

MAN ON TRIAL

A Play in Three Acts

Owen O'Sullivan OFM Cap.

St. Paul Publications - Africa

© Owen O'Sullivan OFM Cap. 1990.

MAN ON TRIAL

CONTENTS

	Page
Cast in order of appearance	4
Act 1, Scene 1	5
Act 1, Scene 2	9
Act 1, Scene 3	13
Act 1, Scene 4	17
Act 2, Scene 1	20
Act 2, Scene 2	31
Act 3	37

MAN ON TRIAL

Cast in order of appearance

Pontius Pilate, Roman prefect of Palestine

Lucius, an aide of his

Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee

Nathaniel, a Sadducee and wine merchant

Jacob, a Pharisee and village shoe-maker

Daniel, a scribe

Caiaphas, the High Priest

Annas, father-in-law to Caiaphas and former High Priest

Levi, a counsellor of King Herod's

Act 1, Scene 1. *A room in the residence of Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Palestine. Pilate is in conference with Lucius, an aide.*

Pilate: Now, Lucius, the intelligence reports. What's the news from our agents?

Lucius: The situation is generally quiet. There's been a problem with tax collection in Hebron, but I think we can sort it out alright.

Pilate: Well, you know what to do if there's any trouble. Just kick a few backsides, and, if that doesn't work, show them the point of a spear. They understand that language. In my experience, it pays to nip these problems in the bud. Show them who's boss right at the start, and it's better for everyone all round. If you're reasonable with these people, they see it as a sign of weakness and exploit it for all its worth.

Lucius: Don't worry, sir, they won't walk up my back. I'll see to it that the revenue comes in alright.

Pilate: Good, Keep it that way. And now, a confidential word in your ear, Lucius. Just between the two of us, there are rumours going round of a re-shuffle in governorships. And of promotion for me. I don't want my chances spoiled by reports getting back to Rome about trouble here. I want to get out of this backwater with my reputation intact. So keep the lid firmly on any trouble that arises. I'll put in a word for you in places

where it matters if you see to it that this place is quiet for the next year or so.

Lucius: Thank you, sir. I appreciate that, and you can rely on me to see that nothing gets out of hand.

Pilate: Is there anything else I need to know about from other areas?

Lucius: Well, I'm not sure how to put this, sir, but there is the matter of this wandering preacher, Jesus. He comes from Nazareth originally, but has lived in Capernaum in recent years. He's been travelling round for over two years now and...

Pilate: Yes. I know; you mentioned him before. Look, I've said it already. I don't give a damn about the Jews' religion. They are fanatics, narrow-minded provincial bigots. They're the bloody chosen people of God, and the rest of us are fit only for the dung-heap. The sheer arrogance of it is insufferable. I don't expect this Jesus is any different from the rest of them. The bottom line is this: we don't get involved in their religious quarrels. As long as they don't become political, as long as they don't question Roman rule in any way, they can say what they like about their God and their Law of Moses and all the rest of it.

Lucius: I realize that, sir, but I think we should take note of his following. The crowds grow bigger every day, and the people listen to him with great interest. Some of his

followers are beginning to call him the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

Pilate: They can call anything they like, as long as they don't call him King of the Jews.

Lucius: With these people, sir, I think the two may not be so far apart. In Rome, the priests do as they're told by the State; here, it's the other way round.

Pilate: Has he given any indication that he has political ambitions?

Lucius: No, not at all. In fact, he totally rejected it; his followers tried to push him in that direction. But his religious ambitions are so extraordinary that they could be taken to include everything in one broad sweep.

Pilate: What do you mean by that?

Lucius: Well, for example, other religious teachers claim to teach the truth. He goes much further: he says he is the truth.

Pilate: What is truth? As far as I can see, it's just individual preference hardened into certainty. If this man's opinion of himself is more exaggerated than the usual run of these prophets or rabbis or whatever they are, he'll probably just destroy himself quicker; that's all. I still don't see any reason for alarm in this. Why worry? We mustn't get excited over every half-crazy preacher that comes along. After all, we represent **Rome**.

