

Revelation 5:1-12 & Mark 14:53-65 Green Eyes – The High Priests

John Lennon wrote the song, “Jealous Guy” and although Lennon is more famous for writing or co-writing many other songs it was Jealous Guy which Brian Ferry chose to record and release as a tribute to the ex-Beatle after his murder. Why this song? Well, perhaps it was because Mark Chapman; Lennon’s, killer lived his life in imitation of the man he was to shoot. He envied Lennon and that unstoppable jealousy was to become one of the reasons he felt driven to take his idol’s life.

Jealousy is a powerful emotion, we touched on it last week when we thought about materialism and we saw then as we will see again this week that envy can have a devastating effect on our relationship with Jesus. But don’t worry, I’m not going to beat us all down with guilt this week, because before the talk is over today I am actually going to encourage you to become Jealous guys – or girls, too.

So first of all **bad jealousy**.

Last week we looked at Judas and what drove him and today we move onto the people who hired him – the high priests.

Now, because, as it was the high priests who hired Judas, it was to them that Jesus was taken after his arrest. So, what was it that drove the high priests, led by Caiaphas, to act like this? Perhaps they were driven by good motives – after all Jesus had rolled into town upturning the moneychangers’ tables in the temple. He was drawing a crowd which the Romans might misinterpret as an uprising and cause them to crack down harshly. And caught in the middle of all this are the high priests - the establishment, charged with doing things properly and here they are faced with someone, who to them, appears to be teaching outrageous strange new things.

Well, we can give the high priests all the benefit of the doubt that we want, but actually Mark tells us exactly why they acted as they did and it was no secret because even the Roman Governor knows. Listen to Chapter 15, verse 10 of Mark's Gospel where Mark reveals Pilate's motive for asking the crowd whether or not they want him to release Jesus; Pilate asked "knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over to him."

So it was envy – jealousy which drove the high priest's to attack Jesus, but what was it that caused them to be envious? Well, these are the elite heads of the Jewish religion, the leaders based in Jerusalem and unfortunately it seems that their envy was rooted once again in money.

You see, if you work things properly then religion can be a nice little earner and the Jewish temple, it would appear, made a tidy profit. It operated using its own money system so that if you travelled there and needed to buy an animal to make a sacrifice then you had to change your money into temple money (at their exchange rates) before you then bought the animal - at their price.

You know how (for no apparent reason) you pay extra to fill up with petrol or food at a motorway service station? Well, imagine if you were also required to exchange your money for special service station money at their exchange rate before you were allowed to even buy anything – it would cost you a fortune for a sandwich a cup of tea and a full tank of unleaded!

But service stations get away with as much as they can because they know that if you are running low on fuel or feeling hungry – you have no other choice and that's exactly the sort of situation operating at the temple.

But the temple isn't a motorway service station, it isn't a money making machine, it is a place of worship and prayer. As Jesus cleansed the temple he reminded the witnesses that God had declared, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations' But you have made it a den of robbers".

It's a damning statement and threat to temple revenue and so in Mark 11:18, the very next verse, we read, "The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching."

The chief priests are offended that Jesus has exposed their materialism and they are fearful that the people might just begin to listen to him and demand a return to worship rather than business in the temple and so they jealously protect their franchise – they look for a way to remove Jesus and, of course, the best, permanent solution is to kill him.

Now, surely that raises in our minds the question of what we might be jealously guarding from Jesus? Notice that the high priests seemed to be serving God and his people – they were providing resources for worship and they were raising funds for the temple and for the clergy - all absolutely worthy and good.

But remember materialism masquerades as many other (and often worthy) things and the reality was that the money changers were overcharging and (more importantly still) had set up business in the court of the gentiles – the very place where non-Israelite Jews were supposed to be worshipping. So, in the words of Adrian Plass' latest book, they were looking good, but being bad.

What is there in our lives that perhaps even looks good but is bad? What is there which we feel Jesus, or God, or the Bible threatens?

If God condemns it then it doesn't matter how worthy it appears, it's got to be sorted. You see the Gospel is offensive, British people are polite and inoffensive, but God's Gospel, whilst bringing great joy and peace and comfort, is not British and will quite possibly offend us because it will challenge our way of living and make us reassess whether or not what seems to be good might actually be dishonouring to God.

And we need to be prepared to change because when we look at the way the chief priests react we should be shocked at the depths to which the jealous human heart will stoop.

You see the chief priests must not only have been jealous for their pocket, but also for their popularity; we have already seen that the crowd in the temple was amazed at Jesus' teaching and Mark goes in chapter 12:37 to tell us that "the large crowd listen to [Jesus] with delight."

As, what we call Holy Week, progresses, Jesus' popularity only seems to grow – how galling for the chief priests that this northern chav swans into their town and wins the population over without so much as a by-your-leave and with no respect shown by him to them.

The festival of Passover is fast approaching and those who feel that they should be centre stage have been relegated to seething bystanders!

