

## Expediency

HN/SS 23/10/05 am

Reading: John 11: 45-12:11, Luke 16:14-31

Study Text: John 11: 46-50

Sing Psalms: 33:1-5, 33:8-121, 2:1-6, 33:18-22

A friend of mine in India was an evangelist. He would travel from place to place speaking at youth camps and conventions. Most of his travel was on trains-the main means of transport for the vast population – over 1m people are said to be on the trains at any one time. To get a seat you have to book weeks or months ahead. One day I met him off the train and he told me that the students forgot to get him a reservation. The conductor offered him a berth but demanded a bribe. My friend refused to pay a bribe. He had to sit on the floor and could not sleep all night. With him truth won over expediency.

More often than not we see expediency winning out in many dealings in life, including relationships. Not only are truth and justice sacrificed but for some expediency means putting Jesus aside. If that attractive person wants you to go to the beach on Sunday morning rather than come to church – what does expediency say? What if your football team wants you to play when you should be in worship – what does expediency say? What about when all your colleagues are drinking and gambling, or organising a Melbourne Cup sweep? If you want to get ahead in this world or just keep your mates it would be expedient to go along with them.

## Hardening

The Jewish leaders had ordered that if anyone confessed that Jesus was Christ they would be put out of the synagogue (9:22). They ordered that if anyone knew where Christ was they were to report it (11:57). They were doing their utmost to stop people following Jesus. But Jesus continued to work. Many Jews who came to mourn with Mary believed in Jesus when they saw him raise Lazarus from the dead.

Seeing such a display of divine power and authority we might ask -how could anyone not believe? Surely this raising of Lazarus was sufficient testimony to the truth of the words he spoke – ‘whoever believes in me has eternal life... he had passed from death to life’ (5:24). But some of these Jews did not believe. They went away to tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done.

*But if someone goes from the dead they will repent* the rich man said to Abraham in the next world (Luke 16). Abraham replied *if they do not hear Moses and the prophets neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead*. How true these words proved to be. Lazarus rose from the dead and still some did not believe. Their hearts were so hard that even after seeing this mighty work of God they did not believe.

It is difficult to imagine, except that we see the same thing today. When the gospel is preached, when the mighty work of the Cross and the free grace of God proclaimed, still there are those who do not believe. *Whoever comes to me I will by no means cast out said Jesus* (6:37). But still they turn away. Such is the hardness of the human heart. Only the power of God can soften it and turn it from stone

into flesh. So there at the grave of Lazarus many believed, but others were hardened. The same fire will melt wax but harden clay!

The focus moves from Bethany to Jerusalem as these Jews go and report to the Pharisees. Why did they do this? We are not told their motives but would suspect their sincerity. Maybe they feared the Pharisees, or wanted to earn their favour.

A meeting of the Sanhedrin, the highest council of the Jews was hastily convened. The chief priests and Pharisees met together, seventy Sadducees, Pharisees and elders sitting together. The question before them was ‘what are we doing, or what shall we do about this man Jesus’ – *for this man works many signs* (11:47).

They now admit that Jesus is performing miracles as signs. No longer are they trying to disprove his mighty works, no longer are calling him a sinner (9:24), no longer are they attributing his work to the devil (10:20). They accept his works as signs but they are not moved to re-assess their stance toward Jesus – such is the hardness of their hearts.

What darkness can envelop the human heart when men can say ‘Oh we know Jesus did miracles, we know Jesus died and rose again, we know the Scriptures, we know it all, but we will not believe’. How tragic that some can hear the Bible read and preached year after year but still not believe in Jesus Christ. Truly *the light shines in the darkness but the darkness did not comprehend it* (1:5).

## Fear

The Council not only acknowledged the miraculous signs but also the growing popularity of Jesus. Despite all their arguments, accusations and actual threats, Jesus continued to do the works of his Father – and the number following him continued to increase. The Jewish leaders feared that *everyone will believe in him* (11:48). Clearly, significant proportions of the Jewish population believed in Jesus, or were following him, at this time. What was there to fear about this popularity of Jesus? The fear they expressed was not necessarily the fear they really held.

The Jews (Pharisees) had already tried a number of times to get rid of Jesus by stoning (8:59, 10:31). Under Jewish law this was the penalty for blasphemy. Under Roman law however, the Jews were not allowed to exercise the death penalty – and certainly not for blasphemy. So the approach of the Council at this time was different. The Chief Priest and the Sadducees were more politically astute – or so they thought. So for the first time the Romans become a factor in their dealings with Jesus.

*The Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation* (11:48). How real was this fear? Many Jews thought of the Messiah in terms of a political deliverer – one who would free them from the Romans. Jesus however, repudiated such a notion. He refused any political involvement and they knew this (6:5). In fact if he had been such a Messiah these leaders would have supported him.

The truth is they were ‘prompted less by dispassionate concern for the well – being of the nation than for their own position of power and prestige’. Their fear was for their own positions and authority. With his teaching and his following, Jesus was undermining their authority. They wanted to hang on to what they had.

Church councils today can sometimes be like this Council in Jerusalem. Christian leaders can be more concerned for their own position and authority than they are for doctrine, but their arguments will somehow be based on doctrine. Beware in your own life and ministry that selfish interests do come before the interests of Christ. This was Paul's sad experience with the Philippian church (Philippians 2:4, 21). Beware the proud heart, the heart that hungers for position, power or prestige.

Politically astute – or so they thought! They got rid of Jesus but just forty years later Rome destroyed their place and nation anyway. In AD 70 Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. *He who sits in the heavens shall laugh...* as men and kings plot in vain against him (Psalm 2). The plans of the wicked backfire as the sovereign God brings them to nothing (Psalm 33:10).

## **Expediency**

Hearing the concerns raised in the meeting Caiaphas, the high priest in this memorable year, proposed a solution. The priests were no longer Levites but were appointed by men. Caiaphas was in fact appointed by the Roman prefect Valerius Gratus. He was a bold and brazen manipulator, a man who liked to lord it over everyone. Sadducees were like this according to the historian Josephus – he writes 'Sadducees are rather savage in their conduct and in their intercourse with their peers and are as ungentle as they are to aliens'.

*You know nothing at all* said Caiaphas as he addressed the Council. Lawyers, scribes and elders alike would have been confronted with this know-it-all attitude. There was no discussion – the plan of the bold and the arrogant, the plan for expedient action carried the day. Such boldness and arrogance is not uncommon in church councils and synods.

This is all the more remarkable when we think of other men who were probably in this meeting. Nicodemus had earlier pleaded for justice on the basis that our law does not judge a man before it hears him (7:51). When Peter was on trial Gamaliel wisely told this same Council *if this work is of men it will come to nothing; but if it is of God you cannot overthrow it* (Acts 5:38-39). Caiaphas cared nothing for the law nor for wisdom – he cared only for expediency.

'You stupid people' he said in effect, 'don't you see that it is better for one man to die for the people than that the whole nation perish'. It was expedient for the one man, Jesus, to die in order to save the nation (we will not go into the prophetic nature of these words today). Was this legal? Was this just or fair? No, but it was expedient!

'The end justifies the means' according to Caiaphas and to many people today. Is this a principle you follow? Have you ever done something you knew to be wrong because it was the quickest and easiest way to get out of trouble, or to get what you wanted? Then repent. Turn away from expediency and follow the way of truth and justice.

Remember you are a child of God; you were bought with a price. Do not turn your back on Jesus in order to gain things in this world. Fear God not man. Seek first the kingdom of God and the Lord will provide all your needs.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*