Lucius: With respect, sir, I think there's another angle we should look at. He seems to be entirely lacking in the narrowness and bigotry we see in the others. As you know, they consider that they **defile** themselves just by walking into your official residence. But Jesus is on good terms with several of our officers, and it's even said that he healed a servant of one of them.

Pilate: (*pauses, reflects*) Now that is something different. What's behind it? What's his game? I know these bastards too well to think that he's doing us a favour by this. They've never made any secret of the fact that they hate our guts. So what's he up to? Is he trying to subvert the army? Trying to soften up the officers? Either he's a complete fool or a much more skilful operator than I thought. Keep a close eye on this man in future and see to it that I hear immediately of any new developments. This could be something very tricky indeed. Our simple carpenter-turned-preacher may be a sharper man than we thought. Alright, Lucius, those are your orders: watch him like a hawk and report back as soon as anything happens.

Lucius: You have spoken, sir. It will be done.

Act 1, Scene 2. *The palace of Herod at Mamre. Herod the Tetrarch is meeting a businessman, Nathaniel, a Sadducee.*

Herod: I like to think of myself as a broad-minded man. I see nothing against combining a little business with the pleasure of a good meal. So then, we are agreed that I grant you a monopoly on the wine trade in my kingdom, and in return you pay me half the profits. Generous terms, I'm sure you'll agree.

Nathaniel: I am honoured by my lord.

Herod: And my officials will be stationed in your vineyards and cellars just in case a cask or two should escape your attention. The expense should not be too great for you. Well, that's settled then. And what news have you brought me? What's going on in my kingdom that I should know about? I can't trust even my own spies; I never be sure who they're working for.

Nathaniel: My lord's subjects are the happiest of all men. As for myself, I have never involved myself in political affairs. I am...

Herod: You are a flatterer and a liar in one. I know your non-political stance. It means you sit on the fence and wait to see what way the wind is blowing. Then you move and kiss the arse of whoever gains power.

Nathaniel: My lord is perceptive... and benevolent, of course.

Herod: I asked you for news. What have you brought me?

Nathaniel: My lord's kingdom is at peace. There is some excitement over this new rabbi, Jesus, who excites the crowd with his wonders.

Herod: The people are fools. If any village juggler comes along with a new trick they all get excited and run after him gaping and gawking like idiots.

Nathaniel: This Jesus seems different from the others. Of course, he shares with other preachers the same total ignorance of philosophy; indeed, he probably couldn't spell the word. And he has all the usual sweeping generalizations, uncritical assumptions, inadequately worked-out ideas, misplaced emphasis...

Herod: By the beard of our father Abraham, you're a dreadful snob, a pedantic bore! To listen to you, anyone would think you were born in Athens, instead of some maggoty little village in Galilee. Can't you answer a simple question: what's he like?

Nathaniel: He's different from John, the one who baptized his followers.

Herod: (*angrily*) You stupid, insensitive fool! Have you forgotten that I had John executed for daring to say in

public that I sinned by taking my brother Philip's wife for myself?

Nathaniel: (*apologetically*) Forgive me, my lord. Your patience knows no bounds. I merely meant to say that while John irritated people with his unending harangues about repentance and fasting, this man appears to take a more positive view of things. He and his followers do not fast, they drink wine, they...

Herod: (*laughing*) Nathaniel, you're one in a thousand! Even in the middle of a sermon, your mind is never far from the trade. Well, there's no harm in that, there's money in it for both of us. I must say I like the sound of it; he might even convert me! I was never much one for fasting; feasting's more in my line. What else is new about him?

Nathaniel: Again, unlike the others, he appears to enjoy the company of women, and has even been seen with women... (*he hesitates*) with women whose reputation preceded them.

