



John 18:19–24

19 Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 20 ‘I have spoken openly to the world,’ Jesus replied. ‘I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. 21 Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.’ 22 When Jesus said this, one of the officials near by slapped him in the face. ‘Is this the way you an-

swer the high priest?’ he demanded.
23 ‘If I said something wrong,’ Jesus
replied, ‘testify as to what is wrong.
But if I spoke the truth, why did you
strike me?’ 24 Then Annas sent him
bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Reflection

Nepotism. It’s as ugly in the Bible as it is in real life and it never ends well. The high priesthood in Jesus’ day was a classic example. So far in John 18 we’ve heard two names referred to as the high priest, Annas and Caiaphas. What’s going on here? Let me explain. Annas held the office of high priest (the senior most official in Judaism) from AD 6 until AD 15. At this point, the Roman Procurator Valerius Gratus deposed him and appointed someone else.

Annas however continued to hold enormous influence and manoeuvred behind the scenes ensuring that no fewer than five of his sons, and his son-in-law Caiaphas, held the office at one time or another as his 'puppet' high priests. This is why the temple guards brought Jesus to Annas before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council) and why in today's passage Annas will be referred as the high priest, even though Caiaphas is nominally serving in the role. Annas was the real powerbroker and patriarch of the high priestly family, Jesus' real nemesis, who would stop at nothing to keep the reigns of power within his family. If you've ever wondered how the priesthood, the leaders of God's people on earth, theoretically the most holy and devout men in the Jewish nation could murder the Son

of God then part of the answer is nepotism, politics and corruption.

Case in point is the middle of John 18 which contain Jesus' hastily convened midnight trial. What justice was ever done at a trial held under the cover of darkness during the early hours of the morning? What person ever received justice who was secretly arrested in the dead of the night and then subjected to a hastily arranged trial without legal representation only to be pronounced guilty of a capital offence and summarily executed at 9am the next morning? That's what we did to Jesus. Jesus' interrogation by Annas, the puppet master high priest, is the subject of today's passage, reading from John 18:19–24,

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tioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 20 'I have spoken openly to the world,' Jesus replied. 'I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. 21 Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.' 22 When Jesus said this, one of the officials near by slapped him in the face. 'Is this the way you answer the high priest?' he demanded. 23 'If I said something wrong,' Jesus replied, 'testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?' 24 Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Annas questions Jesus about two things:

his disciples and his teaching. His disciples, no doubt, as Annas tries to gauge the size of Jesus' following for fear of reprisals. And his teaching, because the fundamental concern of the Jews, apart from Jesus' undermining of their authority, was theological. They were concerned that the claims Jesus was making about himself would lead the people away from following them as God's representatives on earth and instead that Jesus would lead the people into apostasy, a turning away from the God of their forefathers. The irony of course is that their concerns with Jesus are theological but the case they present to Pilate will be a political one. In response to these two lines of questioning Jesus answers,

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world,' Jesus replied. 'I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. 21 Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.'

Jesus speaks to the elephant in the room. It's two or three in the morning. Jesus has spent the entire week teaching openly in the temple courts debating with the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law in the heart of Jerusalem. He drew huge crowds of zealous Jews who listened on approvingly. And no-one laid a finger on him. It took him to venture into a secluded garden late at night for them to dare to arrest him. And now they have him, locked away in the high priest's compound for a hastily

convened midnight trial, without legal representation or witnesses, in direct contravention of every legal code that has ever been written, especially their own, to say nothing of the Old Testament Law. Which is why, in contrast, Jesus' words are so scathing:

20 'I have spoken openly to the world,' Jesus replied. 'I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. 21 Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.'

'I have only spoken openly. Unlike you. I haven't said or done nothing in secret. Unlike this. And why question me? There are

tens of thousands of witnesses to what I have taught. Your own legal system necessitates witnesses. Where are they?’ With such strong words Jesus heaps burning coals on their heads, exposing their flagrant disregard for proper legal process and in doing so manages to divert questions away from his disciples whom he is still protecting. But the directness of his speech draws a sharp response,

22 When Jesus said this, one of the officials near by slapped him in the face. ‘Is this the way you answer the high priest?’ he demanded.

Jesus, who never sins, replies quite simply,

23 ‘If I said something wrong,’ Jesus

replied, 'testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?'

Jesus of course was showing no disrespect to the office of high priest, Annas was not even the official high priest. Seeing that they could get nothing out of him, or perhaps having formulated their best avenue of attack, Annas sends Jesus on to Caiaphas. Caiaphas was a puppet high priest yet high priest nonetheless and also the chairman of the Sanhedrin whose seventy members were being woken in their beds and hastily called into session while this interrogation was playing itself out. It would take a vote of the Sanhedrin after a sham trial to recommend the death penalty to the Romans who were the only ones who had the power to carry it out.

Think

As you reflect back over today's passage I'd like you to think about justice. The desire for justice is deeply wired within us all. Just look how quickly little children learn to point out when something isn't fair. Or how the most compelling viewing on television invariably ends up being courtroom dramas. Or how in all the best drama the good guy seemingly has to win. Human beings are made in the image of God which means that justice is crucially important to us; yet we are inconsistent. If we're the victim of injustice we cry out in anger and outrage. But if our neighbour is the victim, the degree to which we cry out is usually roughly proportionate to the possibility that what happened to them might one

day happen to us. And if the injustice is occurring overseas, at a comfortable distance, then most of us barely give it a second thought. But the worst inconsistency is when we're the perpetrator of injustice, at which point we're very happy for the penalty to be overlooked.

This blackness in our hearts is the reason that Jesus is on trial. We're the reason the only perfect man to ever live was subjected to such extreme injustice. It should have been us in the dock – guilty as sin. The universe turns of the justice of God – we know it deep in our inner beings, our own consciences condemn us – which means it should have been us. There we are standing in the dock up to our necks in sin and God hands down judgment upon us. And then he steps out of the judges

seat and exchanges places with us and is bound and carried away to take the punishment for our sins. That's what is happening before our eyes in John 18.

Pray

Praise God this morning for the great exchange that saw him who knew no sin become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. By his blood, we have been set free. Praise him today for his sacrifice on this dark night.