



**ST. STEPHEN'S
ANGLICAN CHURCH**
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The Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord

Being Easter Day, Sunday, April 21st, 2019

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Jesus had been a mounting cause for concern among Judea's political and religious establishment for the full three years of his ministry. But with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday it became clear that his mission threatened not just their careers but their very survival – for it imperiled the future of the entire nation.

At first they had hoped to see Jesus discredited as every other contender for the Messiahship had been discredited. But their increasingly desperate efforts to expose him as an ignoramus and fraud had failed utterly. Only a week earlier, his encyclopedic command of ancient Jewish legal traditions had enabled him to wriggle out of an intellectual trap that should, by rights, have led to his execution.

It was a question that for a Jew had no safe answer: "Is it lawful or unlawful to pay tax to the Roman Imperial government?" Answer "yes" and he would have been guilty of the capital crime of blasphemy because the Torah declared Jews could only pay tax to God. But answer "no" and under Roman Law he would be guilty of treason.

But Jesus had simply held up a coin bearing the image of the emperor's face and said: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's." According to ancient Jewish law a person depicted on the currency was king and, thus, legally entitled to collect taxes. It was a statement that no Roman could object to; Yet nor could any Jew – for it in no way contradicted the Torah's legal declaration that absolutely everything belonged to God. Game, set and match, so to

speak.

For the Jerusalem establishment the situation was made all the more dire by the fact that it was impossible to estimate the full extent of Jesus' influence. Unlike other self-proclaimed Messiahs, his appeal was by no means confined solely to religious fundamentalists. Educated people were known to support his cause, including the secular humanists – religious backsliders dismissed by righteous folk as "sinners."

His entourage was also known to include self-confessed former terrorists, as well as notorious publicans who collected the Romans' taxes -- folks the Jewish public hated even more than despised Samaritans. But most worrying for the Jerusalem establishment were suspicions that members of the Sanhedrin, Jewish Council of State, were secretly under Jesus' thrall.

Such broad-based support would make it easy for a self-anointed Messiah to mobilize a mob to mount an insurrection – a move they anticipated would be the next stage of his strategy. Logic dictated that in order to liberate the Jewish people the Messiah would need a military machine capable of driving the mighty army of the world's sole super power into the sea.

This would be a tall order for a general as capable and experienced as the great King David. For a rabbi with no military training it would be an absolute impossibility. The only foreseeable outcome would be that the Roman legions would annihilate his rag-tag army.

Then, as they always did in cases of rebellion, they

would cry havoc, and put the entire country to the sword. And among the first folks to meet the lions in the arena would be the political and religious leaders who the Romans had relied upon to keep a lid on things. Emperors – paranoiacs all – were famously intolerant of failure.

It was the raising of Lazarus that brought matters to a head. The miracle couldn't be written off as trickery: It had been witnessed by a large crowd of people, all of whom were well aware Lazarus had been dead for four days. His sister Martha had even warned Jesus that the corpse was in an advanced state of decay.

If the miracle itself was not worrying enough, the words Jesus had spoken before he performed it were more so: "Did I not say to you, if you would believe, you would see the glory of God?" He asked, going on to proclaim himself to be not just the Messiah, but the Son of God. And scandalously, upon doing so, he addressed the Almighty, whose name was too sacred to say aloud, as "Daddy."

"Daddy," he was reported as saying, "I thank you that you have heard me. I know, of course, that you always hear me, but I said it because of the people in the crowd – so they would believe that you have sent me." Then he shouted – on his own authority and without a word of prayer – "Lazarus, come out."

Their spies in the crowd rushed to tell the Sanhedrin what they had just seen, and an emergency meeting was convened. The question on everybody's lips was: "What shall we do? The man is clearly a miracle worker. If we just leave him be, everyone will believe in him: And then the Romans authorities will kick us out of our jobs and destroy the nation."

Caiaphas, chief priest for that year and a consummate politician, went straight to the heart of the problem. "Get real," he said, "The answer's obvious. This man has to die as a matter of expediency. Either he dies or the whole nation will be destroyed." From that time on, according to St. John, they conspired to engineer Jesus' death. And that's ultimately what happened: Judas Iscariot, assuming Jesus' had cold feet about raising a rebellion, tried to tip his hand by selling him out to the chief priests for 30 pieces of silver.

Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane after celebrating the Passover with the Apostles. His closest friends deserted him and he was hauled before the Sanhedrin and given a travesty of a trial.

Under a brutal cross examination, he unequivocally affirmed he was the Son of God. This was gleefully declared to be blasphemy and, after condemning him to death, they dragged him off to the Roman governor to carry out the sentence.

In doing so, they unwittingly committed exactly the same sin for which God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. They had the temerity to imagine they could better arrange the affairs of the world than God. In doing so the members of the Sanhedrin (among the finest Bible scholars in the land) chose to ignore the than 300-plus explicit prophecies concerning the Messiah – thus substituting their own agenda in place of God's.

Surprising though it might seem, we have no right to condemn them. Confronted with the choices before them, they made a decision that any reasonable politician would make today.

They – no more than we do today – imagined God intended to fulfil those ancient promises to the letter, in exactly the way he foretold. That's because we, quite illogically, assume God is bound by the very same laws that he has laid down for us. We, too, are thus apt to substitute our own agendas for God's; arrogantly imagining we know better than he in matters of good and evil.

That's the bad news. The good news is that the story of Jesus does not end on the cross. Nor does it end with an empty tomb. The really good news is it ends with the resurrection – a resurrection we shall all share. This is because God **IS** love – not that he loves, but that the very essence of his nature is love – and he created us so that he can love us and we can love him. And not just for now, but for eternity.

This explains St. John's confident declaration: "So God loved the world he gave his only-begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Far from a trite formula, it is God's cast-iron guarantee that our lives have meaning and that that we will live forever. You just couldn't hope for a better deal than that! *AMEN*