

# Sermon: Jewish leaders held responsible

Acts 5:27-32

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We have focused in the previous weeks on the Great Facts of the Gospel. Jesus died and rose again. What implication does this have for us?

The closest followers of Jesus, his disciples, could not stop talking about Jesus, even though they lived in the enemy territory of Jerusalem. The rulers of Israel in Jerusalem had Jesus killed, and in the same city of Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus could not stop talking about their Lord.

So time and again, they were arrested by these same men who had Jesus crucified, by the Sanhedrin, or the Jewish High Council.

## What was this Jewish Council?

It was the government of Israel, that ruled over the country within the limits set by the Roman occupiers. It would be easy to use the term collaboration, but that is cheap criticism. I am sure they tried to maneuver as much as they could to make the occupation as bearable as possible for Israel.

But they were also very fond of their own power and position.

This High Council consisted of the High Priest of Israel and 70 leaders of the country. Their high priest was Caiaphas; yes the same who had Jesus delivered to the Romans to be crucified, with the agreement of the Council.

At the time of the events described in Acts 5, when the apostles of Jesus were arrested, of the 70 members of the High Court, 67 were part of the theological school of the Sadducees. They wanted to suppress the message of the apostles for two reasons:

First, they did not believe in any resurrection at all. That was their theology, and anything undermining that viewpoint could simply not be true. Greek philosophy had great impact on these people: The spirit of man is good, and the body is useless, so how can you then believe that God will resurrect our bodies. We need to get rid of our bodies, was their idea.

And secondly, they were scared of the concept of another king, as they collaborated with the Roman occupiers and were too happy with their positions. They did not want to rock the political boat. Another king, Jesus, would upset the stability of the situation.

So at the request of the High Council, the temple guards arrested the apostles when they were talking about Jesus in the temple. 'We strictly charged you not to teach in his name', they reminded the followers of Jesus.

Yes, but so what? The leaders of Israel knew they were fighting a lost battle. All of Jerusalem was buzzing with the name of Jesus. So threats we quite useless, what could the ruling council do? They could not teach against Jesus, because the people in Jerusalem knew what had happened. The Jewish rulers knew they could not deny the truth. They could only try to suppress it.

They even used to mention the name of Jesus. Just like much of later Judaism would do, and certainly the orthodox parts. 'You intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' Well, his name is Jesus. They just called him 'this man'.

And the accusation that the apostles wanted to bring the blood of Jesus upon them was interesting. The same High Council had incited the crowds of Jerusalem to shout at Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands in water to ritually declare himself clean of the death of Jesus: 'Worry not, Pilate, his blood be on us and on our children'. Meaning: we take full responsibility for his crucifixion.

So the evidence was really strongly against these Jewish leaders. They wanted Jesus dead, they got him dead. Well, just for a short while.

I have often read pious commentaries saying that the impact of the blood of Jesus was indeed on the Jewish leaders, but in a positive sense. While preparing for today's exegesis I came across a similar statement: "The apostles had no desire to hurt the Jewish Council - they wanted the blood of Christ to be applied to the hearts of the leaders of Israel."

I think this is denying certain realities. When Jesus was fuming against some of Israel's leaders in the week before his death, he said:

I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. (Mat 23:34-36)

Jesus predicted that his followers would be persecuted, so that all the blood of previous righteous people shed by Israel's leaders, would come upon the generation that heard Jesus speak. I think that divine vengeance did indeed come, specifically in the year 70 when Jerusalem and the Temple were razed to the ground.

The injustice done to Jesus and his followers, the injustice done to anyone, will not go unpunished. Woe those who persecute the Church of Jesus Christ. God does not forget.

The fact that God does not forget and that he did punish Israel collectively in the year 70, is in no way ever a reason for anti-Semitism. That is gruesome, sinful, and not Christian at all.

It is historically untrue to say that Israel's leaders were not responsible for Jesus' death, but it is a much worse aberration for us to hold all Jews even today responsible for this.

### **What was the witness about Jesus of the Early Church?**

Peter did hold the Jewish High Council responsible for the murder of Jesus. He tells them straight in their face:

The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. (Acts 5:30)

'You killed him', they say to the Jewish council. Why do they say that they killed Jesus by hanging him on a pole? That is the actual word used by the apostles. They use exactly the same word that is also used in Deuteronomy 21:23:

You must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

This form of capital punishment originated in Persia; it was common throughout the East and was later adopted by the Romans. Israel considered it a desecration of the land if someone would hang on a pole after death. It is evil in the eyes of God to do such thing.

