# **Title: Courageous Love: A Willing Sacrifice**

*‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’* John 15:13

**Scripture Reading:** John 19:1-30

## **Introduction:**

We explore the idea of *Courageous Love* as Jesus embraces his destiny, knowing that ‘the Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, [and] be crucified’ (Luke 24:7). It invites us to examine the journey to the cross and the cost to Jesus as he is exposed to the intrigue and betrayal which led to his finally being condemned to death. His courageous love in the face of the antagonism of the religious leaders, the vacillation of the crowd and betrayal by some of his closest followers, present us with an image of a resolute Jesus who saw beyond his suffering to what would follow.

Motivated both by his mission and his self-declared belief that ‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (John 15:13), Jesus offers us a model of *willing* sacrifice. This Good Friday, allow the courageous love of Christ to inspire your corps to love courageously too; and explore together what this could look like both individually and collectively.

## **Context:**

* For John, the raising of Lazarus from the dead proves to be the catalyst for the final outlawing of Jesus. There had been other threats to his life, eg Mark 3:6 and John 8:59, but these were localised; there were other attempts to prevent his teaching by arresting him (John 7:32,45-47) but they proved ineffective.

His strong support from the common people and their leaders is only contained by the control of the Pharisees and their ability to exclude his followers from the synagogues (John 12:42,43).

* If the people now believe that Jesus can bring the dead back to life, then their opposition and control collapses.
* Jesus has proved himself to be the Messiah. Their arguments against him crumble.
* The consequences for them and the nation could be disastrous. It is political expediency which condemns Jesus to death.

## Steer:

The Pharisees were the dominant party in the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling religious council), but the Sanhedrin did not have the authority to try capital crimes (John 18:31). Blasphemy was a capital offence according to Jewish law (John 19:7) but under Roman occupation it required Roman ratification. If Jesus was to die it would need to come after due process through the Roman authorities. A capital offence would also need to be offered as an indictment against Jesus to make this happen.

A more immediate difficulty was how was Jesus to be arrested when surrounded by the crowd. Could he be openly arrested with such popular support? How is the Sanhedrin’s objective to be achieved?

## The Crowd:

* Not everyone who witnessed the raising of Lazarus had been convinced by what they saw(John 11:46). It is this report, according to John, which leads the Sanhedrin to act and Caiaphas to pronounce judgement on Jesus and order his arrest.
* Jesus is immediately aware and cautious. ‘Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea’ but withdraws to Ephraim (John 11:54).
* Jesus, however, does return to Bethany to the house of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. It is in Bethany that Jesus is anointed and his Passion begins.
* **Jesus embraces his destiny in spite of the threat to his life.**

## The Pharisees:

* Fearing the loss of political control and national disaster, Caiaphas is clear: ‘It is better for you that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation perish’ (John 11:50). So, ‘From that day they plotted to take his life’ (John 11:53). However, the arrest notice against Jesus appears to be futile.
* **Jesus, with full knowledge of the hatred and plotting against him, died for these very people. To love an enemy is a command not just vocalised but embodied by Jesus. It takes courage to love someone without the promise of its return.**

## The protagonists - Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate:

* The Pharisees needed a betrayer. John’s Gospel does not give us any preliminary story about Judas’s betrayal and its motivation beyond what happened in Bethany when Jesus was anointed (John 12:4-6). What we do know is that Judas is ideally placed to fulfil the Pharisees’ intention to arrest Jesus away from the crowd.
* From the Last Supper Jesus went to Gethsemane. He is finally arrested, betrayed by one of those he had *chosen* to be with him (Mark 3:14,19).
* In all, Jesus faces five interrogations through the long night hours, by Annas, Caiaphas, the assembled Sanhedrin, Herod and Pilate. It has been a long and exhausting night. The cost to Jesus we can only imagine.
* It is left with Pilate to bring the drama of the Passion to its conclusion – except that Pilate can ‘find no basis for a charge against him’ (John 18:38). He offers to release him, to pardon him if they feel he has broken the law. But the crowd would rather have a known and convicted criminal: ‘Give us Barabbas!’ (John 18:40).
* So Pilate has Jesus humiliated and flogged. Though Pilate had tried to set him free, Pilate proves too weak and is confounded by politics: ‘Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified’ (John 19:16).
* **Pilate and Judas gave in to conformity over courage. Love is a fierce motivator – so which love won here? Love of social acceptance, love of money, love of self? Our courageous love is to be rooted in Jesus first.**

## We consider Jesus:

* His courage before Annas (John 18:20-23)
* His vulnerability at the hands of the soldiers (John 19:2,3)
* His dignity before Pilate (John 18:34-38; 19:11)
* Jesus reflects Isaiah’s projection of God’s *Suffering Servant*:

‘He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
    nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by mankind,
    a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
    he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.’

