

Sermon on John 11:47-53

Translation:

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. [48] If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." [49] But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. [50] Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." [51] He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, [52] and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. [53] So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. (ESV)

Da versammelten die Hohenpriester und die Pharisäer einen Rat und sprachen: Was tun wir? Dieser Mensch tut viele Zeichen. 48 Lassen wir ihn also, so werden sie alle an ihn glauben; so kommen dann die Römer und nehmen uns Land und Leute. 49 Einer aber unter ihnen, Kaiphas, der desselben Jahres Hoherpriester war, sprach zu ihnen: Ihr wisst nichts, 50 bedenket auch nichts; es ist uns besser ein Mensch sterbe für das Volk, denn daß das ganze Volk verderbe. 51 (Solches aber redete er nicht von sich selbst, sondern weil er desselben Jahres Hoherpriester war, weissagte er. Denn Jesus sollte sterben für das Volk; 52 und nicht für das Volk allein, sondern daß er auch die Kinder Gottes, die zerstreut waren, zusammenbrächte.) 53 Von dem Tage an ratschlugen sie, wie sie ihn töteten.

Theme: What Irony; What Comfort!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Beloved in Christ Jesus,

This remarkable text is very instructive for us, for it give us insight into the thinking of the religious leaders, the Jewish rulers in Judea as they found themselves confronted with the ministry of the Son of God. It also demonstrates how God, despite the most wicked purposes and plans of sinful people uses those same sinners to accomplish his purpose, his saving purpose in Christ. There is great irony in these verses, for the enemies of Christ who stubbornly resisted his will were used by him, nevertheless, and by their stubbornness God's good and gracious will was accomplished. Even by their words true believers are still comforted and uplifted today. This text also teaches us of the authority of divine offices, that God can and does speak to his people even by the ministry of wicked men!

There is one event, dear friends, that brought together the Jewish rulers in emergency session to deal with the Jesus' problem. Our Lord had done many marvellous things that annoyed the high officials of Israel: preaching against their legalism, associating with the unrighteous, and the Sabbath healings, to name just a few. It was the raising of Lazarus from the dead, however, that created an urgency for the leaders of the Jews. As St. John reports, **"Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done."** Early on, Jesus had a small following. At one point some even began turning away from him as they came to realize that the kingdom Jesus preached was not about earthly prosperity. They wanted a bread king, but he was the Bread of Life, eternal life. With Lazarus' raising, however, the Son of God became instantly popular again, so much so that the multitudes were turning to him with the conviction that he was, indeed, the promised Messiah. That explains the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, which we will celebrate a week from today.

Seeing that excitement in Judea over this Galilean preacher, the Pharisees and chief priests were fearful, so called a meeting of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. They knew that their efforts at stopping Jesus had been ineffective. **"What are we to do?"** they asked themselves. **"For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."** Though they hated the Romans who had conquered them, the Romans at least let them run their own affairs, short of judging capital crimes and putting criminals to death. That the Romans reserved for themselves. The situation was precarious, dangerous, for the Romans would not tolerate rebellion. Should the people rally around a Messiah, a new king of the Jews, it would be seen as a revolt. In putting down such a rebellion the Romans would destroy everything those self-righteous and greedy Jewish leaders had. Something had to be done. Some decisive action was needed. But what?

Then into this discussion came some clear thinking. One of their number saw through the dilemma to a solution, a solution none had seriously considered. I am speaking of Caiaphas, who was highpriest that year. His was reasoned problem-solving, for he weighed the situation and saw the way to a good outcome. He looked down on his colleagues for their inability to work it out as he had. **"You know nothing at all,"** he said. **"Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."** In other words, Jesus must die, no matter what the Word of God or Roman law had to say about it. He must be sacrificed to keep the peace. As Caiaphas said to the others, **"It is better for you."** Killing him would be better than everyone dying. He was talking about murder. Dear friends, it would not be senseless violence; murder rarely is. Someone usually has something to gain from it, even if no one else sees it that way. Jesus' murder was reasonable and practical, so far as the rulers of the Jews were concerned.

