

John 11:45-57

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It is better for you that one man die for the people

I wonder if you've ever had the experience,
where you planned to do something nice for someone,
but then because of their ingratitude,
you decided not to do it after all.

My class missed out on a school camp
because our behaviour was considered so poor,
that the teacher decided not to take us.

Not me, you understand.

I was an angel.

But there were some naughty boys in my class.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead,
he might have been excused for hoping
that the leaders of the Jews might appreciate the miracle.

I know he didn't get along too well with them,
they got upset when he healed people on the Sabbath
and they came in for some criticism from him.

But you'd think they might appreciate someone coming back to life.
Well "No," as a matter of fact.

"Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary,
and had seen what Jesus did,
believed in him.

But some of them went to the Pharisees
and told them what Jesus had done."

The raising of Lazarus was not done in a corner.

It was a very public miracle.

There were lots of people come down from Jerusalem
to comfort Mary and Martha.

Mary had got up to go and see Jesus.

The mourners had got up to go with her,
thinking that she was going to the tomb.

And then Jesus had raised Lazarus.
Lots of people saw it happen.
Lots of people knew he had been dead for four days.
And Bethany was only 3km from Jerusalem.
Not even as far away as Tyabb.
It would have been all over the capital city,
all over Jerusalem in no time flat.
And for lots of people who saw it,
they believed in Jesus.
That's what we are told.
We're not told to what extent their faith stretched.
Did they believe that he'd done the miracle?
Or did they believe and become followers for the long haul?
I hope the second option is true.
But it's hard to be sure.
However they are contrasted with another group.
The group who went and reported it to the Pharisees.
There may not have been any malicious intent
in those who reported the raising of Lazarus to the Pharisees.
Perhaps they were simply hoping
that the Pharisees would be delighted to share the good news.
Perhaps they were trying to curry favour with the religious leaders,
by letting them know of what was happening.
Who knows?
What we do know is how the Pharisees responded.
And it was not with joy and delight.
They called a meeting of the Sanhedrin,
and it was not a celebratory meeting.

The Sanhedrin was the body
who made decisions about governance for the Jewish people.
It was comprised of 70 people.
Mostly they were from two groups:
The Saducees who were the ruling aristocracy,
and the Pharisees who were the religious heavies.
The Pharisees on the Sanhedrin

were weighted towards members of the chief priest's extended family.
The closest equivalent to the Sanhedrin in Australia today
is the federal parliament.

But bear in mind

that the Jews could only make some decisions for themselves.

The Romans were the real rulers

and they just passed on some decision making power to the locals.

It was a way of keeping the locals relatively happy.

So the Pharisees are told of Lazarus being raised.

And they call together an emergency meeting of the government.

Does that sound a little over the top to you?

What is the fear that is driving them?

Well listen to what they say,

"What are we accomplishing ?

Here is this man performing many signs.

If we let him go on like this,

everyone will believe in him,

and then the Romans will come

and take away our temple and our nation."

A couple of asides about this.

First of all, sometimes you meet sceptical people

who don't believe that Jesus did miracles.

No doubt you've heard the line,

"Jesus was a great teacher who's teaching we should follow,

but these accounts of miracles were added by the early church

because they loved him so much."

Well notice here

that Jesus' enemies have no trouble accepting the truth of the miracles.

"Here is this man performing many signs."

The Sanhedrin knows exactly what has happened.

And John wrote this down

within the life times of people who could have disagreed with it

if it didn't fit their memory of the events.

There's no record of any early documents

calling into question the historical accuracy of the gospels.

So that's just to say even the Pharisees and Sadducees agreed that Jesus performed miraculous signs.

A second question that is sometimes asked is,

"How could John possibly know what was being said at the meeting of the Sanhedrin?"

Of course he was with Jesus as one of the twelve disciples, so fair enough he could record what Jesus said, but how would he know what the Sanhedrin said in a closed door meeting?

But this conveniently forgets an important facet of John's gospel.