Herod: (*delighted, screams with laughter*) I take it you mean he likes a whore! Well, who doesn't? I wonder what are his tastes? I don't like virgins myself. They're such stupid creatures; you have to explain everything to them. I like the Edomite women, they know it all, and even a few new tricks, which is something for a man like me. Well, I'm delighted. The new prophet of wine and women I solemnly declare to be a man after my own heart. I'm so flattered that my instincts have at long last

won recognition by the men of God. (*laughs*) I like this new, broad, open religion which has room even for one like myself. I must say I never thought I'd spend the evening sitting here talking religion, and least of all with Nathaniel the wine merchant who's never seen in the Temple except when he wants to show off a new cloak at Passover.

Nathaniel: I'm delighted that my lord is pleased.

Herod: We must see something of this man. He must visit our court! Steward! Steward! Where is that lazy dog? (*The steward enters.*) Send a messenger to Jesus the prophet from Nazareth. He is summoned to our court! Let's see what wonders this new preacher can work! The winter evenings are long and dull. It will be something new and exciting to see. And if the people are right about him, his presence may even bring me luck. Thank you, Nathaniel. Your visit to my palace has made me doubly happy. A satisfactory business deal, and the prospect of, who knows? ... perhaps some spectacular wonder. Good night; travel in safety.

(*Nathaniel leaves.*)

Act 1, Scene 3. *The workshop of Jacob, a village shoemaker, and a Pharisee. He is visited by Daniel, a scribe.*

Jacob: Come in, my good friend, and be seated! I hope you're not too tired. This heat is oppressive.

Daniel: I'm glad to be able to rest. I've come from listening to Jesus who was speaking to a crowd in the market-place. He went on for a long time, and the people delayed him further with questions and requests for help and petitions for healing.

Jacob: I have some water here. A drink will refresh you. (*pours*).

Daniel: I am grateful. And how about my shoes? Are they ready yet?

Jacob: Not yet. I'm waiting for the leather to soften before stitching it. Perhaps tomorrow. Can you come for a fitting?

Daniel: I can come.

Jacob: And now, tell me what you think of Jesus. Where does he fit in? I acknowledge that he confuses me a little.

Daniel: The Law was given to us by Moses. And when we strayed from its observance, Heaven sent us the prophets to call us back to fidelity to the covenant by which we became his chosen people. The Law was given

to us; we did not make it. Our task is to learn the Law, and to live by it, not to change it. The Most High has taught us what we must do to please Him, and it is our duty to do it. Since most people are simple and unlearned, He in His mercy has made it simple for us by giving us our traditions, the Torah and the Mishnah, so that anyone, even the simplest villager, can know what is required of him. It is simple and clear-cut; there is nothing to be gained by introducing new interpretations, speculative theories. They confuse simple people who are not capable of understanding them. (*He interrupts himself.*) I am sorry, I have begun to lecture. It's the habit of a lifetime, I suppose. And you know all this anyway. Forgive me.

Jacob: No, no, you are right. Go on. I am glad to hear you speak on this matter.

Daniel: What do you make of him?

Jacob: I'm not sure what to think. At first, I found myself very drawn to him. He seemed calm, assured, courageous. I felt myself in a presence, something very special, sacred, but not distant. He seemed to be one of us - and yet not one of us. It is difficult to explain. His presence is so impressive, like nothing I ever felt before, that I felt drawn to him. Many others felt the same. While he spoke, it was as if time had stopped: the day was half gone, and I hadn't noticed. But, somehow, afterwards, when I thought more fully about what he had said, it seemed not quite right; it was different from what was handed down to us by our fathers.

Daniel: I agree with you. He certainly has a following. But so did the false prophets. Numbers alone are nothing. He speaks of love, humility, forgiveness. These are appeals to our emotions. But emotion is dangerous, especially in religious affairs. It is like a wild bull, full of power, but undisciplined. If I were to till my field in Spring I wouldn't hitch a wild bull to the plough; I would tame it first. There is a need for the discipline of Law, custom and tradition, especially for the ignorant. Far from recognising this, he treats them as his favoured ones. I don't understand this. It is imprudent.

