Sermon for Mid-Week Lenten Service, Week 2

# The Text: John 18:12-27

# Jesus was strong for us

The trials before the high priests Annas and Caiaphas were show trials. In those days the high priest was appointed by the Roman governor. Caiaphas was the official high priest. St John doesn’t tell us anything about the shambolic trial before Caiaphas. He didn’t need to, because already in chapter 11(:50) he says that Caiaphas wanted Jesus dead because many people were believing in Jesus after He raised Lazarus from the dead(11:45). St John tells us that at a meeting of the Jewish Council, convened to discuss the large number of conversions, Caiaphas said to them, *“[You do not] understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish”* (11:50). In his opinion, Jesus had to be done away with to save the nation. John makes the comment, “*He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they made plans to put him to death*” (11:51-53).

After Jesus was arrested He was taken to Annas, presumably for a preliminary hearing. Although Annas had officially been high priest as long ago as 15 years before, in the years 6-15AD, he obviously still had a lot of clout among the Jews. Our Lord answered Annas bravely. He had no intention of contributing to a charade. He told Annas that there was no need to interrogate Him, because He hadn’t given His teaching in secret. He’d spoken “*openly to the world*” (v 20). Annas would do better to ask those who’d heard Jesus teach.

For that honest reply, our Lord received the first of many blows. But then He bravely challenged the officer who’d struck Him: “*If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?*” (v 23)

The courage Jesus showed, Simon Peter lacked. Simon’s intentions had been good. At the Passover supper earlier that night he’d asked why he couldn’t follow Jesus where he was going. “*I will lay down my life for you*,” he’d declared (13:38). Then after Jesus was arrested, he followed Him to the house of the high priest, along with another disciple. The other disciple was known there, perhaps because he was from a priestly family or perhaps because of his father Zebedee’s extensive trade in salted fish. Thanks to his contacts, he was able to get Peter into the high priest’s courtyard as well. Peter should have been proud to make known that he was a disciple of Jesus along with that other disciple. Instead, each time he was asked, he denied it. Then the rooster crowed. It all happened just as Jesus said it would.

The other Gospels say that Peter went out and wept bitterly (Mt 26:75; Mk 14:72; Lk 22:62). Though John doesn’t include that detail, he does tell how, after His resurrection, Jesus met with Peter at the Sea of Galilee. After a breakfast of roasted fish, He asked Peter three times, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” Three times Simon replied in the affirmative. Then the Lord responded, three times, “*Feed my lambs. Shepherd my sheep. Feed my sheep*”. He recommissioned Peter as a pastor and an apostle. Jesus is the true shepherd. He’s true to His word in the prophet Ezekiel. He says there (34:16), “*I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak*”.

Peter in his weakness was like all of us. We might think that we’re strong when we’re surrounded by fellow believers. It’s when we’re challenged by those who are against us that courage easily fails us and we fail our Lord. Yet he doesn’t give up on us. This saying, we are told (2 Tim 2:11) is trustworthy: “*If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself*”.

Made strong by Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter later spoke about Jesus boldly, no matter what the opposition. St Luke tells us how, after the healing of a disabled man at the temple, Peter and John were arrested for teaching the people and for proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. Rulers, elders and teachers of the Scriptures met together with Annas and Caiaphas. The two apostles were asked by what name or power they had acted. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, replied, “*It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed … Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:1-12). The leaders were astonished at the courage and words of Peter and John.

Many others, made strong by Jesus, have shown similar courage. When a Communist government took over Czechoslovakia in 1948, churches were increasingly brought under government control. Those who opposed such control were arrested. One such pastor was Pavel Uhorskai, of the Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (that is, the Lutheran Church in Slovakia). He was arrested in March 1951. For two days and two nights before his interrogation began, he was allowed only to stand, without any food. His interrogation went on for weeks. If he complained of exhaustion, he was made to do exercises. If his remarks weren’t acceptable, he was made to stand until he collapsed to the floor. Two years later (May 1953) he was released in a general amnesty. He worked as a woodcutter and in a warehouse. He also met with a number of pastors in a secret theological study group. Although cleared by the courts in 1971 of the charges for which he’d been imprisoned, Pastor Uhorskai wasn’t permitted to preach or to function as a pastor. He served his congregation as a cantor and after 1983, as a lay supervisor of church work. After the peaceful revolution in November 1989 he was restored to the pastoral office. In November 1990, at the age of 71, he was elected as bishop-general of his Church. There were other pastors who suffered more than he did, who never saw the end of their troubles before they died. Yet they were willing to follow their Lord on the difficult way of eternal life. They believed, as Pr Uhorskai wrote, “Christ was with me before my trial, during my trial, in prison and after my release from prison. He was faithful to me then, and he is faithful to me now”. [*Uncompromising Faith*, 130f]

Peter’s strength of character came from Jesus who always spoke the truth and was willing to suffer and die for it. In Jesus’ death is our salvation. Though we’re weak and sinful, He makes us strong as we repent, confess our sins to Him and trust His word of forgiveness. Since Jesus is our confidence and sure hope before God, as we trust in Him we have nothing to be afraid of from people. We can say with the Psalmist (56:11; 118:6), “*The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. /What can man do to me?*”