

"The Truth Be Told....."

[Before proceeding, please pray carefully and specifically that God's Holy Spirit would open your heart and mind to not only the Biblical text has to say but to the message God wants to impart to you, with which to enrich and encourage you.] John 11:43-53

"When [Jesus] came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." (Luke 19:37-40, NIV) To God be the glory!!!

The work of Satan working to suppress the truth of God and all the truth claims of the Christian community is relentless and never-ceasing. One of the amazing things about Scripture is the way and means by which we see God "speaking" the truth to a broken and hurting world. Many times God "speaks" the truth not specifically by the word of a faithful prophet or a bunch of inanimate stones but by the words, unwittingly, uttered by one who is seeking to hinder or undo the will and work of God, even though that person "thinks" he is actually doing the will of God, that is, doing God a favor by speaking. Such is the case with Caiaphas, who unwittingly prophesied regarding Jesus, "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50, NIV) Caiaphas had one thing in mind while the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ had something entirely other in mind.

What follows is a gathering of facts, thoughts, points, and possible application(s) of the text on which I will hereafter refer to draft our Lenten 2019 Tenebrae service message. Tenebrae is a service of darkness. By extension it perhaps may be said to be a service of darkness and shame. This, actually, is startling at the outset for in our day and age "shame", the mention of the word and/or the application of it to anything or anybody is dubious at the least and loathsome and to be utterly rejected at the most. I want to begin by noting that "shame" is not without proper use and application, first, because it has long been rightly noted that the cross was meant to reflect the utter shame and contempt heaped upon the criminal whose life and actions warranted such a horrendous methodology of death - prolong death as long as possible, by the worst and most

egregious means possible, before the inevitable end. The cross was a visible statement of shame culturally heaped upon the individual so hung there for all the observing world to see. As crucifixion was known to be the vilest and most excruciatingly painful means of execution known to man, the Tenebrae service, which centers on the crucifixion, and events leading up to it, is rightfully seen as a service of darkness and shame.

But it is not improper, but sometimes even necessary, to focus more on the earlier events that inexorably led to the crucifixion. Our passage from John 11 is just such a passage. I used the word "inexorably" because what happened in John 11:43-53 led inescapably to Jesus' crucifixion. The proverbial wheels were set in motion that would not be stopped. The trap was being set with no escape. However, let us never forget that this is said from a human perspective. From God's perspective, similar to Jesus' words to Satan, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt 26:53, NIV), the Father could have stopped the journey headed toward Golgatha if he so chose. But that would leave sin and death unconquered and God would have none of that. From the divine perspective, and not totally unfitting with the human perspective, the wheels set in motion could not be stopped after all because the love of God is such that sin and evil would in fact be conquered, in spite of what man has done, is doing, and will do.

Our Scripture passage on which this writing is based is framed in my Bible with the headline "Religious Leaders Plot to Kill Jesus", an incredibly stark and sinister conclusion, is it not? This begs the question, "What in the world could Jesus have done to merit such a horrific thing?" It is one thing for worldly crooks, thieves, and murderers to plot the murder a human being, even a loving and kind person such as Jesus, but for the leaders of a "religious" community to not only participate in such an endeavor but to spearhead it? Well, that is utterly unbelievable! What had Jesus done that was so egregious that the leaders of his religious affiliation would undertake such drastic measures? Simply put, Jesus had brought his dear friend Lazarus back to life after he had been dead 3 days (existentially, this particular point was to preclude any speculation or claim that Lazarus was only seemingly dead [historically, cases have been known to exist where a body seemed utterly dead for a day or more but then suddenly come to life on their own with the spark of life

not 100% extinguished but merely put on hold]. That he had been in the grave 3 days meant that he was dead dead. The detail that Martha, the sister of Lazarus, objected to Jesus' command that the stone sealing the tomb be removed, saying, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." (John 11:39, NIV) seals the truth that her beloved brother was truly and fully dead, dead dead! He's not coming back to life on his own. Except that Jesus brought him back to life.

This lengthy emphasis on the death of Lazarus and Jesus resurrecting him is necessary in that it helps us understand what the Pharisees and Sanhedrin (top level group of religious leaders) were so nervous over. "Nervous", however is not quite right word. They were in fact very worried.

