

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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MARCH 18, 2007



John 11:45-53

"Inside Knowledge"

Being "on the inside" is a great thrill to some people: knowing what nobody else knows, anticipating events that other people can't guess at. It is also a dangerous position; partly because it feeds our pride, but also because it is a place of great responsibility. All societies reserve strong condemnation for people who abuse their "inside" positions to make money, to manipulate others; people who betray their group. "Insider trading" is a practice we know all too well in our greed-saturated culture; we are rightly enraged when it occurs just before a corporation crashes and ordinary people lose their jobs, their health insurance, their pensions.

Two characters in the gospel narratives stand out in this way: people who knew a lot and tried to use their knowledge to manipulate events to their advantage. One, of course, is Judas who betrayed Jesus; the other is Caiaphas, the High Priest.

1) *Caiaphas the High Priest*

In the OT era, you were a High Priest for life and the position was inherited, but the Romans wanted to be sure the Jews knew who was in charge, and regularly deposed High Priests to put in new ones they favored. Caiaphas was a member of the Annas family; over a 50 year period, Annas, five of his sons,

one grandson, and his son-in-law Caiaphas held the office of High Priest. Caiaphas became High Priest in 18 AD, and held the position for 18 years. When Pontius Pilate became procurator in 26AD, he liked what he found in Caiaphas, and the two developed "an understanding" which comes out over and over in the Gospel narratives.

Caiaphas is the cynical president of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council, which observes Jesus' growing popularity – especially after the raising of Lazarus – and decides they must stop it. To them Jesus represents a threat: although some members were prospering under Roman rule, others were agitating for revolt, and Jesus looked like a possible leader for something they knew from experience would bring quick Roman repression. Jesus also threatened their position as rulers and guardians of Jewish spiritual life: he claimed to by-pass the Temple and the sacrificial system and himself declare forgiveness of sins; he challenged "traditional" Sabbath practices, he had driven out the market that Caiaphas had permitted to occupy the Court of the Gentiles, and he implicitly threatened the whole Temple system.

So when the Sanhedrin gathers to debate what to do about Jesus, and worry over what the Romans will do and how that might affect them, a contemptuous Caiaphas lashes out at them: "You know nothing at all! You

do not realize what is best for you..." He, of course, the ultimate insider, knows what is best: *"It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."* It is a remarkable statement; it could have been said by Jesus of his own mission to save the nation.

But it was Caiaphas who said it, and he meant it cynically and cruelly. He foresaw what was at stake and how it would have to end. He had inside knowledge; more, in fact, than he knew. As John the Gospel-writer wryly puts it, Caiaphas "did not say this alone, but as High Priest that year prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and gather into one all the scattered people of God." Even the most knowledgeable and cynical people cannot be sure what God is doing.

A week later, when Jesus stands before the Sanhedrin on trial, and Caiaphas questions him about his teachings, Jesus refuses to be drawn into debate; he simply says that he has spoken openly and truthfully, and that his teachings are well known. Only when he is challenged under oath to confess whether he is the Messiah, "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One," does Jesus reply clearly and affirmatively.

Caiaphas met Jesus, but it did him no good. Caiaphas knew a lot; he tried to control events, but in the end he failed and was part of the very disaster to Israel that he thought he would prevent by sacrificing Jesus. He didn't grasp what was really going on. But that's a problem for insiders: while they are trying to profit by what they know, they are sometimes blind to what is really going on in the wider world beyond their "inside group."

2) Judas The Apostle

Our second cynic is Judas. He is one of the Twelve, but we know little about him beyond that he was keeper of the money-bag; the "treasurer" of the group. Maybe that is why every time his name is mentioned in the Gospels, it's in connection with money!

When Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus with a jar of costly perfume, Judas complains at the waste, and says the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. But John the Gospel-writer notes, of course with the benefit of hindsight over what had happened to Judas, that he was really not that generous and did not care for the poor; in fact he was a thief who used to help himself to the money bag. So when Judas considers betraying the whereabouts of Jesus to the priests so that they can arrest him secretly, he asks "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" They agree on a price of "thirty pieces of silver."

It's plausible that Judas was motivated mostly by greed. Some think the deciding moment came when Jesus cleared the animal-sellers and money-changers out of the Temple: they were "Judas' kind of people," traders who knew how to make money, even out of the legitimate needs of worshippers. Was Jesus' action "the last straw" for Judas? Did he too decide that this man was a threat to a system he was doing well by?

I have often wondered if there was another, related reason for Judas' actions. I wonder if he saw more clearly than the others that Jesus really was on a collision course with the Temple and Sanhedrin leaders? I wonder if he foresaw that Jesus really was going to die in Jerusalem that week, and chose what he thought would be the winning side in the clash that lay ahead? Judas was at best confused, thinking he could use his inside knowledge to his own advantage. But like Caiaphas, he had no idea what was really going on – what God was planning, what Jesus himself clearly intended. Judas chose the wrong side, and paid dearly for it in remorse and self-destruction.

Whatever his motives, what makes Judas such a villainous figure is that he *was* an insider. He was one of the Twelve. As Peter said when they prayed and drew lots to replace him: *"he was one of our number, and he shared in this ministry."* In more poetic

language, Jesus predicted his betrayer was "one who shares bread with me, who has dipped in the bowl with me..." This is among the worst things: to be betrayed by a friend. If it has ever happened to you, you know the shock, the disbelief, the anger.

Judas goes down in the history of infamy, but that hasn't stopped him being a hero to some people. About a year ago a great fuss surrounded the publication of a translation of *The Gospel Of Judas*, another 2nd-4th C. Gnostic writing that claims the name of an earlier famous author. In it, Judas is a hero who obeys Jesus' instructions to betray him, and so hastens Jesus' death so that his "spirit can be freed from the prison of his body." Jesus tells only Judas "the true gospel," "the mysteries of the kingdom," and declares that he will "exceed all the apostles" by helping Jesus to be crucified. It is just another piece of Gnostic revisionism, historically and theologically, and adds little to what we know already.

The idea that Judas secretly cooperated with Jesus to bring about the crucifixion reflects two things the canonical Gospels already tell us: that at the Last Supper, Jesus told Judas to "go and do what you have to do quickly;" and that the early church insisted that the crucifixion and resurrection were part of "God's set purpose and foreknowledge." Did Jesus "intend to die"? Yes; he said he had come "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Did he know Judas would betray him? – yes, as Jesus said, "The Son of Man will go as it is written of him, but woe to the man by whom he is betrayed."

3) *Inside Knowledge*

Real inside knowledge is knowing what God intends to do. Jesus knew it, and promised to share it with his followers. What God is doing is what neither Caiaphas nor Judas knew.

Even when you think you have inside knowledge, the danger is that you will run foul of God's sovereignty. Instead of being

"the mover and shaker" behind the scenes, you may in fact end up as the pawn that God moves across the board in a game whose rules you do not even understand, let alone being able to see many moves ahead. Or if you prefer a lighter take on all this, there is the old saying: "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

From Judas, we should learn that it is not enough to be *with* Jesus, to hear him, watch him - even to be counted as "one of our number" - if your heart is really elsewhere. Beware trying to "use Christianity" for your own advantage.

Lord deliver us from the seduction of inside knowledge, of thinking we alone know "the secrets of the kingdom, that we have a "seat at the table" of power. Better we should be truthful, open, transparent, and faithful to our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Example.

Let us pray...