How terrible the jealousy that the loss of status, position or authority can arouse. How vengeful we can become towards those who are so popular; Tiger Woods, Ashley & Cheryl Cole, John Terry, Katie Price – our tabloids create them and then when they get too big they journalistically kill them off and we condone that culture with every issue of Heat we buy.

Even if you don't read the gossip columns, I suspect that most of us know many of those people I've just mentioned. How dare they be more successful than us!

So, what do the high priests do? Well, because Jesus is so popular they arrest him in secret, they try him illegally at night and they bring in false witnesses to convict him; the high priests would have made great Tabloid editors!

But as with the red-tops no two witnesses can agree in their accusations against Jesus and Jewish law required that a conviction could only be secured on the agreement of two witnesses, a man could not be convicted by his own account and yet, when the witness fail, the high priest Caiaphas begins to grill Jesus.

Quite legally within his rights Jesus doesn't answer, but when Caiaphas persists; "Are you the Christ, the son of the blessed one"? Jesus quotes Daniel's vision in the Old Testament back to him, "I am," said Jesus, "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Well, it's too much for Caiaphas - Jesus is claiming that the judges will themselves be judged by Jesus on the last day, so Caiaphas dramatically tears his robes – a sign of anguish and repentance for some sin which has occurred and cries out, "Why do we need any more witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"

What they should have thought was, "Well, yes, we do need witnesses, the law insists on it." But instead their envy and their fury are too great and they condemn Jesus looking on as the guards begin to taunt him, beat him and spit on him.

The result is that the final road to the Cross for Christ has well and truly begun – such is the viciousness of envy. So if we want to be imitators of Christ rather than imitators of Caiaphas then we need to recognise that there is no place for envy in our regenerated Christian lives. Paul points this out to Titus when he describes the pre-Christian life in Titus 3:3. He says, “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.”

That is what we were like before we turned to Christ – it should not mark out how we live after we have declared him to be our Lord and Saviour. In fact Paul criticises the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 3:3 because their faith seems to have made little difference to their attitudes. He says, “For since there is jealousy and quarrelling amongst you, are you not worldly?”

Instead, because envious jealousy is ungodly and has no place in the Church Paul encourages the Romans in 13:13 by saying, “Let us behave decently...not in dissension and jealousy.”

But didn't I say that I was going to encourage you to be jealous? Well, yes, because actually the Bible teaches us that there is **good jealousy**; that God is jealous and he calls us to demonstrate godly jealousy too.

You see, the New Testament uses two words for jealousy, we have looked at the first, it's the one Pilate used of the Chief Priests and it means a vindictive or resentful rivalry, that is something which we are definitely called to avoid.

But the New Testament uses a second word for jealousy; a word which means zeal for something or someone. So we read of Paul telling the Corinthians in 2 Cor 11:2, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy.”

Paul has a passionate zeal to see the Corinthians stick faithfully to God who is passionately faithful in turn to them. It takes us back to Exodus 20:5 where God declares, “I the Lord your God am a jealous God”.

So what’s the difference between the jealousy of the Chief Priests and the jealousy of Paul and God himself? Well godly jealousy is a zeal for godliness; it builds us up in holiness, it is a zeal to cut out the very things which would pull us away from God, harm our relationship with him and draw us into strife with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Isn’t it wonderful that God is jealous for and about you? If he didn’t care he would allow Satan to pick you off, he would show no zeal in rescuing you, he wouldn’t care less if you worshiped idols and spent all eternity in hell – but the Lord our God is a jealous God and calls us, like Paul, to imitate him.

So are we jealous for one another with a godly jealousy? If we see someone turning away from their faith, or slipping into ungodly living are we prepared to lovingly say something to them?

British people are polite and inoffensive, but it is neither loving nor gracious to simply let our neighbours or our family members go through life and death without telling them about the God who will come on the clouds to judge, who will save those made righteous through their faith in Christ and sadly, but justly honour those who have chosen eternity without him.

And as we draw closer to Easter I want to encourage you to be jealous for those around you with a godly jealousy – let God use you to lead them to Christ; pray for them, just talk naturally with them about your faith, lend them a book, invite them to one of the services.

And be jealous for one another, pray for each other too, love each other, encourage each other in your faith and graciously lead each other back on track if you start wandering off course. When you have a coffee after the service ask your neighbour how their Christian life is going. Why not fix up a regular time to get together in two's or three's to pray for and with each other. Be passionate and zealous about supporting each other's faith.

The chief priests got their jealousy wrong – they were envious of Jesus when in fact we should be jealous for Jesus – full of zeal and passion, love, grace, encouragement and support.

There is no place in the Christian life for envious jealousy, but plenty of room for godly jealousy because we are saved by the God who is jealous about us. What an amazing cause for thanksgiving that we do not have an apathetic God, so let's not be apathetic about our God either, but instead pray that God will take away our envious green eyes and in their place give us zealous hearts to do his will. Amen.