

Good Friday 10 April 2009

Jesus before his Jewish and Roman judges is both judged and judge, condemned and the one who himself condemns.

I want to reflect with you on one person in particular with whom Jesus has to do in these final hours. Spare me one or two moments of improbable exploration on this journey, just so as to excavate these familiar yet dense narratives. Our Orthodox brothers and sisters next week, will not have a liturgy of this kind. They wait until the Evening of their Good Friday and then instead of pondering the nature and significance of Our Lord's death, as is customary in the West, instead using the burial rite of the dead, they adorn an ornamental shroud with as many flowers as it can bear and process it around the church, before as it were burying it on the altar.

The person of the High Priest, Caiaphas, and connected with him his father in law Annas holds a particular fascination for me. Perhaps it is because I spend part of my life interviewing potential priests that the character of the High Priest who tried Jesus intrigues me.

Before exploring the texts permit me my first apocryphal excursus. The Gospel of James is one of the late non-canonical Gospels, but not included in the canon of Scripture. It tells the story of the birth, infancy and childhood of Mary. Upon its stories much Marian tradition is based. Her parents Joachim and Anna, were of the priestly line, of the same clan as Zechariah and Elizabeth, whom we meet in the early part of Luke's Gospel, the parents of John the Baptist. Mary, as a young child was sent to Jerusalem, with many of her kinswomen to dwell in the Temple and to embroider the great veil of the Temple. She only returns to Nazareth, as her parents are seeking to arrange her marriage to the widower Joseph. The close-knit community of Temple servants, which included thousand priests living largely in Judaea, around Jerusalem, formed a caste, not unlike Brahmins in India to this day. They were set apart, the upper echelons of this caste formed a political, aristocratic elite whose palaces have been excavated around the outside of the Temple precincts. Their poor country cousins, were indeed their relatives, but lived in less style and officiated only rarely in the Temple. Mary, if she was amongst those who did, as the later historian Josephus confirms, embroider the Temple veil, would have spent her formative years in the Temple precincts, conscious of her priestly ancestry, and even known to the Temple authorities. Thus far I am within the bounds of the possible, not the dubious or the heretical. If John is the unnamed disciple who makes his way with Peter, under the cover of darkness, after Jesus's arrest, to the High Priest's House in John chapter 18, then the reason the pair of them are admitted entry is because John, if John be he, is related to the High Priest. The Greek could imply kinship. This makes John, the Beloved Disciple, a cousin of Caiaphas. We know that John's mother was Salome, and that Salome was Mary's sister. John, the beloved disciple was thus Jesus's cousin. If John was related to Caiaphas, then Jesus may well have been too.

I am not making a strong case. I confess is flimsy, but I want to trace a personal connection between Jesus and his interlocutor, Joseph Caiaphas. Even if they were not

cousins, one of Jesus's closest disciples had connections with Caiaphas's household, and Jesus's maternal line was of priestly descent. Jesus was not a northern lout, but one of them. As a boy when he taught the teachers in the Temple, he was in his own environment, and those ancient walls would have reverberated with his early teaching

What do we know of the High Priest? We should begin with his father-in-law. Annas who interrogates Jesus immediately after the arrest, was a unique figure. He was High Priest between 6 AD and 15 AD. In the fifty years after he was deposed, five of his sons became High Priest, one son-in-law, and one grandson. Caiaphas was no shrinking violet. Three years after his father-in-law was deposed, he was nominated, and he held office from 18 AD until 38. Throughout the Governorship of Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas held office. As High Priest, he was not just spiritual leader, he presided over the governing council or Sanhedrin. Evidence of its membership and function is hard to piece together, but it had extensive powers in secular and religious matters. We think it had 70 members, with the HP as its president. We think that all that the NT suggests of its deferring to Rome for capital matters is accurate, especially if the charges were of religious origin.

This executive seems to have been representative of the various factions in contemporary Judaism, comprising Pharisees and Sadducees. The latter, the priestly caste, with interests in preserving the religious status quo were in the majority. At the apex Caiaphas and his extended family represented the interests not just of the religious elite but the landed and the powerful. It is hard to guess their sense of entitlement, their sense of responsibility for nation and institutions; but the record of quizzing governments in more recent years may give some helpful indication of what issues were at stake in heading a body like this.

Unlike Petain, Quizzing and others Caiaphas was not just a head of state. He presided not only over a government, but a religious institution which embodied Israel's history in a particular way. At the Temple's heart was its daily and annual cycle of ritual sacrifice, which gave Israel a sense of who it was. The High Priest's role in atoning once a year for the nation's sins was a moment of extraordinary solemnity. The created order depended on these liturgies being conducted in the proper manner in the proper place by the proper people. All national life cohered around these institutions. The High Priest was political because of what he represented and did for and on behalf of the people. It did not mean he was without his critics. They were many, some within the framework of government, others outside, some on its margins at Qumran amongst the Essenes, but the High Priest's profile was of incalculable significance.