The apostles lay this blame at the feet of the Jewish High Council. They had participated in this abomination. It was *haraam* in Israel. A great taboo. They so hated Jesus that they utterly disgraced him by having him crucified by the Romans.

But the apostles say, God raised him. You dishonored him, God honored him. God raised him from the dead and placed him at his own right hand. This means, God gave him the glory that belongs to God himself. On your right hand you put the person who you deem more important than yourself. My mother in the good old-fashioned days taught me to always let the girls walk on my right hand.

The message of the early church is clear: Jesus died on a cross, and that after three days, God made him alive again. And then he ascended to the throne of God.

God made Jesus a leader and a savior, Peter tells the Jewish Council. The word savior we

know as the term is used throughout the Bible. But leader?

The Greek word used here is *archegos*. That is actually a pioneer. Someone who goes in front of the pack, who leads the way for those who follow. The apostles speak here of Jesus as our leader in death, resurrection and being elevated to the throne of God. This is the message of the Gospel from day one of the church. What he did he did for us.

Jesus is the pioneer of our salvation, he is leading us to the Father. Jesus as pioneer underlines that the Christian life is one of movement. It has direction. We are pilgrims on the way to God.

The Christian life is not a parking lot where you arrive and stop your car. It is more like the runway for the airplane – faster and faster until our time comes to take off and be with our heavenly Father.

And what is so impressive in this early church – yes they blame the leaders of Israel for having killed Jesus, but they did not write them off. Even though the early church was persecuted by the Jewish leaders. God still offers repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. This is the gracious donation of God even to the criminals who killed Jesus. God offers a way back to him. Repent and your sins will be forgiven.

### **The witnesses**

The apostles had no desire to hurt the Jewish leaders – they invited them to turn to Jesus Christ and to become his followers as well. Peter never wasted an opportunity to preach the gospel, and this is the altar call for those who killed Jesus. 'God offers you repentance and forgiveness'.

It is remarkable to note that the Jewish council is no longer up against unlearned fishermen from Galilee. They were up against men filled with the Spirit, leaders of the new people of God. And by rejecting those spirit-filled leaders of the new people of God, The leaders of Israel set themselves in collision course with God himself.

With such a message, of course the apostles obeyed God more than they obeyed the Jewish council. The authority of this council was great but God was so much greater, and He had commissioned the apostles to proclaim this message of Jesus.

So they humbly and boldly remind their judges that obedience to God comes first. They knew that many members of the Council were religious men, good Jews who could understand this very well.

God had sent his son, and his spirit, and now his church as well. That is why during this court case before the Jewish Council, the tables were turned. Not the apostles stood as the accused,

but they accused the Jewish leaders. “There is a highest court in heaven we are all answerable to”, is what they told the Council. And this is important for us as well.

As citizens we are all subject to the authority of our governments. But if they try to impose laws on us that go against the clear will of God, we cannot obey. Christians are loyal citizens, even in a country ruled by a Muslim Brotherhood. We obey their laws – but not if they go against God's law and our own conscience.

As Christians we must pray to God that he gives us resilience: we need it because there is always the danger of growing indifferent and of abandoning the faith to some extent. Especially when our circumstance invite us to not take the will of God too seriously. And those circumstances can be a lifestyle that is too luxurious, or a life in the midst of too many problems. It is very convenient to forget about God and his will sometimes.

Our conscience is designed to enable us to see moral truth, but it needs light from outside, it needs the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the Church's guidance, to know and do what is good and to stay away from evil.

Without this external input into our conscience, we simply tires ourselves out in his search for good and evil; we may end up only finding ourselves and forgetting about good and evil, and our conscience becomes darkened moral opportunism. We just do what is convenient.

A right conscience, which always goes hand in hand with wisdom based on Holy Scripture and the work of the Spirit in our life, will help us to obey the laws of our countries like a good citizen and also to take a stand, personally or together with others, against any unjust laws which may be proposed or enacted.

### **Conclusion**

It is not enough for good Christians to profess privately the teaching of the Gospel and the Church regarding human life, the family, education, freedom, human rights etc. Jesus is our Pioneer and our Saviour, and he desires also to be the Pioneer and Saviour for all people: if only they believe in Him and follow Him.

And so we must speak of Him in public, and we must defend His righteous laws in public. Jesus cannot be silenced into the private sphere. No one has the right to stop us from speaking out in the public arena.

How can we ever accept rules that stop us from speaking about Him who died and rose again and who now sits at the right hand of God in the throne of the universe, and who is waiting for us and for all people to follow Him toward His Father in heaven.

AMEN