Isaiah 53:2-4

* To love like Jesus may come in unexpected ways – ways that confront social norms, disrupt expectations and evoke risk. To love like Jesus takes courage.

Who is culpable?

* Pilate becomes the instrument of the Pharisees’ determination to eliminate Jesus, the crowd is engaged, Judas makes it possible, and the hesitant soldiers arrest him. The charge against Jesus will echo the crowd on Palm Sunday as the Messianic title of *King of the Jews* is given a harder and immediate connotation.
* Was Caiaphas wrong in his judgement? Jewish freedoms depended on the favour of Rome. Caiaphas was astute in realising that the crowd could become the ‘mob’.
* What did Judas want to achieve? Were his feelings hurt by the rebuke of Jesus (John 12:7)? Did he feel excluded from the group?
* Did those of the crowd informing the Pharisees understand the implications of what they were doing?

Jesus said to Pilate: ‘The one who handed me over to you is guilty’ (John 19:11). But we all become identified in the emotion, judgements, influences and opinions represented by all those who brought Jesus to his death.

Isaac Watts asks, ‘Was it for sins that I have done he suffered on the tree?’ (*SASB* 159 v2). As John Donne (1571-1631) in his *Devotions* reminds us, ‘No man is an island … because I am involved in mankind.’

**The suggestion is that we are *all* culpable and can see parts of our own choices and attitudes reflected in those above. To act with courageous love requires checking the areas of our heart and mind that prevent us from loving like Jesus, acting as a barrier.**

## **Application:**

*Courageous Love* is evident as Jesus battles with all the conflicting influences that lead to his Passion and the fulfilment of God’s purpose in the redemption of humankind.

As in the notes, the three influences of the Passion:

* People
* Pharisees
* Protagonists - Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate

can be cited and their behaviours reflected in our own behaviours.

Consider the impact on Jesus –

* the stresses of the crowd and their expectations
* the machinations of the Pharisees
* the betrayal by Judas as one closest to Jesus. Peter also denied (betrayed) Jesus (John 18:15-18,25-27), and all the disciples but one (possibly John himself, author of the Gospel – John18:15,16) scattered. Pilate too betrayed Jesus. He believed Jesus to be innocent, but condemned him anyway.

These can be explored and the resolute determination of Jesus identified. The cost should not be minimised. How would any of us have sustained our commitment against so many challenges? It takes courage, bravery.

Following the theme of *Courageous Love,* the example of Jesus to be brave in our decision-making is offered to us:

* **To be loyal to what we have seen and believe of Jesus and not to shift in our allegiances (the crowd).**
* **Not to act from our emotions, disappointments and subsequent regrets (Judas).**
* **When faced with difficult choices, to maintain what we believe to be true and not to capitulate (Pilate).**

Jesus does not condemn any of his accusers for their actions or behaviours. He achieved his purpose in spite of their expectations and opposition. ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30) has no qualification in John’s Gospel beyond demonstrating God’s redemptive purposes through Christ as completed and inviting a response:

‘These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.’ (John 20:31)

John identifies Jesus strongly as the Life-giver (eg John 5:24; 6:40; 17:3 etc). Beyond his death lies the resurrection and the future promise that ‘because I live, you also will live’ (John 14:19). **Paul also reminds us that the new life brought about by Christ’s death and resurrection has a present impact in the empowerment we receive to live as he did by his Spirit helping us**:

‘For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.’ (2 Corinthians 5:14,15)

See also Ephesians 5:1-2; 1 Peter 2:21-23; 1 John 3:16 as similar encouragements to follow the example of Christ.