There are two primary reasons they were incredibly worried. Which one is of the most importance may be debated. But the first is that what Jesus did was a very credible threat to them as religious leaders. Jesus was going around teaching people that, in some instances, the Son of Man, while in other instances claiming that he was the Son of God! In the present treatment of the story, the distinction between the two are immaterial. Both titles refer to Jesus as being more than man, that he is God himself! This was, from the human perspective, arrogance at the least and blasphemous at the worst! Jesus' claim to authority over all earthly and heavenly matters was a direct and dangerous challenge to the temple hierarchy. This upstart itinerant do-gooder peasant preacher from Galilee was a direct challenge to the authority of Judaism's leaders. They, from their perspective had absolutely no option but to shut him down, even if it meant they had to see Jesus killed.

But there was a second compelling reason, from their perspective, for the necessity of Jesus' death. And this reason intersected with the perspective of their overlords, the Romans. The Romans were not primarily interested in the religious aspects of the rabble Jews but in the political stability of the region. Squabble and quibble about religious matters all they like, so much for that, but civilly, they had better behave and keep things orderly and quiet. [Much of my research for this writing was done using *The NIV Application Commentary, John*, Gary M. Burge.]

Chief priest Caiaphas ruled the Sanhedrin for 18 years (18-36 A.D.) and took personal responsibility for the political stability of the country. Caiaphas worked along side the Roman governor Pilate for

10 years. Together, these 2 men forged an uneasy and fragile peace. For Caiaphas, political expediency was key. For Caiaphas to let things get out of hand would be the death of Caiaphas, at the least, and a whole host of his fellow Jews at the most.

It was not lost on the Romans that the Jews of that time had high hopes of the arrival of the long awaited messiah Scripture and tradition had prophesied and clung to. The popular and religious understanding of the messiah was that the messiah would be a military-style freedom fighter who would come in (to use one of our present day metaphors) riding like a white knight on a blazing and virile stallion, leading the beleaguered Jews in a successful insurrection and uprising by which the evil and hated Romans would be thrown off. Rome itself and those in charge in Palestine were well aware of this belief and potentiality. Thus, the ever-increasing scuttlebutt that this Jesus could be that messiah was as worrisome to the Romans as it was to the Sanhedrin. If successful, such an insurrection would mean the Jews would be free from the clutches and domination of Rome. Rome could not permit such a thing, nor could the Sanhedrin if it meant the ultimate annihilation of them as a nation. On both counts, by the Sanhedrin assessment, Jesus had to die. Otherwise, only carnage and death awaited Israel.

Thus we come to the incredible statement of Caiaphas. "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." In Greek class in seminary we learned that the original Greek lacked grammatical points that we are used to such as the period, comma, and question mark. In addition, word order such as we are used to was of less concern to the early Greek writers (e.g. the subject of a sentence doesn't always come at the beginning of a sentence). One implication is that, lacking grammatical points, there are at times uncertainty whether a sentence is presented as a statement or a question. I, therefore, seem to see these words of Caiaphas better as a question than a statement (though I think either, or both, ways will ultimately convey a proper message and understanding). "Do you not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish?!"

It is incredibly interesting to realize that what Caiaphas meant was meant by God to mean something very different. Caiaphas spoke one truth while prophesying, unwittingly, something very different. The thinking of Caiaphas as like this: "If we let him go on

like this, performing miracles, especially bringing a dead body back to life, all the people will turn to him and follow him! And the resulting insurrection will see us all killed." The truth was now understood and expressed. Jesus, one man, now has to die, so that the whole nation would not die. This is rightly understood existentially and theologically. The story of the resurrection of Lazarus would have spread like wild fire! How could it have not?! Word would have immediately found its way to the religious leaders and Pilate, etc. For the Sanhedrin, "It is either him or us." For if the insurrection came to pass and failed, the subsequent retribution and punishment would be terrible and swift, in effect saying very clearly, "Don't you EVER think of doing this again!"

In terms of Judaism, Killing Jesus would preclude the feared insurrection and slaughter of an untold number of Jews. But also, the crucifixion of Jesus would bring salvation to an unknowable number of people who came to believe in him. Those would be saved from eternal death and guaranteed to live eternally in bliss with God and one another. Caiaphas was unwittingly a spokesperson for the truth as God has delivered it to us.

