such government, any such leadership, even the sanctified priesthood of Jerusalem, to enter the court of God as the “one like a son of man” approaching to receive the authority of God over all the nations.

That is why there is a new leadership for Israel, the followers of Jesus who have believed in him and to whom he declared: “I invest in you the kingdom which my Father has invested in me. You will sit on thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.” But even they are not equal to the role: they were found arguing over which of them was the most important. One of them has betrayed him, and Peter, who is to be the strength of the others, has run in fear, denying that he even knows Jesus.

There is no leadership in Israel to come forward and receive, with Jesus, the splendour that God intended for his people, and the followers of Jesus have failed him. And if we hoped that a gentile Christian leadership might succeed

in future where Israel had failed,⁴ we will be disappointed. The merest glance at Christian history will end our illusions and make us wiser. We are the successors of Peter and of Judas, of the Jerusalem priests and the Sanhedrin.

That is why there is a new covenant in the blood of Jesus. Those who follow him, tho they will not be strong or worthy, will drink the cup of his blood, will consume and live on his life. They will eat his body. The new covenant foreseen by Jeremiah will be written on their hearts, not from their own strength, but in the life and authority of Jesus which they will receive.

For in the end, whatever Daniel had hoped, there is only one who can enter the court of God and receive from him authority and rule over all the nations. The representative figure of one like a son of man has become the Son of Man. The vision of Daniel when it is fulfilled, is corrected and sharpened, and the holy people of God are now just one man, whom the leaders of Israel are bent on condemning to death.

The time of preparation, of getting redy for the coming kingdom, is over. From now on the Son of Man will be seated in glory and the kingdom will be established in the very different power of God. The leaders of Israel could not have mistaken Jesus' assertion. This is the fulfilment of the vision of Daniel. But it is fulfilled in a way that draws together the whole of Jesus' life and his message. Daniel helps us to see who Jesus is, what his death means and what his authority is for all time, but ultimately it is the words of Jesus now, and the events that follow, the crowning acts of God, that give the vision of Daniel its full and final meaning.

Luke's account of the trial of Jesus is not Mark's and it is not John's. And it points, again, to a meaning in Jesus' death that is not what we read in the letters of Paul. Not that Luke clashes or disagrees with the others, but he sees another dimension, or a different configuration of dimensions, that adds substantially to the total picture. We need all six accounts of the death of Jesus,⁵ just to begin to understand the mity event that is the very center and explanation of all history.

Jesus' proclamation of the triumph of the Son of Man has meaning for those who have listened to him, who trust him and have welcomed his message of

⁴ An early Christian writing, the Book of Esdras (included in the "apocrypha" of some bibles) spoke of the "Son of God" giving to the Gentiles the sovereignty once promised to Israel.

⁵ The gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, Paul's letter to the Romans and the letter to the Hebrews.

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the kingdom of God. But there is nothing there for the Sanhedrin to shape into a charge against him. So they challenge him again: “You are, then, the Son of God?” They are not challenging him to claim divinity, as we understand the divinity of Christ, but returning to the question: Does he claim to be the Messiah? “Son of God” was a title that could be applied uniquely to the Messiah, as it had once been applied, by poetic extravagance, to a king of Judah (who probably lived to show himself unworthy of it), in a psalm that came to be understood as referring to the Messiah:

You are my Son;
this day I have become your father.
Ask of me what you will:
I will give you nations as your inheritance.
the ends of the earth as your possession. (Ps 2: 7 – 8)

They put it to him again that he is claiming to be the Messiah, and by a kind of irony that we see much of in the actions of Jesus’ trial and execution, they suggest the one messianic title that refers to God, for they want to represent his claim as blasphemy. It is – ironically, but also in the providence of God – the leaders of Israel who point to the full reality of Jesus.

Jesus answered them: “It is you who say that I am.” That is, he will not commit himself to what they might mean by the title, but neither will he repudiate it. The Messiah not being God, it is not blasphemy to claim to be the Messiah, but those who had come to think of the Messiah as a transcendent and glorious figure, of mythical proportions, might well feel it to be a blasphemy, coming from an ordinary human being like Jesus, especially when it is claimed under the title “Son of God”. It was enough to give a show of legality to the Sanhedrin’s judgement:

“We need no witnesses now; we have heard it from his own mouth.”