

Pride and Prejudice

HN/SS 3/4/05 am

Reading: John 7:10f, Acts 5:12f

Study Text: John 7:45-52

Psalms: 101:1-4, 101:5-8, 28:5-9, 15:1-3

Why have you not brought him the Jewish leaders demanded when their officer returned empty handed. It had not been a good week for these men of the ruling council – not since half way through the feast anyway. That was when Jesus started teaching in the temple. He spoke against them, accusing them of making false judgments and of breaking the Law of Moses. How they hated him for telling them, the lawyers, they did not know the law and nor did they keep it.

As Jesus continued to speak, many believed in him. These proud rulers were forced to act. They sent officers, Levite temple guardians, to arrest Jesus (7:32). Rather than arresting Jesus the officers were themselves arrested by the words of Jesus. They did not take him immediately but listened as he taught in the temple. In fact they did not take him at all. Later that day or maybe a day or two later these officers reported back to the Council that sent them.

Claim

The officers were in deep trouble for failing in their duty. An explanation was demanded of them. It would have been easy for them to give an acceptable excuse. Jesus was a controversial teacher, and with the city crowded as it was, a riot could suddenly break out. Already some had tried to take Jesus in some way or other but unsuccessfully – John tells us this was because of divine providence (7:30, 44). To arrest Jesus would have been difficult and dangerous.

But these men make no such excuse. Rather they make a most profound confession. They confessed *No man ever spoke like this man or never did man so speak*. They spoke of Jesus as a unique man, as one who was above all other men. There is a touch of irony here for the reader knows that Jesus is indeed like no other man for he is the Son of God, he is divine.

These men were not the first to be amazed at Jesus' teaching. Those who heard his 'sermon on the mount' were *astonished at his teaching for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes* (Matthew 7:29). Authority, boldness, truth, wisdom, grace...such things characterized the teaching of Jesus. Is this what you find as you read or as you listen to his word?

Shame

The answer of the officers was not welcomed by the Pharisees who sent them. From an exalted claim about the teaching of Jesus we sink to the depths of prejudice when we hear the reply of the Pharisees. They did not listen to what Jesus had to say and were not interested in what their own officers had to say about him. They had judged or pre-judged Jesus to be a deceiver, a law breaker and had condemned him to death.

Blinded by pride and prejudice they did not even ask their own officers why they had concluded *no man ever spoke like this man*. Rather they burst forth with vitriol, rubbishing whatever these men had to say and accusing them of being completely gullible. And their outburst turned from these men to the crowd that continued to listen to Jesus (7:49). They knew nothing about the law and they were being deceived. A curse was pronounced upon them for their ignorance of the law – the law that the Pharisees had the exclusive right to proclaim!

The irony that we have seen in the previous verses continues in this passage before us. Remember the Jews who boldly stated on the basis of the Scriptures ‘this is not the Christ for the Christ will come from Bethlehem’. They claimed they knew the Scriptures. These Pharisees claimed to be upholding the law. They claimed that Jesus was breaking the law. Yet many ordinary people had trouble reconciling this judgment with what they saw and heard.

I was listening to a professor called Peter Singer on the radio. He is from Melbourne but is now at a university in the USA. I think he is a philosopher or bioethicist. He said he was shocked to find that so many people there believe in God. A recent survey found over 80% of Americans believe in God. Did he stop to consider for a moment why this might be? Did he go and ask any of them why they believed in God? No. He was writing a book pouring contempt on people who believe in God – over 80% of the population! They were all so ignorant according to him.

Now mere numbers do not make things true or false, but you see how this professor, like the Pharisees, was blinded by pride and prejudice. He was right and all the rest were wrong. We must hold firmly to the truth of the gospel of course and we may stand alone at times but we must not turn to irrational cursing of those who differ from us. We must be prepared to give an answer, a gracious and rational answer, to anyone who asks about the hope that we have.

Jesus said *ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it shall be opened unto you* (Matthew 7:7). Too often pride and prejudice, arrogance and self-righteousness, prevent a person from knocking, from asking the simple question – what is truth? Pilate asked but did not wait for the answer (John 18:38). Too often pride and prejudice lead people into irrational argument, into vitriol and cursing, especially of those who are different in some way.

Too often pride and prejudice lead to looking to other people and to traditions rather than to the Scriptures, the word of God. Learned men as the Pharisees were, we might have expected them to show their officers from the Scriptures why they should not believe in Jesus. But no! Instead they looked to their fellow Pharisees – *have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in him*. Beware of looking to men to support your argument. They are not always reliable – even when they are dead.

Game

None of us, none of the Pharisees, have believed in him. None of the educated people have been deceived by him. That was the basis of their ‘put down’ of the officers and of the crowd who had listened to Jesus. But this argument was about to fall apart. One of their own was about to drop a bombshell.

Nicodemus...being one of them, stepped forward to speak in defence of Jesus. This member of the Council was the same one who came to Jesus by night calling him *a teacher come from God* (3:2). Jesus told him that he was sent down from heaven and that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Nicodemus pondered these words in his heart. He at least was eager to hear more, even if he did not yet believe.

Standing up to claim a point of law in Jesus' defence was a bold and game move in this tense atmosphere. His fellow rulers had given up on reasonable and rational argument, and on adhering to their own laws. Nicodemus was not happy with these developments – every man had the right to defend himself. He did not want to be guilty of breaking the law. The apostles would later be saved from death threats by this Council when a Pharisee called Gamaliel stood up to make a rational and legal argument against any precipitous action (Acts 5:34f).

Shame again

Such was their blindness, their prejudice against Jesus, that these Pharisees were not even prepared to listen to one of their own. Their solidarity was broken but still they persisted in irrational argument – they did not stop to consider their position. Shamefully they turned to attack one of their own. They heaped abuse on Nicodemus, casting aspersion on his background by suggesting he was from Galilee, the backwater of ignorant people. They knew he was from Jerusalem but were reduced to innuendo and character slurring.

They challenged Nicodemus to search their national history, confident that he would not find any prophet had arisen out of Galilee. The verb here is in the present tense so it literally reads 'out of Galilee a prophet is not raised'. And a few MSS read **the** prophet, so some think they were referring to the Messiah. Some scholars find it hard to believe that these teachers of the law could overlook the fact that Jonah was from Galilee (II Kings 14:25). But it is clear that in this context, in the heat of the moment, they cared little for historical accuracy. They were out to discredit Nicodemus, to mock him as being ignorant like everyone else who even considered Jesus might be the Christ, the anointed of God.

On the last and great day of the feast Jesus cried out *if anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink*. The officers thirsted when they heard him – they had never heard a man speak like this man Jesus. They spoke more than they realized for this Jesus was not just a man – he was the Son of God who spoke the words of God. Nicodemus thirsted. He had already sought Jesus out by night. He wanted Jesus to get a fair hearing. He probably wanted to hear more himself.

But the Pharisees did not thirst for the truth; they did not thirst for God. They thirsted only for personal power and prestige. Out of pride and prejudice they ignorantly poured contempt on anyone who dared even to listen to Jesus. What do you thirst for?

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