

Luke 22:66 At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them...
70 They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You are right in saying I am." *71* Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips."

Dear Friends in Christ,

THE SEMBLANCE OF LEGALITY

"Can he get a fair trial?" Lawyers representing a criminal defendant will sometimes suggest their client can't. They will state that pre-trial publicity has prejudiced every single person. That there is no way that a jury of fair-minded people can be assembled. That even before the case has begun everyone has presumed that the defendant is guilty. "He cannot get a fair trial," they maintain.

"At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them." So Jesus entered the courtroom at dawn, hours after being arrested. He was exhausted, and bruised from the first of the rounds of beatings he would receive. This was indeed a crucial hour. One who claimed the title of Son of God, God's promised Messiah was now on trial for those claims. Is there any chance that he can get a fair trial?

Factors that suggested the unlikelihood of a fair trial started showing up even before Jesus started preaching. When Jesus' advance man, John the Baptist, preached, John saw both Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him. Interesting combination that is, Pharisees and Sadducees. These two groups had been violently vying for political power for most of two centuries. John took one look at them and called them a brood of vipers. (Mt 4) They were the two main parties making up the Sanhedrin, before whom Jesus stood in our reading.

Soon after John the Baptist, Jesus had also had his run-ins with them. It started with a paralytic man lowered through a roof. You know the story. Jesus took one look at the invalid and said, "*Your sins are forgiven.*" When some of these same religious people heard Jesus, they said, "*Who can forgive sin but God alone.*" And then Jesus said—and note here that in this first encounter he did not rebuke them, but simply put the evidence in front of them—Jesus said to them, "*That you may know that [I] have authority on earth to forgive sins... ' he said to the paralyzed man, get up. ' "*" (Lk 5) And he did. From there it was all downhill. One or two, like Nicodemus, put their faith in Jesus, but the vast majority grew suspicious, then confrontational, and finally with the raising of Lazarus from the dead, murderous in their attitude toward Jesus. Pharisees and Sadducees, two religio-political parties who couldn't agree on the color of the sky or the time of day, agreed to rushing Jesus to trial. Will he get a fair trial?

You don't think so? Well, according to their jurisprudence, he would. You see, they were following the rules. They weren't allowed to hand down a death sentence under cover of night. That is the significance of the first two words of our reading, "*At daybreak.*" Never mind that they had rushed through sham proceedings in the dead of night. But they could say, "We sentenced him after daybreak." In this trial there are witnesses—fair trial, right?—never mind that even when they were lying they couldn't get their facts to agree. There were jurors, but they had decided that Jesus must die before they heard the first word of evidence. There were bailiffs, but their prisoner bore the bruises of their fists. There is a chief justice, but he had choreographed the entire thing. There is a court of appeal (Pilate), but they have arranged for a mob to show up on his doorstep at daybreak. These opponents of Jesus have assumed a semblance of legality, they have dressed up this murder in the clothes of something resembling a trial. If someone were to object and say that Jesus was treated unfairly, they would say, "Our duly established courts found him guilty, guilty of blasphemy and treason. You can't have people like that running around, can you!"

But here is the important question: Why? Why assume the semblance of legality? Why not just have him meet an untimely end in a dark Jerusalem alley? Because our human nature is really evil.

Because they wanted no one to challenge their sins, and Jesus had done just that. He had proven it all. He had proven that they were worthless religious guides, that their religion—today we would call it spirituality—was nothing but rules taught by men. Worse, Jesus had not whispered in anyone's ears but proclaimed it from the roof tops. Worst of all, Jesus had proven his authority with numerous miracles and irrefutable teaching. He built on God's revelation in the Old Testament and instituted a new covenant in himself, the Son of God. Jesus threatened everything they held dear: their religion, their reputations, their fortunes, their power.

They could never successfully counter Jesus, but we humans have a need to be right, even when we know we are wrong. And so they put Jesus on a trial, even though they were fooling no one. Least of all God himself. One shudders to think how such people, unless they eventually came to faith, will be judged and punished in hell.

Why do we humans assume a semblance of reality? So we can be comfortable in the things we love more than God himself.

We must whisper a prayer of thanksgiving that God has saved us out of that. Notice that I did not say, "Thank God that that is not what we are" because that is what we all are by nature. "*Sinful from birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me*" is the Bible's appraisal. But God in his mercy has saved us out of that: humbled us with his law that condemns us for what we really are, and then exalted and saved us through Spirit-given faith in what Jesus has done. Each of us must confess that there is no reason why he poured his grace upon us. But for that grace, we would be in the courtroom shouting, "Guilty." How humbling to know Jesus' grace!

Here's the other reason for humility: not just my past, but my present. While I have been saved by Jesus and brought to believe in Jesus, yet there is still this thing in me that loves to be clothed in a hypocritical semblance of legality.

✓ When I have a conflict of opinion with someone else, and it is nothing but a conflict of opinion, I not only want to be right, my sinful nature wants to show up that other person as wrong, and also as less—less smart, less compassionate, less worthy, less whatever.

✓ When I really need to go and apologize, my sinful nature frantically scrambles for semblances of legality, reasons that I really shouldn't have to humble myself and admit my wrong: *they* were unreasonable; *they* made me angry; *they* need to apologize first; I was right even if I went too far; maybe we can just all forget about it without actually apologizing.

✓ I love a semblance of legality when I am doing something I shouldn't and I can say: but everyone else is too (they may be, but what did God say?); I would be at a disadvantage if I didn't (what about suffering for the cross?); I couldn't afford not to (so do I love God or money?).

Thank God that Jesus has claimed me as his own. Thank God he has forgiven me in spite of who I am by nature. Thank God that he leads me to hate and repent of sin. And thank God that every day is a renewal of God's grace. May I live in that daily renewal of grace.

How do we fight those temptations? Well, what happened in that courtroom? Jesus didn't do any miracles there. He didn't give them a Mount of Transfiguration show of glory. He just spoke the truth. ***“You are right in saying I am [the Son of God.]”*** That's where the power to make believers is. The Word. That's where the wisdom to conquer the sins I love lies. That's where the truth resides to expose the hypocrisies I hide behind. That's where the motivation is found to overcome the laziness I prefer. It comes from the Word. From the Son of God and everything he would speak into my life. Amen.