

The plot to kill Jesus was not cooked up overnight. According to John 11:53, the high priest Caiaphas and his cohorts had set that plan in motion several days beforehand, right after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. So imagine that someone from the high priest's circle started a checklist of what needed to be done to get Jesus executed. Theologian and Activist, Robert McAfee Brown suggests it might have read like this:

- + Sound out Judas. Get him to keep us posted on Jesus' whereabouts.
- + Check with priests about bribe money for Judas.
- + Alert guards to be ready to follow Judas at a moment's notice.
- + Arrange for half a dozen people to meet with [the Sanhedrin legal officer]. Have him drill them on charges to make against Jesus at the trial.
- + Requisition funds from Caiaphas to pay off the "witnesses."
- + Hire a messenger to call members of the high court together at a moment's notice. Impress on him that we've *got* to pull this thing off before the Passover, since no one can be put to death during the Passover!
- + Send representatives to Pilate to point out that he had better condemn Jesus too, unless he wants a bad report sent back to Rome.

As you can see, a lot of behind-the-scenes illegalities were committed related to Jesus' trial. Had he been tried under the laws of United States with jurisprudence, some smart attorney could've found plenty of reasons to get him off, and possibly the crucifixion would never have happened.

But no! Jesus was tried by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council, where, according to Matthew and Mark, there was a deliberate use of "false witnesses" who were allowed to give testimony against him. But our reading today is from John, who never mentions false witnesses. What John *does* tell us is that the high priest, Caiaphas, had already advised his cohorts that it was better for one person to die for the people, than for the Romans to move against the whole Jewish population. That one person, as far as Caiaphas was concerned, was Jesus. So, as

we read John's account of what happened after Jesus was arrested, we're seeing that plan put into motion.

Under U.S. law, a good lawyer could have found a number of "reversible errors" in the way Jesus' trial was conducted to warrant a reversal of judgment against him through an appeal. But, of course, all of this is neither here nor there. Jesus was tried and executed long before our legal system existed. The case against him was no doubt rigged, but as the gospel writers understood it, his death -- as unwarranted as it was -- was part of God' plan to save the world.

Which brings us back to the matter of reversible errors, but in this case, ours. We may have things in our past that we are so ashamed of, or feel so stained by, that they seem to us to be irreversible errors -- things that we cannot be rid of. Yet because of the cross, these errors are "reversible," i.e., forgotten, erased, removed "as far as the east is from the west," as Psalm 103 puts it.

Of course, I'm talking about bedrock Christian belief here. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." And as John wrote, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Much of the time, however, we're convinced our major errors and sins are not reversible. The memory of them haunts us. Robert Brown, who created the check list I mentioned earlier, was a military chaplain during World War II, and he tells of being on a troop ship after the war ended with 1,500 Marines being brought back to the United States from Japan. On board, a small group of Marines asked him to lead a Bible study, and he chose the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

Brown explained to his audience that the incident dramatized what Jesus said on that occasion -- "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will

never die." Brown went on to tell his audience about Ras-ko-link-off, a character in the novel *Crime and Punishment*, who had effectively killed himself, but who later was brought back to life as those words of Jesus were read to him.

After the discussion was over, and those in attendance dispersed, one corporal followed the chaplain back to his cabin. There, he confessed that the Bible lesson seemed aimed directly at him. He explained that six months previously, while serving with the occupation forces, he'd gotten bored and finally, one night, he'd gone off with some friends and gotten into serious trouble. Apparently, no one knew about it, but he knew about it, and he was sure God knew. And the Marine felt terribly guilty. He felt he had ruined his life and wasn't sure how he was going to face his family back home.

He told the chaplain that like Lazarus, he'd been a dead man, but after listening to the Bible study that day, and hearing Jesus' words about resurrection, he'd become convinced that the forgiveness of God could reach even to him. Through Christ, the error was reversible, at least as far as the man's guilt was concerned. Through Christ he had discovered that his guilt could be released.

Now....perhaps we've never done anything on the scale of this Marine's wrongdoing. Truth is, none of us really makes it through life without some regret. In fact I'm certain that there are times in our lives when we'd love to have a "do-over" for some incident where we handled things badly. But here's the thing: God's willingness to forgive is tied to God's realization about human nature. God knows we cannot avoid sins and errors, and so forgiveness and reversibility are built into how God relates to us through Christ. And Christ's death on the cross -- seemingly the success of the plot against him -- becomes in the larger picture a sign of God's love for us and an emblem of our forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

Today, the day we remember Christ's death on the cross, is traditionally called Good Friday, which often strikes some people as exactly the wrong word to

designate the day on which Jesus suffered so horribly. But "good" (as it is used to refer to this day) is an old English expression for "holy," and the word is telling us that the events of that day had beneficial effects for us.

The term "Good Friday" does not appear in the Bible, but the Bible does use the word "good" often to mean a satisfying experience of reality, rather than to define a moral norm. It is most commonly used as an adjective to describe or appraise the beautiful feature, desirable quality, or useful purpose of a person, thing, or event. For example, after God created light, he called it "good!" God also called the Law "good." And Jesus said that the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep is "good."

In that sense, and for our benefit, then, this day is Good Friday. On this day, Jesus died... a sad event by all accounts, but we can call this day "Good" because by God's power, the error of Jesus' examination, condemnation, and execution was reversed! God overrode the evil of human intention, disobedience, and sin. And likewise, through what happened on this day, God offers us a reversal from any guilt for our disobedience, our wrongdoings, our sins. So...despite the horrific and tragic death of our innocent savior, as we focus our attention on the events surrounding the cross we can indeed call today Good Friday! Thanks be to God. Amen.