

Midweek 3

It Is Hidden in the Savior's Rejection by His Own

Text: Matthew 26:57-68

- I. That rejection comes from those who should know better.
 - A. They knew both the law and the promises by heart.
 - B. They claimed love and loyalty to both.
- II. Again we need to hear, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."
 - A. Hold to the truth by keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus and his Word.
 - B. Watch and pray, lest you be among those who cause the cross instead of those who carry it!

We are drawing ever closer to the moment when all the promises are fulfilled. In our reading this evening, we come to one of the most appalling, one of the most shocking, one of the most painful points in the passion history. The Word of God had promised more than once, not only in the words of Jesus himself but in the prophecies of the Old Testament, that the Savior would suffer. But listen to the source of the suffering in the reading this evening. Who would have believed it? We read in Matthew 26:57-68:

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

Whenever and wherever Jesus and his cross appear, we should expect hostility, hatred, opposition, and persecution, not outward glory. The glory of Christ is hidden under the cross of rejection. That's what he promised. That is obviously a truism in Lent. For Jesus carries the cross and dies because of just such hatred and opposition. What is surprising, however, in our reading for tonight and, yes, in the whole history of the church, is the source of that hostility and rejection. Who is most hostile, most vicious, most filled with hatred toward Jesus and his cross? Exactly those who should be the first to welcome him, to believe in him, to love and trust and worship him!

That's who we see in our reading this evening. Jesus was arrested and taken before the high priest. The high priest was to be the man closest to God in the whole world. He brought the blood of sacrifice into the Most Holy Place, God's throne on earth, on the great Day of Atonement and sprinkled it twice on the mercy seat, once for the sins of the nation and once for his own sins. That sprinkling of blood was a picture of the work of the Savior, who would shed his blood to blot out sin and guilt once and for all. The high priest knew that. He was the overseer of all the ceremonies and sacrifices in the temple, most of which, in one way or another, pictured the coming of the Savior, whose one great sacrifice would redeem the world.

If anyone should have known that Jesus was the fulfillment of all those ceremonies and sacrifices, it was the high priest. As one who knew by heart all of the promises in the Old Testament that pointed to the Savior, the high priest's behavior should have been far different from the behavior we hear about in this reading. He should have stood up in front of all the people and shouted at the top of his voice the words of John the Baptist: **BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD, WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD!** But just the opposite, exactly the opposite, is what we see and hear from the high priest. Totally contrary to the law, he presides over a kangaroo court in the middle of the night. He does not even act as an impartial judge. He has already made up his mind. Even before the trial begins, he declares that this Jesus must die because it would be better for him to die than for the high priest and his cohorts to lose their place and power. And now he goes so far as to arrange for and accept false witnesses who accuse Jesus of heresy and blasphemy. When they fail in their testimony, he charges Jesus to take an oath and identify himself. When Jesus declares that he is indeed the Son of God, the high priest cares nothing for all the proof of it. Instead, and completely contrary to the law, he rips his robes in rage and calls for the death sentence. It's shocking. Where is the glory that the Son of God should have from his own people, yes, from his own priests and official representatives on earth? It is nowhere to be seen. His glory is hidden in the rejection by his own.

But what of the rest of the officials, of the Jewish high court? That court consisted of the leading priests and Pharisees and scribes, all experts in the law and the promises of the Old Testament. So expert were they that they had all memorized word for word large parts of the Old Testament. What of them? If the high priest was corrupt, should we not expect an outcry from them, at least from the majority, at the very least from a few? But there is not a word of it. Not one rises to defend the law and legal process, nor is there a voice heard to defend Jesus. And again, that is not because they did not know what he had said and done. They had sent spies to watch his every move throughout the three years of his earthly ministry. They knew all about the raising of the young man of Nain

and the daughter of the synagogue ruler. They knew all about the cleansing of the lepers, the giving of sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. They knew all about the feeding of the thousands with a few loaves and some small fish. They had heard about the raising of Lazarus just outside of Jerusalem about a week earlier. All the evidence was there that this was indeed the Son of God, the promised Messiah. But they hardened their hearts against the prophecies about the Messiah that they knew by heart from the Bible. And they hardened their hearts as well to the evidence that Jesus was indeed that promised Messiah. They hardened their hearts and filled them instead with hatred that would only be stilled by Jesus' death. (Nicodemus was a member of this counsel. But it may well be that he was not called to this midnight meeting so that there would not be even his lone voice to protest.)

Jesus and his cross stir up hatred and hostility from the most surprising quarters. It was so in the first Lent. It has been so down through the ages. It is so to this day that his glory as God and Savior is hidden under the rejection by those who should know better, who should be the first to listen to his Word and follow it. The Jews continued their hatred of Jesus and his Word long after he was dead, as the book of Acts makes so tragically clear. And the rejection by most of his own people continues to this day. But it is by no means confined to them. Year after year after year, without interruption, one group after another rises up from inside the church to hate Jesus and to persecute his Word. If we had the time this evening, we could go through every century since Pentecost and would find that some of the most bitter persecutors of Jesus and his Word were those who claimed to be his followers. The Nicene Creed, which we all know by heart, was written to defend the truth that Jesus is true God and the only Savior against the Arian heretics who denied it and had taken control of the church in the fourth century. At the time of the Reformation, the persecution of the gospel and even wars against those who faithfully preached and taught it came at the insistence of Roman priests and bishops and popes.