Jacob: But he has power. No one who has seen him can deny that he has healed the sick, cast out devils, and some even say that he has raised the dead to life again. A man with powers like those, a man of our people, with a following like his, could become a great leader. He could be the one. Do you think it is possible that he might be the Messiah, sent by God to restore the kingdom of Israel?

Daniel: Be careful what you say on that point. It's better to be a live dog than a dead lion.

Jacob: (*heatedly*) We have lived for too long under the heel. Pilate, a cursed, godless heathen, openly shows his contempt for us. And Herod, that drunken pig, is worse. He is a disgrace to our religion and our race. It is time to be rid of them both and all they stand for. We need to make a clean sweep of all that is foreign. We must purify our land and restore it to the glory of King David. From Dan to Beersheba we must be rid of the gentiles, and of

those of our own people who have prostituted themselves to gentile ways. And this man may be the one to show us the way. He has the power, but does he have the will to use it?

Daniel: one must allow for his youth. He is inexperienced. He needs direction. His energies and talents, which are great, I agree, need to be channelled more constructively. At present they are dissipated too widely. When I was young, I too wanted to change everything. This young man seems to think that everything began with his arrival on the scene. Well, we were all a little like that once, but we learned as life went on. We will not help matters by expecting too much of this man, but with wise counsel and prudent direction much good can come. I feel it is our duty not to let this chance pass; it may not come again for a long time. Let us put our minds to it, then. Let us save this talented young man from his indiscretion and use his abilities for the purification of our people before Heaven.

I'll discuss this with some of our friends on my way home. Well, I have rested, and it's time for me to go. May peace rest in this house.

Daniel leaves.

Act 1, Scene 4. *The house of Annas, a former High Priest. He is in conference with Caiaphas, his son-in-Law, and current High Priest.*

Caiaphas: As you know, father, I have been considering for some time the reports that we have been receiving about Jesus the carpenter. Reliable scribes have kept us informed, and many of the Pharisees on their own initiative have come forward with information and have shared with us their opinions and concerns about the situation. The conclusion I have drawn from all this is that there is as yet no need for undue concern, and certainly not for any firm action. That might be premature and could make matters worse. A self-fulfilling prophecy about destruction is something we do not wish to bring down upon ourselves.

Annas: When you asked me years ago for the hand of my daughter in marriage I congratulated you for your perceptiveness and good sense. Now I am beginning to doubt my judgment. Caiaphas, can you not see what is so obvious? Is it too difficult for you to grasp what is before your eyes? You refer to these reports that we have received about Jesus. Can you not see what they say? The Pharisees and scribes talk about domesticating Jesus as if he were a wild animal. They are fools. Jesus is more dangerous to us than they can see. Jesus represents the end of Judaism; it is as simple and dangerous as that. The Pharisees and scribes are worried because Jesus and his disciples do not fast; they say he heals on the Sabbath, contrary to our custom. They see so clearly

what is not essential, but they do not see the essential which is staring them in the face. What Jesus represents is the dilution of our religion and our race. It is not merely his free-and-easy attitude to the Sabbath, it is not merely his indiscreet and inappropriate behaviour in public with prostitutes... these things are relatively minor. The heart of the matter is that, under the cover of fulfilling the Law of Moses and our traditions, Jesus is re-making them in his own image and likeness.

Caiaphas: What do you mean?

Annas: I mean this. Jesus befriends the Romans, our conquerors. He heals them when they are sick. He says, 'Pay taxes to Caesar.' He actually sits down and eats a meal with the tax-collectors, those traitors who do the conqueror's dirty work for him. And, as if all that wasn't enough, let any gentile woman come whining and whinging about some sick brat of hers, and Jesus thinks nothing of healing it. Are we Jews the chosen people of God or are we not? If the gentiles are equally in God's favour, then our separateness vanishes like dew in the morning air. We have survived as a nation for nearly a thousand years by maintaining our identity; we were called apart. That is what has kept us from having our faith diluted by pagan practices. If this Jesus has his way, we will be reduced to the same level as the gentiles. Do I need to explain to you what that means? It means that a separate Jewish nation ceases to exist; it means that you and I and all we stand for are nothing. Can you not see the way things are leading?

