

Emperor, and those governors did all in their power to make the political servitude oppressive. They levied taxes at their own discretion, they insulted the noblest families and went, finally, so far as to appoint the highest ecclesiastical functionary in the church, the High Priest, an office which, according to the law, was not appointive, but hereditary. The political condition of the people was therefore such that every true heart prayed for deliverance.

The religious condition was not less deplorable. The people had been without the light of direct revelation for about four hundred years, and the consequence was that they were broken up in numerous factions. The Pharisees, the Saducees, the Essenes, the Herodians, the Zealots, the Samaritans and many other sects are mentioned. All these understood the scriptures their own way and were full of prejudices and bitterness towards each other.

Christ joined none of these sects. He proclaimed the truth, fearlessly uncompromisingly. He took the very opposite course to the two noted Pharisees, Judas and Zadock, who traveled through the country and kindled the flame of rebellion everywhere.

One of the evangelists states that the people at one time would confer upon Jesus the royal dignity and thus go with Him in open rebellion against Rome. And this is corroborated by other writers. We are told that some of the leading men of the Jewish Sanhedrim actually proposed to revive the old dynasty of David by anointing Christ and proclaiming Him King, and that our Savior declined to even discuss the matter. He had not come to establish a "kingdom of this world." His was a kingdom of truth and righteousness. But the priests who saw they could not enlist the great prophet for their plan commenced to tremble before Him. He knew their treasonable secret, and they thought their own safety demanded His death. "It is better," they said, "that one man should die, than the whole people should perish."

The plan to put Jesus to death was conceived, from the moment he declined to take any part in the conspiracy of the priests. Let us see what helped to bring this plan to maturity and how it was carried out.

The popularity of Jesus became great. Multitudes followed Him and sounded His praise. This fact would naturally increase the uneasiness of the priests. For this growing popularity meant a corresponding decrease in their own. "What shall we do, for

everybody follows Him?" was their anxious question. Besides, his public career might be considered suspicious in Rome, and they, by putting Christ out of the way, had an opportunity of throwing a veil over their own dark plans, appearing loyal while they were laying the secret plots, which at last led to the rebellion and to the destruction of their city.

But this consideration alone might not have been sufficient for them to lead Jesus to death, had not another event happened, which deserves special attention. According to the law, the people were to worship God at certain yearly festivals in Jerusalem. But none should go to the house of the Lord empty-handed. Each one was required to bring his gifts before the Lord. These gifts were to consist of the produce of the earth or of the flocks and herds, and each one was supposed to bring from his own property that which had been set apart for the Lord. This involved some trouble, when the worshiper had several days' journey and had to bring with him his grain or wine or oil or sheep, doves or cattle for sacrifices and for feasts. But such was the requirements of the law, and the provision was a wise one, since a divine service which brings no sacrifice cannot be of much worth.

Now the priests of that age had invented an ingenious plan, whereby those who came to Jerusalem to worship could save themselves a great deal of trouble. The priestly family, of which Annas was the head, had converted the temple ground into stables, sheep pens, etc. Those who came to worship did not need to bring animals with them. They could bring their money and buy the required victims for the altar right on the temple ground. And Jews from abroad who had foreign currency could change this into the money of the country within the sacred precincts. Need it be said that these dealers in cattle and these money changers used the opportunity of robbing their customers and that the priests shared the profits in payment for the license granted to break the law of God, to rob the people and profane the holy place? Such was the case, and the Pharisees in particular hated the priests for their arrogance and avarice in this respect.

The indignation that was felt among the common people found expression in the act of Christ, when he drove the oxen out of the temple and scattered the money on the ground. The greedy priests were dumfounded at this act. But cowards as they were, they dared not openly protest against it. Thousands upon thousands would have stood up for Jesus, had the priests

used violence against him on account of this. They, therefore wisely said nothing. But they immediately held a secret council and it was concluded to kill Jesus. The plan which they had long ago talked about was to be carried out now. Jesus had publicly rebuked them as greedy, sacrilegious thieves. He was to be assassinated for the truth He had vindicated.

Jesus was now a captive. He was hurried off under the cover of night to the house of Annas, who had summoned a few of the other members of the Sanhedrim. This crafty old sinner hoped by an examination to be able to formulate a charge against the noble prisoner, but he failed.

The examination was then continued in the early morning, when Caiaphas presided. Here the confession was elicited from Jesus that He was the Son of God, whereupon the Sanhedrim rendered a verdict of guilty of blasphemy, an offense the penalty of which was death.

The question has been discussed whether the Sanhedrim had a right to inflict capital punishment, and the opinions are divided. Lightfoot is of the opinion that they had. Whether they had the right or not, certain it is that they did inflict capital punishment on Stephen, for instance, when the whole body of judges rose and joined the mob and killed that martyr by stoning him.

In the case of Jesus, however, it was necessary to do the execution through the Romans, first, in order to show their loyalty and throw any suspicion off from their own deliberations and plottings, and secondly because the great passover feast was near at hand and they would contaminate themselves by actual bloodshed. For these reasons they resolved to bring Christ before Pilate without delay.

This was the first time the Roman authorities came in contact with Christ. Neither Pilate nor Herod had ever seen Jesus before, although the latter had heard a good deal about Him. By the Romans He was never suspected of treachery. The priests accused Him. The Romans found no proof whereby to sustain the accusation. The priests exerted all their power to have Him condemned. Herod refused to have anything to do with the case. Pilate did all he could to save Him. And it was first by the serious threat of the priests that they would accuse the governor of disloyalty to the emperor, that he yielded and pronounced the death sentence upon Jesus.

With these facts before us, there seems to be no room for any doubt as to who crucified Christ,