Caiaphas was aware of Jesus from early on. There was a scuffle in the Temple early in Jesus's ministry. The Sanhedrin are called to discuss it. One of their number Nicodemus who has met Jesus by night, defends Jesus. The matter is closed, but the authorities have marked him. Perhaps the High Priest knows precisely who this earnest young man is and is calculating the risk he might pose. Man and message are so bound up. When the raising of Lazarus takes place, the Council is called again. The members put aside their wrangling and say "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our Holy Place and our nation." Looming over the Temple precincts was one of Rome's

largest garrisons, the Fortress Antonia, one false move and the place could have been razed in hours. Indeed, forty years later that is what was to happen. “But Caiaphas, who was High Priest that year, said to them ‘You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.’ He did not say this of his own accord, but being HP that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”

There John puts it. Jesus is not even present. His arrest is some 10 days off at least but the outcome is known. The HP does not just express alarm, or even call for Jesus’s arrest, he pronounces as HP (‘that year’ – ‘that fateful year,’ John means) that he must die. Irony crafts expediency into providence. Jesus’s death will gather all those scattered abroad, but not as Caiaphas sees it.

St Mark remembers what exactly happens as the party proceeds to Caiaphas himself. “Are you the Christ the Son of the Blessed?” Jesus has been silent, but now Jesus answers “I am”. Mark’s Gospel does not have the density and layering of John, but it is no simple work. At the outset, St Mark says “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The HP asks if this is indeed what he is, and Jesus replies “I am”.

There is drama in this exchange. Drama, because the HP then does a most unusual thing. Because we know the story it may not seem quite as strange as it should. “And the HP tore his garments.” This was not the action of a distressed judge when hearing blasphemy. There is no evidence for it in the past, at least. The rending of garments is the sign of extreme grief, associated with the death of a very close relative, usually a son. The HP’s distress is obvious, why is it so strong? Maybe this prisoner before him was an object of his hopes and inspiration, and even the affection of very close kinship.

After Pilate left, the year later in 38, Caiaphas is deposed. He leaves the stage, without a trace. There was even a tradition that he became a Christian. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were men of precisely Joseph Caiaphas’s background who were members of the Sanhedrin, who were converted.

This theory, is almost certainly disproved by a find in the early 90s of the Caiapha family tomb, including an elaborate jar marked Joseph Capha, dated at precisely mid 1st c. A renegade HP would not be buried with pomp in such a way.

However, Jesus of Nazareth touched Joseph Caiaphas. Joseph Caiaphas saw the end of all that he stood for, and brought about Jesus end with a prophesy that all the world might be drawn to Jerusalem. How right he was.

Our High Priest, is he who has passed through the heavens, Jesus Christ the righteous. As the Epistle to the Hebrews underlines He has done away with the old order.

Sacrifice was at the heart of priesthood. Caiaphas offered earthly sacrifices in the Temple. He was prepared to see Jesus done away with for the sake of that Temple and his nation.

In 2007 I had the privilege of visiting the Abbaye des Dombes in South East France, the mother house of the Cistercian Abbey of Tibirine. The community had moved to Algeria to engage in prayerful witness there. At the Abbaye des Dombes is a memorial chapel to the brethren who moved from there and then in 1993 were massacred. One Dom Christian de Cherge wrote this on the day of his death:

If it should happen one day and it could be today, that I become a victim of terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners in Algeria, I would like my community, my church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and this country. To accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. For this lost life, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God who seems to have wished it entirely for the sake of that JOY in and inspite of of everything. In this THANK YOU which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you friends of yesterday and today, and you O my friends of this place, besides my my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families, a hundredfold, as was promised! And you too, my last minute friend, who will not know what you are doing, yes for you too I say this THANK YOU AND THIS ADIEU – to commend you to this God in whose face I see yours. And may we find each other, happy ‘good thieves’ in Paradise if it please God, the Father of us both.....AMEN! INSHALLAH.

Christian de Cherge knew he had to offer himself in faithful following of Christ. Being priestly, which is the new dispensation of which the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks, we are all called to, is about a new sort of sacrifice, of which we are all capable, by God’s grace, our selves, or at least what we are inclined to confuse with our real selves: our pride, our vanity, our attachment to this world. Christ’s offering of himself repitches the Tent, as the Epistle to the Hebrews says, it resituates priesthood, recrafts expediency into providence and crucially calls us to follow Christ, whatever the cost.