

“Cowardly or Courageous”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
Good Friday – 10 April 2009
John 18 - 19

The high priest Caiaphas advised “that it was better to have one person die for the people.” At one level, this makes perfect sense, bringing to mind the words Spock uttered as he died in the second Star Trek film, “Wrath of Khan”: “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one.”

Caiaphas was concerned, and not without cause, that Jesus could incite an insurrection. Everyone knew what that brought: chaos, terror, more Roman soldiers on the streets, and eventually crosses with rotting corpses posted as milestones on every major road. The message unmistakable: these are the consequences of rising up against us.

Was Caiaphas a coward or a courageous man? Were his fears legitimate, and if so, did his fears motivate him to do the right thing? On the one hand, we can understand his desire to protect the common good by engineering the death of a popular yet potentially dangerous teacher and wonder worker, a task which had considerable risk attached to it. On the other hand, we wonder if perhaps his fears were misplaced, led astray by lack of imagination that inhibited him from seeing Jesus for who he was, not merely for the threat he represented. After all, even Pilate said to the crowds, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.” And this was from a man for whom professional paranoia was not only a career builder, but a device for personal survival.

What makes me lean toward Caiaphas as coward is the fact that he passed the buck to Pilate. In the Gospel of John, it’s interesting that no specific charges are brought against Jesus.

Later in the story, the implied charge is treason, that Jesus had declared himself King. But remember how Pilate asked Jesus, “What have you done?” In the other three gospels, the chief offense was blasphemy, a religious crime. Indeed, in chapter 10:33 of John, they explicitly charged Jesus with exactly that, and people had taken up stones to throw at him. But near the end, it’s all rather vague, perhaps on purpose. Remember the exchange between Pilate and the people that brought Jesus to him.

Pilate: “What accusation do you bring against this man?”

Jesus’ Captors replied evasively: “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.”

Pilate: “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.”

Jesus’ Captors: “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.”

That last statement was a lie. Jesus’ captors were authorized to execute for blasphemy, along with a number of other religious offenses, like adultery. Their method of execution was stoning. Why they tried to get Jesus crucified, when they could have bludgeoned him to death instead, remains a mystery. Maybe stoning just wasn’t nasty enough, and they wanted a harsher punishment, but only the Romans could crucify, hence the need to get Pilate involved. Or maybe the religious leadership was afraid to assemble a crowd to stone Jesus.

Only a few days before, huge throngs had lined the streets shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!” Between that time and this, there’s no hint that anything’s happened to curb the people’s enthusiasm about Jesus. An attempt to stone him could have easily backfired, quite literally, with the rocks flying in the opposite direction from whence the instigators intended. So they took Jesus to Pilate, hoping that he would take care of things with his usual administrative efficiency.

Pilate gave Jesus a cursory interrogation and had him flogged. Perhaps he thought that might be enough to satisfy Jesus' accusers and chastise Jesus to be less provocative in the future. But that didn't work. A crowd had assembled demanding Jesus' death. Up until this point, Pilate appears perplexed, perhaps annoyed, but when Pilate heard the crowd, "he was more afraid than ever."

Pilate then asked Jesus more questions. The answers Jesus offered were unsatisfactory, probably incomprehensible to Pilate, but still, it says that, "Pilate tried to release him." This is peculiar. The path of least resistance would have been to crucify Jesus, but Pilate seems to hesitate, despite having crucified hundreds, possibly thousands, of people. Maybe he too remembered the enthusiasm of those welcoming crowds from earlier in the week, but whatever made Pilate hesitate was eventually conquered by his fear, as the crowd taunted him: "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor."

Could that be true, or more to the point, might the Emperor see it that way? Pilate's position was powerful, yet precarious. Emperors preferred peace – at least on their terms – because peace helped provide safe roads, unimpeded commerce, and the orderly collection of taxes. Insurrections messed all that up. People like Pilate had to keep the peace, or they were out of a job, or worse.

Pilate had an angry mob and a charismatic leader. He could satisfy the first by getting rid of the second. In a way, we could look upon Pilate as simply doing his job as best he could, but his courage faded and he cowered behind an annual tradition where he would let the crowd decide who would live and who would die.

