

Jesus through the Eyes of Caiaphas and Pilate
Matthew 26-27

“Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has blasphemed!’”
“But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge,
so that the governor was greatly amazed.”

Caiaphas and Pilate. Priest and politician. Religion and politics. I think it no coincidence that, in Matthew’s Gospel, the hearing Jesus is given before the Sanhedrin (the religious council) mirrors the one-man trial he is given before Pilate, religion and politics being two sides of the coin of unbelief. In the house of Caiaphas, where the Sanhedrin has gathered, Caiaphas says to Jesus, “Have you no answer [to your accusers]? What is it that they testify against you?” Jesus is silent. Then the high priest asks him directly if he is the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus responds, “You have said so.” Caiaphas is enraged. In the praetorium, the order is reversed. Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus responds, “You say so.” Then Pilate asks Jesus, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” Jesus is silent. Pilate is amazed until he is afraid.

To ask how Caiaphas saw Jesus is to ask how religion (our seeking God) sees revelation (God seeking us). From the standpoint of revelation, religion is a human assumption and assertion that contradicts revelation. Therefore when revelation comes to us, we do not believe. If we did, we would listen, but in religion we talk. If we did, we would let God claim us, but in religion, we grasp at God. Religion, Karl Barth famously said, is what we believe in instead of God. In religion we bolt and bar ourselves against revelation by providing a substitute. On our own, we set out to find God by seeking “a truth above [in the starry heaven] and a certainty within [in the moral law],” Barth again, a seeking that religion is all too eager to accommodate.

In this accommodation, all religions, including the Christian religion, “are continually faced with the choice: either to go with the times, to change as the times change, and in that way relentlessly to deny themselves any claim to truth and certainty; or else to be behind the times, to stick to [religion’s] once-won forms of doctrine, rite and community and therefore relentlessly to grow old and obsolete and fossilized; or finally, to try to do both together, to be a little liberal and a little conservative....” “That is why,” Barth concludes, “religions are always fighting for their lives. That is why they are always and acutely or chronically sick.”

Caiaphas saw Jesus through the eyes of a priest who was responsible for religion’s survival in a time when the Temple would soon lie in rubble. The surmise of some scholars is that he was a Sadducee, a priest who was “intimately connected to the Temple and the maintenance of its cult... [concerned with] liturgy and the proper observance of feasts.” According to Edinburg Don Helen Bond, “The Sadducees were presumably ready to do anything in their power to safeguard the cult—even if that meant compromise with Rome.” Perhaps this is what led Caiaphas, in John’s Gospel, to say more than he knew, telling a nervous Sanhedrin that “It is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

This is why, according to Matthew’s Passion, when two come forward to testify that they have heard Jesus say he was able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days, Caiaphas takes the words to be a deathly threat rather than a hopeful promise. Sticking to his once-won forms of doctrine, rite and community, Caiaphas tears his clothes and declares, “He has blasphemed!” The council agrees and answers, “He deserves death.” Through the eyes of Caiaphas, God’s revelation, God’s coming to him in Jesus Christ, is a threat to religion and to his priestly office. Even so, God is able to use religion for the sake of revelation. Because Caiaphas saw Jesus in this way, he has Jesus bound (I cannot help but think of the binding of Isaac) and hands him over to Pilate so that God may save us from the death he must die.

Pontius Pilate. Every week we say his name, the name of a subordinate functionary in the military government of an occupying power. Now Pilate was about Jesus’ age and his wife Claudia happened to be the granddaughter of Caesar Augustus. Likely it was because of Claudia that Pilate had been appointed procurator of

Judea. Still, his job depended on his ability to maintain order. Though he and the wife lived in Caesarea, the potential for riots in Jerusalem during the Passover feast brought them to the capital. Time does not permit me to tell you of his first tumultuous three years in office, but suffice it to say a number of almost deadly confrontations with the Jewish population caused Pilate to hate the people he had come to rule. As the late English preacher Leslie Weatherhead characterized him in a little book on *The Personalities of the Passion*, Pilate was a “course, tactless, obstinate, bullying coward, fond of those blustering, loud-voiced methods by which so often fear is cloaked, and through which violence usurps the place of just and legal authority.”

While Caiaphas asked after Jesus’ theological identity, Pilate is interested in Jesus’ relationship to political power. “Are you the King of the Jews?” he asks. The question reminds us of the beginning of Matthew when the wise men ask Herod’s court to point them in the direction of the child who had been born king of the Jews; and of Jesus’ public ministry as he announced directly and in parables that God’s kingdom had come near; and of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem only a few days before, that called to mind the prophecy in Zechariah: “Behold your king coming to you...mounted on an ass”; and of Jesus telling the Sanhedrin just hours ago that they will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power....” “Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks. “Are you guilty of sedition against the empire?” Jesus simply acknowledges Pilate’s question: “You say so.” He will not speak again until he cries out from the cross, “Eli, Eli lema sabachthani?”

However Pilate saw Jesus initially, this one response causes him to see Jesus as an enigma and a different sort of threat. “Does he not understand that he is facing a death sentence?” Pilate wonders. “Does he not realize that I hold the power of life and death over him?” “Do you not hear the accusations they make against you?” Jesus is silent. Pilate is amazed until his wife’s dream causes him also to be afraid. Now the one occupying the judgment seat is the one being judged. When, without a word, God’s reign (revelation) invades our own (politics), the weakness of power is unmasked by the power of weakness; the exercise of power is laid bare by the refusal of power. “In the power of this weakness,” Paul Lehmann writes, “submission becomes the moment—not of obedient surrender but of obedient waiting,” waiting for God to use politics as God has used religion: to set God’s cosmic battle with death itself in motion. “What should I do with Jesus called the Messiah?” Pilate asks the crowd. All of them say, “Let him be crucified!” And just so, Jesus goes to the grave to defeat the only power Pilate possesses over the people: the power of death.

Poet Barrie Shepherd imagines Pilate’s last glimpse of Jesus, having wandered incognito to the foot of the cross:

Something says
I have by no means heard the last
about the lad I sent to die today
and watch give up the ghost.
Something tells me that my guard
has nothing left to watch over
because the treasure and the power,
all authority over lives and minds,
has been set loose from empire or religion,
has been set deep within that experience,
that moment that I knew there at the cross,
when all seemed given to me, all seemed new
and I looked up and into life
right at the heart of cruel death.

Thanks be to God.