Who is it that came to see Jesus alone at night and Jesus told him he must be born again?

It was Nicodemus.

Who was it that helped Joseph of Arimethea take Jesus body down from the cross and bury him?

It was Nicodemus.

Nicodemus had become a disciple of Jesus.

And we are told in chapter 3

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin.

So Nicodemus is a good bet for John's source of information from inside the Sanhedrin.

Well that's just a couple of asides in case you happen to be talking with more sceptical people.

But back to the question.

What is the fear that is driving the Pharisees to have an emergency meeting about Jesus raising Lazarus?

"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away our temple and our nation."

The Romans allowed the Jews a measure of autonomy.

They allowed the Jews to maintain the temple worship.

But the Romans were very suspicious of would be Messiahs.

And it's not hard to understand why.

In the couple of centuries before Jesus, there were a number of chaps

who thought they were the Messiah,
and led rebellions against the Romans.
Because that's what Messiah's did.
They tried to throw off Roman rule
and establish God's kingdom
as it had been in the time of King David.
So the Sanhedrin has a real fear.
Word of Jesus' miracles will get the crowds over excited.
They will declare Jesus to be their king.
Remember the crowds had already wanted to make Jesus king
back in chapter 6.
It's no idle fear.
The Romans will take exception to that.
They tolerate no other kings.
And bang.
No more Sanhedrin.
No more temple.

So what can we say?
The Pharisees were very politically astute.
They read the politics of the situation exactly right.
And so they could in their own minds justify what they wanted to do.
Clearly God wants his chosen people to worship him in the temple.
God can't possibly want the Romans to destroy his temple.
Clearly God wants his people to be able to organise their life as a nation
so that it honours him.
He wants the chief priest keeping the nation honouring God's Law.
This fellow Jesus is putting all of that in danger.
So the way we honour God in this tricky situation is to get rid of Jesus.

How did they get it so wrong?
Their problem was
that they assessed the situation politically rather than spiritually.
Politically, all would be messiahs are the same.
They are people who gather a crowd of rebels.
They become a stench in the Romans' nostrils.

And they result in a crack down on God's people.
But spiritually all messiahs are not the same.
Some messiahs are deluded people,
puffed up with self importance,
who wrongly think that God is using them.
But one messiah and one only,
is truly sent by God to save his people.
If you assess the situation spiritually,
you have to work out which messiah is which.
How do you do that?
Well look at the prophecies and see whether they fit.
Look at the signs the messiah himself performs
and see if he has power from on high.
Look at the person of the messiah.
Does he look like a crazed revolutionary drunk on power?
Or is he a gentle and meek teacher
who doesn't seek to incite violence but forgiveness and love?
If you assess the situation spiritually
at every level Jesus checks out.
So the right response from the Sanhedrin would be to say,
"You know what,
the crowds may well try to make Jesus king.
That may well make the Romans very upset.
But if God has sent Jesus,
then we will trust God to sort out the Romans.
We have faith
that the power of God is stronger than the power of Rome."

It's worth pausing for a minute to think about us.
Do we ever think about things politically,
when we should be thinking about things spiritually?
There may be some issue,
where the world is going in one direction,
and God's Word takes us in the opposite direction.
The temptation would be to assess the situation politically.
"We will get a much better hearing if we don't offend people."

But the right response is to assess the situation spiritually.
"We need to be faithful to God.
If we are faithful to God,
we can trust him to sort out the consequences."
If we justify moral compromise
on the basis that the world now thinks this is right,
and what we need to do is talk to them about Jesus,
then we actually are not trusting God to prosper his gospel.
But God is in charge!

