

LENT COURSE WEEK FOUR

Christ before the High Priest (Matthew 26: 57-66)

Christ before the High Priest – Gerrit van Honthorst 1592-1656



The Artist was born in Utrecht in 1592 and learnt the rudiments of painting under his father who was a decorative artist. In 1616 he went to Italy where he was greatly influenced by Caravaggio and Manfredi. His fame spread and he was commissioned by Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia, sister of Charles 1st, to paint a number of family portraits. Van Honthurst was eventually chosen by Charles 1st as Court Painter and a number of his works can be found at Hampton Court. He was nicknamed "Gerrit of the nights" due to his innate skill in the use of light. Although mainly a secular artist, his notable religious works include The

Mocking of Christ, The incredulity of Peter and today's subject, Christ before the High Priest. All involve the skilful use of light in their subject.

Read Matthew 26: 57-66

"Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you? But Jesus remained silent."

Here Jesus stands, his face denoting an acceptance, a resigned acceptance that this process has to be; that this is part of his Father's eternal plan for salvation. Isaiah had prophesied years earlier "He was oppressed and afflicted yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, but as a sheep is dumb before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth" (Isaiah 53: 7,8)

And so, Jesus stands silently, his hands bound, his white robe torn from his shoulder – in Roman terms rough justice was exactly that. The two witnesses who brought the accusations against him stand behind the high priest. They look intently at the prisoner, one with his arms folded in the confident assumption of a guilty verdict, the other perhaps less sure of his ground. The soldiers look on from the background, their spears just visible in the dimly lit room.

The High Priest sits in judgement pose – the Book of the Law is open in front of him, the very law which Jesus came to fulfil. The High Priest holds an accusing finger aloft “Are you not going to answer, what is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” They had claimed that they heard Jesus say “Destroy this Temple and I will raise it up in three days.” They would, indeed destroy the Temple of his own body and God would, indeed, raise it up in three days.

Jesus’ countenance in the painting has a quiet confidence; He listens intently to all that the High Priest is saying. Eventually the High Priest, in desperation says “I charge you under oath by the living God; tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.”

“It is you who say so” Jesus eventually replies. “But I say to all of you; in future you will see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” So Jesus’ fate was sealed.

Between the gaze of the High Priest and the gaze of Jesus there is a lighted candle. Christ’s white robe radiates more light than the robe of the High Priest and also more light than the Book of the Law. He is to become the fulfilment of that law. He is to become the Light of the World. The book of the law represents God’s word in the Old Testament, Jesus becomes the embodiment of that law as God’s living word in the New Testament.

And so even in this bound, silent and vulnerable state, Christ and God’s word are truly together. Illuminated by that candle, the light of the world stands ready to face His pre-ordained destiny.

Mark tells us in his account that the witnesses’ testimonies did not agree – had they been told what to say? Had they been paid to say it? It matters not, the process of interrogation continues, the outcome predetermined as the soldiers hovering in the background remind us.

In Honthort’s portrayal this is a night time interrogation, behind closed doors, adding even more to the feeling of Christ’s vulnerability. One way or another the authorities wanted him out for the way and they would surely get their way.

The soldier in the foreground stares intently at the High Priest, his gaze denoting an eagerness to “get on with the job.” Another glances over the shoulder of the first at Jesus with a similar impatience.

But Christ, although the bound prisoner and victim, remains the dominant figure. And he does so because he knows that all the scheming, all the fraudulent accusations here, or indeed anywhere else, cannot and will not thwart the Will of God.

In our troubled world, that is God’s message to us; the scheming, the plotting, the greed and the violence we see daily can never, in the final analysis, overcome the purpose of God. The God who so loved us and continues to love us that He sent His only Son.