

**SERMON – GOOD FRIDAY**  
**JOHN CHAPTERS 18 & 19**  
**ALL SAINTS CHURCH, WITLEY**  
**21 MARCH 2008**

Why was Jesus crucified? I have read many theories. Because of His Messianic claim. Because of blasphemy. Because of His political challenge to the power-bases of Caiaphas, Pilate and Caesar. Because of all those things – and more.

But I have never read a theory that takes into account one little line in what we've just heard read. For Pilate perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Him over.'

That little line and that little word 'envy' would more than explain all on their own the huge destructive forces unleashed against Jesus – because envy is open of the most destructive emotions that exist. It can be quite terrifying in its effects.

The pioneering psychoanalyst Melanie Klein wrote a penetrating study of envy. She traced its roots back to the earliest stages of infancy, where some babies, instead of being grateful for the plentiful supply of their mother's milk, react instead with envy of this capacity that they don't possess. And if they can't have it, then they want to destroy it.

So envy is distinct from jealousy. It is a desire for something that someone else has. It is an angry feeling that wants to take away or spoil. Jealousy, on the other hand, involves at least three not two people. It's a concern that love has been or will be taken away by a rival.

Envy may be born, then, in the initial encounter with a mother's capacity to give and preserve life. So it is that creativity becomes the deepest cause for envy. As Melanie Klein points out, the spoiling of creativity is illustrated in Milton's Paradise Lost where Satan, envious of God, decides to usurp heaven. He makes war on God in an attempt to spoil the heavenly life and falls out of heaven. Satan and his angels build Hell as a rival to heaven and become the destructive force that attempts to destroy what God creates.

Milton may have taken the idea from St. Augustine who describes life as a creative force opposed to envy, a destructive force. And St. Paul in I Corinthians writes that love is not envious.

People who do envy creativity lose their own creativity, and being eaten up with envy is a horrible thing to bear. That's why the envious try to block out what they feel. One way of doing that is in confusing good and evil. We see Jesus's religious enemies confusing good and evil when they call Him demon-possessed.

If you've mixed up good and evil, then you don't have to feel guilty when you try and destroy what's good.

But, as I've said, a major way of dealing with the target of one's envy is to try and destroy it, spoil it, devalue it. Then you don't need to envy it any more because it's gone. That, I think is what we have going on at the end of Jesus's life – a full-blown destructive onslaught by the chief priests and Pharisees attempting to wipe out the huge feelings of envy evoked in them by this man

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whose sheer goodness—let alone miraculous powers, authoritative teaching, freedom and speed of thought in public debate – left them feeling hopelessly inadequate.

Small wonder, then that, as Melanie Klein again says another classic author, this time Chaucer, describes envy, not pride, as being the deadliest of the deadly sins. Chaucer wrote, 'It is certain that envy is the worst sin that is; for all other sins are sins alone against one virtue, whereas envy is against all virtue and against all goodness.'

Small wonder also that untrammelled envy is associated with character deterioration. So perhaps, on this Good Friday, the chief priests and Pharisees are even more to be pitied than their victim, Jesus.

But let's be very aware that what happened to Jesus at the hands of envy will also probably happen to some extent to us. We will have our crucifixions. A major principle of the Gospels is that there is no glory without suffering. It's true of Jesus and He warned us that, as His disciples, it would also be true of us – because the servant isn't greater than the master. If we walk closely with Christ, then we will not be able to avoid attacks by evil. And that will include envious attacks if His goodness is at work in us more than in our attackers; if we are capable of empathy and love more than they are.

So we have to be alert to this, remembering that envy disguises itself behind denigration, devaluing and insult. I'm quite struck by the fact that Pilate perceived – perceived – that it was out of envy that Jesus had been handed over. Pilate is rarely commended for anything – and rightly so because he was an appalling governor – but perhaps he deserves commending for his insight here. He was sharp in reading what was going on. And we have to be sharp too, spotting what lies behind the attack.

But remember also that evil only attacks where there's something worth attacking. It attacks fortresses not deserted ruins.

We need to remain fortresses and to build up our strength. That can only be done in the power of Christ. As with Him, evil is being on our destruction, but Christ fights with us and for us. He was not defeated on the first Good Friday. And if we hold on to Him, He will never allow our defeat either.

Amen.