Caiaphas: (*nervous, he pours water into his drink of wine*) I am equally concerned for the welfare of the nation, but I still have hope that...

Annas: (*heatedly*) Hope? What hope do you speak of? It is blind unrealism. You might as well think of removing from your wine the water which has just diluted it. The damage has already been done, but it can be prevented from growing worse. Jesus must be stopped, **firmly and finally**. The issue is clear; all we need is the will to do it. When it is done, we will be glad, we will be able to know with full assurance that we have done what is right, that we have saved our faith and our people from destruction.

Caiaphas: (*frightened*) Your words have deeply disturbed me. I need time to think. I will go home now and reflect. We will meet again and discuss this matter further. Good night.

Annas: The time is short. Do not reflect for too long, or you will decide nothing.

Act 2, Scene 1. *The residence of Pontius Pilate in the Antonia fortress in Jerusalem. He is meeting with Lucius, his aide, Herod the Tetrarch, Levi, a counsellor of Herod's, and Nathaniel, the Sadducee and wine-merchant.)*

Pilate: Gentlemen, as prefect of this province, I have called this meeting today to enable us to review together our information and our assessment of the preacher Jesus. I don't think it is necessary to say in present company that we are not here for a theological discussion but – how shall I phrase it? – to put a name on him, to find out what he's about and to take whatever action is necessary to see that matters do not get out of hand. (*Nods of agreement all round.*)

Lucius, you have watched this man closely from the beginning. Give us your assessment.

Lucius: As Your Excellency says, I have watched him and have had him watched from the beginning, when he first began to attract attention. Our concern was with his political significance. The rest did not matter. There is no doubt that he has the capacity to win followers on a large scale, and that they are devoted to him. They even follow him into the desert, where it is said he fed them by a miracle. I need not say that I was extremely skeptical about these and other reports of wonders which it is said he worked. I suspected some cheating, some form of trickery. But it seems that such an explanation cannot be accepted as adequate. Frankly, I do not know

how to account for it, but he does indeed appear to have powers which go beyond anything that can be explained in human terms. Whatever about all that, of this much I am certain: he is popular and he has power.

On the other hand, he has no organization worth talking about, and his teachings are peculiar, to say the least. No one can accuse him of trying to win favour with the crowd. He does not tell them what they want to hear; on the contrary, he sometimes disappoints them with his statements and with his actions. That shows a lack of political skill, if nothing else.

Pilate: For example?

Lucius: On several occasions, his followers have called on him to become king. There have been calls for a revolt against Rome, and against you, Herod. Yet he will have nothing to do with any of this; he stands apart it, and has even hidden himself from his disciples when they pressed the point. He seems genuinely not to want political power. He says, 'My kingdom is not of this world.' I'm not sure what that means, but it doesn't sound like a threat to us anyway.

On one occasion he really infuriated his followers by saying to them that if one of the occupation soldiers forced them to carry a bundle for a mile, they should freely offer to carry it for another. They were disgusted with him when they heard that, and a lot of them got up and went home.

Pilate: I don't understand why he should say that. Is he being subtle, or merely stupid? (*pauses*) You told us before that he was trying to make friends with some of our officers; is he still at that?

Lucius: Some of our men have become his followers, I regret to say. When they asked him what they had to do to be saved – “being saved” is one of his pet phrases – he told them to be content with their pay, and not to extort money from the peasants.

Pilate: He keeps both the paymaster and the peasants happy with that statement. (*chuckles*) Tell me, is it true that he once said to his followers, ‘Love your enemies’?

Lucius: Yes, it is.