Today in our country, to be sure, the gospel can be preached in all of its truth and purity. But that does not mean that everyone who calls himself a Christian loves the cross of Christ and its message that Jesus alone is the God-man born of the virgin and that he is the only Savior of the world. Quite the contrary, and you know it perfectly well, many churches that call themselves Christian want nothing to do with that message. For some, Jesus is no more than a great teacher of the law who shows us how to live a good life. For some, Jesus is the one who made salvation possible and nothing more; if we follow him, we can finish the work he merely began by our own good works and merits. It may come as shock to you to know that some so-called Lutheran publishing houses and their synods print and peddle books that even deny that Jesus was born of a virgin and rose from the dead. They publish and peddle books and magazines that openly reject most of the teachings of the Bible and, of course, the divine inspiration of the Bible itself.

We see it everywhere. Contrary to the Bible, a homosexual lifestyle is excused and defended, even made equal to marriage by churches calling themselves Christian. Abortion counseling is offered by many such churches. Many churches calling themselves Christian today go so far in their denial of Jesus that they even say that Jews and Muslims and ultimately anyone in any religion all worship the same God; they say such an outrageous thing even though those religions deny that Jesus is God and Savior.

And many will argue that it doesn't matter at all what you believe, because whether there is such a thing as hell or even heaven is itself very doubtful.

Nor are any of these churches content with peddling their poison. Like the high priest and the Jewish high court, they heap scorn and ridicule on the Jesus of the Bible and on those who still proclaim the message of Christ and him crucified for the sins of the world. Such believers, they say, are narrow-minded bigots from the dark ages and the world would be better off without them. And all this in the name of religion. All this even while wearing a cross around the neck and claiming to be Christian. Isn't it shocking? Isn't it tragic?

II.

It truly is shocking and tragic. But it is more than that. It is a warning to us. As Jesus told us in Gethsemane, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (Mt 26:41). There is no guarantee that we will always belong to the right church. Nor is there any guarantee that our church will forever teach God's Word in all of its truth and purity. The high priest was in the right church. The heretics who attacked Jesus at the time of the Nicene Creed started out in the right church. At the time of the Reformation there was only one recognized church. But those churches all fell away. They all turned aside from the Word and ended up being numbered with those who despise the hidden glory of the cross. And yes, the Lutheran churches of Germany and the rest of Europe and many in this country as well have also, for the most part, fallen away. Watch and pray therefore. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and his Word, and see to it that your church does too! We do not hate false teachers or followers of false teachers in other churches. We have no desire to persecute them. But we also have no desire to invite them into our churches and homes, nor to let them stay, should they arise from our own midst. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples" (Jn 8:31 RSV). Jesus said, "Watch out for false prophets" (Mt 7:15). St. Paul said repeatedly—and he was echoing the words of all the prophets and, of course, of Jesus himself—that we should have nothing to do with false teachers and false teachings.

Therefore watch and pray. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and his Word. Out of love for those deceived by false doctrine, we reject the heresy that all teachings are basically the same and that it's only important that you at least believe something. No! That's poison! That's deadly error. We warn against it. We warn against it out of love for those poisoned by it. Some people may think that rattlesnakes will not harm them. That doesn't make a snake any less deadly. Nor is it an act of love to tell such people that as long as they don't believe the snake will hurt them, everything is well and they are safe. The loving thing is to warn against the snake and flee from it, not embrace it or hope it won't bite.

Yes, we need to watch and pray so that we are not sucked into the notion so common among those who call themselves Christians today that doctrine doesn't matter. We need to watch out that we are not seduced by such an attitude and become angry when our own church rebukes error and insists on teaching all of the truths of the Scriptures, no matter how unpopular they may be, no matter how many people may not like it. For the sad truth is that sometimes the biggest problem that a congregation or church body has is with its own members who want to soft-pedal and compromise the truth of God's Word. In their

weakness, such members have turned aside from the hidden glory in favor of the glory they want to see; they want the glory of being popular or the glory of the easy path that runs away from the cross to whatever is convenient. They imagine that what we believe, teach, and confess is up to us, that it is some kind of smorgasbord or buffet menu from which we can pick and choose whatever suits our fancy at the moment.

Watch Jesus before the high priest and the Jewish council, and pray that in his Word you find and keep the whole of God's truth. Watch Jesus before the high priest and the Jewish council, and pray that you may be filled with such love for him that you willingly take up the cross and follow him. For you can be sure that just as Jesus and his faithful church have been ridiculed and persecuted when they followed the truth and carried the cross, so too will you taste that hostility that comes from faithfulness. Don't be scared off by it. Don't be surprised by it. For that is what Jesus has promised.

But he has also promised that he will not forsake you or abandon you when you cling to him and to his Word. There is glory in that rejection, since it is a rejection that we share with him and that he shares with us. He has promised, and he will never lie to you, that even in persecution you will learn more and more of his love and grace. He has assured you, and the witness of the church says that it is so. As you bear the cross after him, your knowledge of his love and grace will only deepen and increase—grace heaped upon grace, as St. Paul says. These may indeed be hard lessons to learn. People don't want to hear these lessons. But Jesus goes the way of the cross out of love for us to teach them. He goes out of love for us on the way of the cross to bring us salvation by his sacrifice for us and by the word of his sacrifice for us. Oh, to see Jesus and to see him only. Oh, to follow him up to the cross, gladly bearing it after him in love and faithfulness to him who loved us and gave himself for us. May God grant this to each of us for Jesus' sake!
Amen.