But reasonable is not necessarily right and God-pleasing, for man's reason is corrupt and so leads to deductions that are wicked. Consider how in these terrible days of world-wide illness, some are suggesting that the elderly should

just be left to die so that the young might live. But God says, **“You shall not kill. We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbour in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.”** Yes, sadly, many will die by the coronavirus, but no human being is expendable, especially those who ought receive the greatest honour in their old age. To write them off is devilish thinking. We must work to save as many as possible. Satan often uses corrupt reason to turn and twist the truth to his advantage, as he did with the rulers of the Jews. Surely the devil had filled the heart of Caiaphas. It was hatred, jealousy and selfish pride that moved him to decree the death of God’s Son. There was no love of God in him and, so, no love of others.

Nevertheless, the highpriest had authority to make such decisions and issue decrees that would affect the welfare of the nation. This had been the case since the time of Aaron’s priesthood. In other words, dear friends, Caiaphas had the God-given office of highpriest. No, he was not of the priestly house of Zadok. He had rather been appointed to that office by Valerius Gratus, the Roman governor of Judea. Yet, God through the Evangelist John acknowledged Caiaphas’ authority: **“Being highpriest that year he prophesied.”** Take note dear friends: Caiaphas was God’s man in that place, put there by the Lord himself, just as our governing authorities rule in God’s stead, just as our Prime Minister and Premier do in this difficult time. We owe them our obedience; God says so!

More than that, beloved, Caiaphas was God’s prophet to his people, the one who spoke for God among the Jews. That’s what’s so remarkable, so ironic, about his words. They carry a double meaning. Listen again: **“it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”** I already explained what Caiaphas meant. He spoke freely and in accord with his sinful will. He was the devil’s mouthpiece, because he was an unbeliever, a child of the devil. But his office as highpriest made him God’s mouthpiece as well; therefore, God used him to speak his Word. Caiaphas had no idea what he was really saying, for, although his words revealed his wicked design on Jesus’ life, God used his highpriest to announce the Gospel, the glorious Good News, the fulfilment of the Promise made to Adam and Eve. **“it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”** Listen again to St. John’s interpretation of those words: **“He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”**

Beloved, Caiaphas thought in political terms. **“It is better to have one man die than have the Romans destroy our nation.”** We, however, need to recognize the spiritual import of those words. We know that the Law declares death to all who sin and fall short of God’s glory. That threat is far greater than any other on earth, even the threat of a pandemic. But Jesus said, **“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”** Yes, it is a terrible thing to die, and we live our lives trying to avoid it, put it off, delay it, but it will come. All must die. Some will even die at the hands of others, for murder continues in the world, ever in this desperate time. The real deal, however, is eternal death, death in hell. The Almighty will damn those who remain unclean in his eyes, those who break his law, those who have no Saviour. But the Gospel is that God determined it would be better for you that one man die so that the rest of the people, even the whole nation, would not have to die. One Jew would die for all his fellow Jews, their leaders included. Jesus would be tortured and crucified for all his countrymen.

But not only for that nation, dear friends, but for all the children of God scattered throughout the world. One man would die for everyone, all people, to bring them together by faith into one holy nation, one royal priesthood, one people of God, the Holy Christian Church. Isaiah records the words of the Father to his Son, his Servant: **“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”** The Lord Christ said himself: **“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”** And again, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** That’s the great Good News, beloved -- that the Son of God stands in for all people, for you and me, that he dies for all of us and rises again, and so gives us life, true life, with God. He is **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”**

See how God rules all things in heaven and earth. Even wicked Caiaphas became God’s servant for good to those who would hear and believe his words. Nothing happens without the Lord allowing it, and all things, even the evil in this world, God works for the good of his children, those who love him in his Son, Jesus Christ. No, we do not always see it. None of the elders of Israel heard the Gospel, the words of comfort and hope, in the sinister words of their leader. They did not understand that the high priest had announced their salvation. Beloved, it is with the eyes of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, however, that these things become clear. Are they clear to you?

So, this prophecy, a prophecy not from men, but from God himself, was fulfilled. **“So from that day on they made plans to put [Jesus] to death.”** It was not that God had caused them to do this evil thing. God is not the author of sin. He does not make murderers of us, and does not will death. Those men did it of their own depraved hearts and minds. The heavenly Father simply used their wickedness to accomplish his good and glorious purpose -- the salvation of the whole world, the salvation of those men as well.

Dear friends, take comfort and trust, then, in the words of Caiaphas, who, ironically, with evil intent uttered a prophecy not his own and thereby announced the good news of your salvation: **“it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”** Amen.

Now the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.