Jesus' captors and killers were not the only people skating on the knife's edge of courage and cowardice, only to fall off on wrong side. There were the disciples, all of whom apparently

disappeared after the arrest of Jesus, not to be seen again until after the resurrection. All of them, that is, except Peter and some anonymous disciple who followed Jesus toward the high priest's house. That took a lot of courage. Guilt by association could elicit harsh retribution, especially since Peter had sliced off the ear of the high priest's slave. Yet Peter's courage faded as the sun rose, and he denied Jesus as the cocks crowed at dawn. We don't know for sure what happened to the other disciple. He simply vanishes from the story.

Then there were those who showed up way too late. Joseph of Arimathea, described by John as "a secret [disciple] because of his fear." Likewise with Nicodemus, who met with Jesus in the dark of night for fear, but who took the modest risk of helping Joseph arrange a proper burial. These men of considerable influence appear to have done nothing to intervene in Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion, and perhaps they couldn't have. Everything happened so quickly, but the indictment remains that there is no record they even tried. Cowards.

It's a bleak picture, these powerful, cowardly people, motivated by fear yet with plenty of gumption to take a man's life, but this is how we are, sinners all, and there were some who showed courage.

Think of the women gathered at Golgotha, the three Mary's: mom, Magdalene, and the wife of Clopas. Only a single disciple stood there, again anonymous, perhaps the same one who accompanied Peter, perhaps not. Guilt by association evidently didn't frighten these women enough to keep them away. They could do nothing but be there, their weeping a witness to love hanging on a cross.

Then, of course, there's Jesus himself, who suffered such indignities and pain: the presumptuous questioning by the religious leaders and Pilate; the excoriation of the crowds, some of whom might have been cheering him only days before; the flogging which stripped flesh

from bone; the mocking guards; his naked exposure on the cross; the nails; the labored breathing. Through it all, he chastised Peter for drawing his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. He denied nothing that was true, never begged for his life, hardly pled his case. He never threatened anyone or even attempted to shame them.

We can attribute this to the fact that Jesus knew he was going to die, knew that he needed to die, in just this way, so why offer resistance? Accept the inevitable with resignation. Achieve the mission. Endure the pain. But I believe it was more than that.

Jesus, as we can easily see throughout the gospels, is not someone to duck a fight. He debated cleverly, viciously embarrassing those who sought to trip him up and undermine his work. He could be rough with the disciples when they were being a little thick in the head, which was more often than not. And yet in his final days, Jesus displayed a remarkable serenity. He was human and knew fear, but his courage kept him from succumbing to it, and that made all the difference for the whole world.

There's a fine line between courage and cowardice, and that line get blurred constantly by people who try to deceive us into thinking that violence is always courageous, and that anything less is always cowardice. But the men who played the primary roles in Jesus' death – Caiaphas, Pilate, the crowd, the guards, even Peter – all exercised violence, and each arguably acted as a coward. There were a few other cowards, like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who complacently did nothing until the very end, when there was nothing much left to do. But the courageous in the story were not violent, not even verbally, and what strikes me most about those courageous few is that more than half were women, and one of the two courageous men died in great public humiliation and disgrace.

Those courageous few were tender, loving, forgiving, loyal, and true. And they were able to resist the temptation of striking back, empowered to endure their fears and abide in peace, because their courage came from the heart. In fact, courage and heart share the same root word. The word courage means “to have heart.” And it wasn’t that the cowardly were heartless – far from it. But there dwelled in the hearts of the courageous a presence that allowed them to rise above, while remaining humble; to be human in the midst of great inhumanity, cruelty, injustice, and apathy. That presence was Jesus, who nestled in the hearts of those who invited and welcomed and nurtured him in the deepest part of themselves.

The question for us, on this Good Friday, is whether we will choose to be cowardly or courageous, or for that matter, whether we’ll be able to tell the difference, what with all the lies constantly swirling around us? Certainly, we do not face the extraordinary circumstances that challenged those on that first Good Friday. However, that only gives us all the more reason to take sparse council of our fear in troubling times, to abhor and reject violence unless truly exceptional circumstances leave no other choice, to act bravely for justice and mercy and truth, even when the risks are great, the possible penalties high, and the safety of remaining complacent very tempting. Otherwise, we too will wind up cowards, people with half-empty hearts, and that’s not much of a life, when we consider where courage – the type of courage shown on a cross – will ultimately lead us. Amen.