Pilate: What an extraordinary statement! Rome could rest secure if all her enemies loved her. It certainly isn't a revolutionary statement... (*hesitates*) I mean, it **is** a revolutionary statement. Dammit, I don't know what to make of him. Whose side is he on? Is he for us or against us? If he cursed us to hell I could understand it, but this ‘Love your enemies’ business is beyond my grasp. What's your final word on him, Lucius?

Lucius: I don't see **him** as a threat, but the **movement** which he has started could become one if it was taken over by one of his more radical and politically-minded followers. It may be necessary to take steps to prevent that possibility from becoming a reality.

Pilate: That may come later. In the meantime, (*turning*) let's hear from you, Herod. You have an interest in this no less than we.

Herod: (*sulkily*) Levi, my counsellor, will speak on my behalf.

Levi: I will be brief. In part I agree with you, Lucius. Jesus is popular, and he has even worked miracles. He is in a position of great power, even if he likes to pretend otherwise. This appearance of not being interested in the kingship is pretence. He's a subtle schemer, who's merely waiting until he thinks the time is right. It comes to this; either we get him or he gets us. That's all there is to it.

Herod: No, it's not. Finish your report.

Levi: (*surprised*) Does my lord wish me to refer to (*he hesitates*)... the other matter?

Herod: They know about it anyway. Get on with it.

Levi: My lord Herod was extremely generous to this young man. He even invited him to court and offered him a full share in its life. But the ungrateful wretch refused. He did so in public and called my lord a... (*he hesitates*) a jackal. The people laughed.

Herod: (*furious*) No one speaks of me like that in public and gets away with it. John challenged me about my marriage to my brother Philip's wife, and I had him

executed. This upstart, who provokes my subjects to laughter, when they should fear and reverence me, won't get away with it wither. By God, I'll have his head on a plate!

Pilate: (*laughing*) We all heard about it! You thought you could buy him off with wine, women and song, and he threw it back at you. You thought that if you couldn't tame him, the women would, and then you discovered that his interest in prostitutes was to try and convert them – how did he put it? – to recover their self-respect. If he gets his way, there'll be a lot of Edomite whores out of work. It'll be safe for a young man to pass a crossroads once again. (*laughs*)

Herod: He humiliated me! The cursed dog had people laughing at me on the streets!

Pilate: Poor Herod! You know, you'd see a lot more if you could lift your mind above the belt! (*laughs, then turns*)

Well, Nathaniel, what have you got to say for yourself? Did you offer him a concession in the wine trade? You rarely miss a chance to turn a profit.

Nathaniel: Your Excellency jests, but I'll make no profit on this prophet (*laughs at his joke*). Jesus attracts a large following, mainly among the poor, the lepers, and other undesirables. Very few of our class take him seriously. But when he says, for example, 'The last shall be first and the first last,' and, 'The greatest among you shall be

as your servant' that turns the social order upside down. His teaching is too extreme, too simplistic... and well, odd. He says, for example, 'If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.' I'm not sure what he means by the bit about the cross, but clearly the statement is not going to win him popularity. He seems to be aware of that, but it appears that he doesn't mind. I sometimes wonder if he has thought out the implications of what he says.

Herod: Nathaniel, you're as pompous as ever. Your crowd always take yourselves seriously. Wisdom will surely die with you.

Nathaniel: He has a substantial and loyal following. His disciples are devoted to him. In political affairs – if I may use a Roman metaphor – he leads them to the Rubicon, and then tells them to sit down and have a picnic. In matters of money, he simply isn't interested. He could make vast sums using his miraculous powers. I don't know whether they're genuine or not, but it doesn't matter. What counts is that the people think they are, and, with proper management, there could be a great future for anyone who can somehow tap into that market – I mean his line of business – I mean his..., well, whatever he's at.

Pilate: You're not being very helpful, Nathaniel. Can't you give us something more specific, something to enable us to get a grip on this man?