Hence our message title "The truth be told....."

It is crucial that we speak briefly to what we are told here: "[Caiaphas] did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for **the Jewish nation**, and not only for that nation but also for **the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.**" (John 11:51-52, NIV)

These prophetic words uttered (in both a witting and unwitting sense) by unsuspecting Caiaphas point to the fact that **the crucifixion** is the pivotal event in the whole divine drama. As an aside but important point, this particular point sets the stage and reference for the Tenebrae service message I am planning. It also is a prelude to my message set for this Easter Sunday.

Jesus' crucifixion is the most central focal point of the whole plan of salvation. The words and phrases emboldened above emphasize 2 things. First, salvation is provided for not only the faithful members of Judaism residing in and around Jerusalem and those who are known as the Diaspora [meaning "scattered"; those who still lived in far flung places like Babylon, Egypt, and Asia Minor to the north; all who lived outside of Palestine, who never returned to Jerusalem at the end of the exile] Jews, but also to all faithful Christians hereafter.

The phrase "to bring them together" refers to, at least in part, those who believe and accept that the crucifixion happened for the saving of their souls for all eternity will be joined together in and by this singular doctrinal belief. We, as Christians, can debate and argue about how many elders a church should have. We can debate over whether church leaders should be referred to as deacons (elder to us) in some churches, bishops in others, evangelist in others. We can debate and argue over the proper form of the elements of the Eucharist (and even the name itself: Eucharist to some, Holy Communion to others, the Lord's Supper to still others, etc.) whether to use unfermented grape juice or actual wine of the alcoholic type, whether to use unleavened bread, typical of what Jesus used in the original, or a particular sweet bread that is the common bread of a particular local church and location. Lest it be missed, there are lots of things we can argue about and disagree on, and still be found to be included in the "family of God".

But the one thing that seems cannot be cast aside and rejected is belief in and acceptance of the crucifixion. There are at least a few critical doctrines that cannot be rejected. The cross, the crucifixion is perhaps the most critical one for everything that went before, and everything that happened after is affected by this singular point in time and historical fact.

This may seem like, "Well, ok. I accept it. I always have, and will. What's the point of such a serious and lengthy emphasis on what is so simple and well accepted? The cross and the crucifixion, I get it."

My ultimate point is this. A very disturbing change has come upon Christendom, especially in European Christianity but also increasingly in American Christianity. Facebook post this past week revealed a very disturbing change that seeks to do great harm to the church, in general, and to individuals who either believe in Jesus or who might come to believe in him in the future. According to *The Blaze*, April 15, 2019, it is reported that a BBC poll shows that fewer than half of UK Christians believe Jesus died and rose again for forgiveness of their sins."

To historic, tradition Christianity, this is incredulous, beyond belief. To see what is the crux of the whole salvific story set aside so easily, so casually dismissed as with a simple wave of the hand, is disheartening to say the least.

I put together this writing as a means of helping us all wrestle with whatever we need to wrestle with this last week of Lent, Holy Week. I've put it together as a foundation upon which I will prepare and present my Tenebrae service message. Again, the Tenebrae service is a service of darkness, sadness, shame, and tragedy. It is a terribly dark and sad thing to see some parts of Christendom seemingly so easily jettison the very most important focal point of salvation history. We are made one by accepting and living into the crucifixion. Conversely, those who now reject it unavoidably remove themselves from that group of "one" referred to in verse 52. My Tenebrae message, as I presently conceive it, will focus on not only the darkness of that horrible "Good Friday" event but the darkness and shame that is coming upon Christendom, especially in European and American Christianity. What a sad turn of events for the church of which Jesus said was his body on earth after his ascension. What a crime and a shame that what has long been either taken for ultimate truth is now increasingly being set aside like a worn out garment.

Two concluding points here. If the reader is one who has already rejected the reality and necessity of the cross and crucifixion, or is contemplating such a rejection, I hope said reader will prayerfully reconsider this matter. If the reader embraces it, my hope and prayer is that said reader will be encouraged and made steadfast all the more. My Tenebrae message will be found on our church's web site on the "Sermons" page identified as "Apr. 19, 2019". The subsequent, and also related message for Easter Sunday will be found on that page as "Apr. 21, 2019".

From my heart to yours.....