

## A WEEK OF HOLY TERROR: TRIAL & DENIAL

SHERARD EDINGTON

Mark 14:53-72

Blasphemy. The Old Testament book of Leviticus defines blasphemy with these words: *Anyone who curses God shall bear the sin. One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death.* In the Old Testament, blasphemy means to insult the honor of God, either by attacking God directly or mocking God indirectly. In the New Testament, rejecting Jesus is to reject God, and therefore that also is blasphemy. Blasphemy should be considered the opposite of praise. It is a grievous sin and something we should try to avoid.

We find ourselves now in the third week of the season of Lent, and through this season, I am presenting a sermon series I've entitled "A Week of Holy Terror." Through this sermon series, we will be looking at the significant events of the week, starting with Palm Sunday and ending with Easter Sunday. I've entitled this "A Week of Holy Terror" because of all that happens to Jesus in this week. He's rejected by his friends and by the people; he's arrested, tried, beaten, tortured, sentenced to death, and then executed. It is truly a week of holy terror.

Today, we're looking at two stories: the story of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin and the story of Peter's denial of Jesus. These take place late in the evening on Holy Thursday of Holy Week. Holy Thursday is the day of the Jewish Passover, so Jesus and his disciples have celebrated the Passover meal together—the meal we call the Last Supper. Then, following that meal, he took his disciples and led them out of the city, down the Kidron Valley, up the slopes of the Mount of Olives to a place called Gethsemane, which was an olive orchard. And there, he sought to pray. But he didn't pray for very long because soon Judas comes over the hill leading a mob. And they take Jesus and arrest him.

And that is where we find our reading today. We are told at the beginning that they took Jesus to the high priest, a man named Caiaphas, back in Jerusalem. And there also were the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes. This group is known as the Sanhedrin. It's like the city council for Jerusalem. But since Israel is a theocracy the Sanhedrin also serves as the spiritual rulers of the land and the people. They serve as judges as well, overseeing religious and civil trials.

And Peter, we are told, *follows Jesus at a distance*, and he goes right into the courtyard of where this group is meeting, and he sits down and warms himself by a fire. So, we have two stories which are intertwined here to let us know that the trial and the story of Peter are happening concurrently.

Now, back to the trial. We are told that the chief priests and the council—the Sanhedrin—were actively looking for testimony to apply against Jesus so that they might put him to death. So, we know right away that this isn't a fair trial. They're not looking for the facts; they're not looking for the truth; they're looking for what they can pin on Jesus because they want him out of the way. They want him dead. And so, they brought in witnesses to speak against him. This was a capital case because they were seeking his execution, and according to Jewish law, in a capital case, you have to have at least two witnesses whose testimony matches exactly the other one—perfect testimony. And they can't do that. They can't arrange that. *For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.* They couldn't get their story straight. Some stood up and gave false testimony against Jesus, saying, *We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands.* So, it looks like they're trying to get him on a charge of treason here, saying that he's going to lead a group to destroy the Great Temple in Jerusalem, a building that people love, the center of religious and civic life. It is recorded in the gospels that Jesus did talk about the temple. He said, *When this temple is torn down, I will build it back in three days.* He never said that he was going to do it. And we as Christians know that it's really more of a metaphor because he is talking about his body that will be destroyed, that will rise again in three days.

Finally, the high priest, Caiaphas, in what appears to be a moment of frustration, steps down and goes to Jesus saying, *Aren't you going to say anything? Can't you address the testimony that's being brought against you?* hoping he would say something that would incriminate himself. But Jesus stays quiet, just as prophesied by Isaiah many centuries before. Isaiah talked about the sheep being led to slaughter, who remained silent. Jesus is that sheep; he says nothing because he is God. He does not need to defend himself. He does not need to explain his case.

And so, up to this point, it appears that it's been a trial of treason. But now, the high priest has changed to a case of blasphemy. And he asks Jesus, *Are you the Messiah, the son of the blessed one?* Now this has become a completely different trial. And Jesus answers, *I am.* He answers in the affirmative, and so, hearing this, the high priest tears his garment, which was a symbolic sign of guilt, and asks, *Why do we need witnesses? We don't need any more witnesses. This man has spoken. You have heard his blasphemy. And what is your decision?* The council condemned Jesus as deserving death. They had what they needed.

And then, it appears they took him out from the council, and upon hearing this verdict, people began to spit on the prisoner. They blindfolded him and began to strike him, and they yelled, "*Prophecy!*" because if he was who he said he was, if he was indeed the Messiah, the son of God, then even blindfolded he should know who's hitting him. It was a horrible game they were playing. And then the guards took him away, and they beat him.

That's the end of the story of this first trial. They will then take him to the Roman governor Pilate and ask Pilate to give the order of execution.