Nathaniel: What does he want? Power? Money? Position? Pleasure? He rejects them all. So what **does** he want? Is it to live on in memory? To have a lasting name for himself? If that's what he has in mind, he'd want to do something about setting up an organization. Yet he has nothing like it. He appears to have given little thought to it. It is true that he has chosen twelve men, whom he calls apostles, and I have taken the trouble to watch them to see what sort they are. A most unimpressive bunch, I have to say. I don't understand how a man with such obvious leadership ability can choose such a crowd of no-hopers as his closest associates. It cannot be that he wants all the attention for himself; they're nothing anyway.

Pilate: Tell us about them.

Nathaniel: (*slowly*) Peter is the first among them. A fisherman who has been too long among the fish. He has a mouth as big and a brain as small as a barbel's. Full of big talk, but he never achieves anything. More of a hindrance than a help, I'd say. Philip is simply stupid: he doesn't seem to understand anything Jesus says. Nathaniel is a cheerful cynic, but lazy; he spends most of the day asleep under a tree. Thomas is a real skeptic; he believes in nothing until it hits him in the face. James and John, who are brothers, are fanatics, and Jesus has his hands full trying to talk some sense into them. Their mother has ambitions for them; she wants them to be co-rulers with Jesus or something like that. This causes friction with the other apostles and Jesus has to calm them all down from time to time. The rest are

blockheads. I don't know why he bothers with them. One day when Jesus was healing I saw two of them more interested in a dogfight than in the healing. They are so wooden that nothing moves them.

Oh, I almost forgot. There is one who's different. He's a common-sense character, with a good business head on him, a practical down-to-earth fellow who could steady up the others if they'd listen to him.

Pilate: Who's he?

Nathaniel: His name is Judas Iscariot, Your Excellency. Given time, I think he could develop into someone who might be useful to us.

Pilate: Thank you, Nathaniel. You have been most helpful. I think we have agreed substantially that Jesus has a large and devoted following, mainly among the poor and the outcasts. He appears to have miraculous powers which he uses to heal people; he has not been known to harm anyone with them. His teaching seems confused, or should I say confusing. He has no political ambitions, no desire for money or power, no organizational structure, and his closest followers are mediocrities at best. So have we got anything to worry about?

Herod: We do.

Pilate: You mean **you** do. Your royal feathers are still ruffled because your tactic with the women rebounded on you.

Herod: Your Excellency, there is more to it than that. The neat distinction in your mind between what is religious and what is political does not apply here. This is not Rome. Let me recall a lesson from the history of my country. There was once a man among us called Theudas. He claimed to be the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. Followers gathered round him, and he led them into the desert. After a while they returned in revolt, proclaiming a new kingdom of God on earth. It took much bloodshed to suppress it. Now when the followers of Jesus call him king, he rejects it. But when they ask him if he is the Messiah, he does not reject the title, though he has not so far positively affirmed it. If he announces himself as the Messiah, that will be taken by his followers as a claim to kingship **and even more**. Should we wait passively for that day to come, or should we take steps to ensure that it does not?

Pilate: Continue; we are listening.

Herod: I believe that he is simply waiting for the right time to make his move. He has the cunning of a peasant; he will not show his hand until he is sure of himself. And then we are **all** in trouble. Furthermore, I would add that, even if I am wrong about **him**, there is still the danger of his **movement** being taken over by hotheads who could spark off a revolt. None of us is too popular, and we cannot be sure of where such a revolt would end.

Therefore, I am saying: why take the risk at all if it can be forestalled?

Nathaniel: Social disturbance must be avoided at all costs. It destroys the confidence of the business community. Stability is essential, and sacrifices must be made to maintain it.

Pilate: You are saying that Jesus must be sacrificed.

Nathaniel: I merely meant to say that...

Pilate: I know very well what you meant to say. You just didn't have the guts to say it, that's all. Well, then, if that's what it is to be, let's get on with it. Who are Jesus' enemies?

Herod: He has plenty among the scribes, the Pharisees, and the priests.