This is beautifully illustrated for us in our reading.
One of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up,
"You know nothing at all!
You do not realise
that it is better for you that one man die for the people
than that the whole nation perish."
Well it's a delicious irony.
Caiaphas means it is better for one man to be wrongfully killed
and so keep the crowds quiet
and so the Romans allow the Jewish nation to continue.
It's a terrible thought.
To knowingly execute someone without cause
to achieve your political aims.
But when Caiaphas said that, God meant something different.
You see God was in charge of Caiaphas' words.
And God made it come out so you could take it another way.
"It is better for you,
that one man die for the people
than that the whole nation perish."
When was the nation of Israel going without Jesus?
They were doomed to destruction.
Their spiritual leaders were hypocrites.
When the leaders go to pot,
they take the rest of the people with them over time.
And in any case,
while Israel had a sacrificial system to deal with their sin,

the sacrificial system was only effective because of what it pointed to.
It pointed to the time when God would send a perfect sacrifice.
Without the death of Jesus,
the whole nation perishes.
That's not just Israel.
Australia is in the same boat.
Without the death of Jesus, we are all perishing.
If you could catch every drug smuggler bringing in ice
and stop it at the border.
If you could make everyone drive responsibly on the roads.
If you could get rid of all the mosquitoes in Hastings.
And find a cure for cancer.
Without the death of Jesus, we are all perishing.

This is how John puts it.
"He 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 for the scattered children of God,
to bring them together and make them one."
So Caiaphas was speaking as God's mouthpiece.
He was prophesying.
Now this wasn't the same experience
that an Isaiah or a Jeremiah had.
When they prophesied,
they knew that God was speaking through them,
and they said,
"Thus says the Lord."
But Caiaphas had no idea.
He was just spouting his murderous little plan
to cement his political power.
God made him a prophet.
And John tells us he did that because Caiaphas was high priest.
The Jewish high priest was a role instituted by God.
Aaron was the first high priest in the time of Moses.

And so as a way of respecting the order he had put in place,
God used Caiaphas to speak his words.

John tells us the Caiaphas was prophesying
that Jesus would die not only for the Jewish nation
but also for the scattered children of God,
to bring them together and make them one.

Readers of John's gospel have already heard this from the lips of Jesus.
In chapter 10 Jesus says,
"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen.
I must bring them also.
They too will listen to my voice,
and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

Jesus died also for the scattered children of God.
And friends that is such good news for us.
Most of us here today are not from the Jewish nation.
Peter and Karena Selig are part of the Jewish nation.
But I'm not.
And chances are you are not either.
But we are part of the scattered children of God.
And Jesus died
that all those scattered children would be brought together
and made one.

Well we have baptised Kaitlyn today.
She has become a member of the church.
Has she become a member of Holy Trinity Hastings?
No. Then what?
She has become a member of God's universal church.
She is part of the one church of Jesus Christ.
The church that unites people from every nation on earth.
The church that unites people across time.
The church that unites people even across denominations.
Kaitlyn is united with the Christian women of Pakistan

who live oppressed in their land.

Kaitlyn is united with Martin Luther who lived 500 years ago.

Kaitlyn told me this week

that she's a Baptist worshipping in an Anglican Church.

Does that matter?

It's excellent.

It improves the quality, doesn't it Val?

Jesus doesn't care.

Jesus died to bring the scattered children together and make them one.

Having Baptists worshipping in an Anglican Church

is a great demonstration of Jesus making us one.

I guess to be fair,

we should send along an Anglican or two

and get them to worship in a Baptist church.

Well we have.

David Rietveld the pastor at New Peninsula Baptist is an Anglican.

Jesus is making us one.

When we baptise Kaitlyn

she became a sister to very Christian person in the world.

I don't know if she's ever wished for a sister.

She's got lots now.

Well let's leave Kaitlyn alone.

And go back to Caiaphas as we finish.

What is Caiaphas the unintentional prophet teaching us?

He's teaching us that God is totally in control.

Jesus at the point when the boss men were having their meeting,
thinking that they were calling the shots,

God arranged it so their own leader would spill the beans.

One man died for all the people.

For the Jewish nation and the scattered children of God.

For all of us.

And if he didn't we would all perish.

Praise be to our Saviour!