Now we return to Peter. Remember, he's out in the courtyard at this time, warming himself by the fire, and a young female servant sees him and recognizes him, and she points to him and says, *You were with Jesus, that man from Nazareth.* And Peter denies it. He says, *I do not know or understand what you're talking about.* And he gets up and he goes to another place. And then the servant girl, she began to tell the bystanders, *This man, he's with them. He's one of them.* And again, Peter said, "No. Nope, you got the wrong guy. I'm just here warming my hands." And then the bystanders, they're starting to pick up on it. They recognize him, and they go, "Yeah. You're a Galilean, aren't you? You talk like one of them. You must be with him." And Peter says, *I do not know the man you are talking about.* Peter doesn't just say those words, he swears an oath with those words. *I do not know this man that you are talking about.* And then Peter heard the cock crow for the second time, and he remembered the words that Jesus had said to him: *Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.* And he broke down, weeping.

We have two stories here: the story of the trial and the story of denial. But really, it's the same story told twice. They are mirror images of one another: the trial of Jesus and the trial of Peter. In the trial of Jesus, we have witnesses brought before him, witnesses who give false testimony, witnesses who lie. In the trial of Peter, as I'm calling it, there are witnesses too. But they tell the truth, don't they? *You're with him. You're a Galilean. You've been spending time with him.* They tell the truth. It is Peter who lies. At Jesus' trial before the council, the religious authorities are unable to recognize the presence of the Holy that is in front of them. They cannot see this man as the Messiah. They deny knowing the Messiah. Peter denies knowing the Messiah as well. They ask, "You're with him?" "I'm not with him."

When we think of the apostle Peter, often our first thought turns to that critical time when he publicly denied Jesus. And sadly, it is often our weakest moments that people remember. But Peter, we know, was more than that. Peter was much more than that. Peter was one of the first called to be an apostle to follow Jesus. He's one of the three that witnessed Jesus' magnificent Transfiguration up on the mountain. He was one of the three in Galilee that Jesus separated from the rest and asked to come and be close to him as he prayed. According to Jesus, Peter would be the rock on which Jesus' church would be built. At Pentecost, Peter was the first to preach, and he baptized 3,000 people. Peter would become the leader of the church. And then there's the tradition that tells us that Peter ultimately met his end as a martyr, choosing death rather than denying Jesus as his Lord. And there's even a legend that goes with this, that Peter insisted on being crucified upside down because he did not feel worthy of dying in the same manner that Jesus had.

So, when you think about it, it's really odd that we even know about Peter's denial. You would think that the Gospel writers would want to keep this story under wraps. It doesn't reflect well on the leader of their church. But I believe that we know this story about Peter because Peter wanted us to know. It was a moment of weakness and shame, but also a moment of growth and possibility, and in a very short time, Peter would go from this moment of denial to Pentecost and then become head of the church. And so, Peter's story is a story for all of us. None of us are perfect. And Peter is a reflection of who we are, for in our darkest moments, we too deny Jesus. But at other times, we can be models of faith, Jesus' greatest proponents.

When Jesus was arrested, we were told the disciples scattered into the darkness. However, Peter did choose to follow the mob back into Jerusalem. But as we read, he followed at a distance. And can you blame him? He certainly didn't want to get arrested too. But following at a distance is also a reflection of Peter's commitment to Jesus. At Gethsemane Jesus begged Peter to stay awake and pray. But Peter kept falling asleep. And when Jesus was arrested, Peter didn't go with him. He held back. And then in the courtyard, he pretends not to know who Jesus was. He swore an oath on that. And all this is surprising, since just a few hours earlier, Peter had pledged his life to Jesus. And yet, when the going got rough, Peter caved.

No doubt, Peter preached this story about himself to those who were joining this new movement that we call the church. But he tells the story from the other side of the cross, from the other side of Easter. He shared this story as a source of encouragement to all those who sought to follow Jesus, who knew that they might follow him at a distance, because following Jesus up close is tough.

I started off a moment ago talking about blasphemy. And this was the charge leveled by the authorities against Jesus. And yet, it was not blasphemy, was it? Because Jesus was the Messiah; his words were true. However, in the Peter story, Peter is the one who is guilty of blasphemy because he denies knowing the Messiah. And in that third denial, he swears, *I do not know this man you are talking about*. Peter can't even bring himself to say Jesus' name here. That is blasphemy. That is lying against God. So how is it then that Peter is able to move beyond this rock-bottom point of denial, this blasphemy, and then rise and become leader of the church? The answer is easy. It is Easter. Peter experienced God's saving power in Jesus' resurrection. If God can overcome something as absolute as death, then certainly Peter's sins can be forgiven. Peter does not allow these sins to define him. He claims his sin, and he uses it to encourage others to follow Christ, even us. And so, in this time of Lent, as we draw closer to Easter, let us do so with the understanding that we can always follow Jesus more closely, we can always be more obedient to our Lord. We don't have to keep our distance. We don't have to play it safe. For in the cross is forgiveness, even for sinners such as us. Amen.