Pilate: The approach you suggest is a good one. If he is to be... rendered powerless... it is best that it be done at one remove from us. Our hand should not be seen in it. So, Herod, you say we should throw him to the religious wolves. Can that be arranged? And can they handle him?

Nathaniel: The groups my lord has just mentioned, and, I must admit, my own group, the Sadducees have often tried to outwit him in argument. We lost every time, and no one will challenge him now.

Herod: I think we should give them more time. We can nudge them along with care. It is not a matter of winning an argument, as you think, Nathaniel, but of winning the people. The religious teachers are as proud as Satan; they have all the answers. For every dilemma, they have a formula; for every mystery, a technique. They have God locked up in their books, and they have the key. Now this Jesus comes along and ploughs across their furrows. It hurts their professional pride that an amateur, no matter how gifted, can beat them at their own game, and win the crowd by doing so. You may think they have ink in their veins, Nathaniel, but I tell you they have blood, and they will have blood... Jesus' blood, before all this is over.

Pilate: That was quite a speech, Herod. It's amazing what you can come up with when you have a clear head.

Herod: The job must be done. It is best done from the religious angle, so that we can keep out of it. If we play the scribes, the Pharisees, and the priests the right way, they'll do the job for us.

Pilate: I underestimated you, Herod. Splendid. Well, that settles it then. Our assistants can work out the details of our plan. It has been a very fruitful meeting. We can meet again if necessary to review progress. I bid you all good day.

They leave.

Act 2, Scene 2. *Jacob the Pharisee, Daniel the scribe, Caiaphas the High Priest, and Annas, his father-in-law, are together in Caiaphas' house.*

Caiaphas: My brothers, we live in difficult times. The integrity of our faith is challenged as never before. The foreigners impose on us their pagan rule, their godless power. Within our nation, we have to endure the scandal of Herod who is the foreigner's willing tool. Worse than either of those though is the threat from within our own ranks, from the man Jesus of Nazareth, who is more insidious and therefore more dangerous than any other. I have summoned you here to ask your counsel, which I deeply appreciate. I ask you to be candid in putting before me your feelings, your thoughts, as to what must be done in this grave hour.

Jacob: I have to acknowledge that I have been deceived by this man. When I first came to hear of him, I thought he was just another wandering preacher... and we have had plenty of them, mostly good, decent men who perform a useful service to our people. As his fame grew, I became more interested in him. Then, when I actually heard and saw him face to face, I grew more and more impressed by him. He was such an attractive person, so full of life, so complete, so whole. He seemed to have such a depth of understanding of our Law, custom and tradition that I felt overwhelmed. I began to hope that maybe he might be the Messiah, God's chosen messenger to his people in their time of need. Others thought the same. Many tried to proclaim him king. I

was impressed by his modesty in refusing. Indeed, I should have been disappointed if he had seemed to be power-hungry and grasping. (*He gets up, agitated.*)

However, what sickens and disgusts me about him is his attitude to the Romans. He has the ability to lead us to freedom from Rome; he has powers that no one has ever seen before – he has even raised people from death – yet he refuses to use this power to rid our nation of the foreign filth that stains us. The man is a worthless, cowardly traitor. He has no courage, there's no fight in him.

Daniel: (*signals to Jacob to sit*) For my part, I agree with Jacob, but I would go further. He claims to teach the Law of Moses. But he changes it. He says, 'You have heard how it was said... so and so ... and he quotes the Law, and then goes on, 'But I say to you...' and he introduces something new. He has no right to change God's Law; he puts himself above it. We all know what the Law prescribes about Sabbath rest. But he's free and easy about all that; if he feels like healing, he heals and it doesn't matter to him that it's on the Sabbath. He fails to grasp, or maybe I should say he refuses to grasp, that it's the principle that counts; an individual person here or there is not important. What is important is that we should be true in all respects, at all times and in all places, to what we have inherited from our fathers. He sees no problem at all about amending the Law. In matters of fasting, as well as the Sabbath, he's not merely liberal; he's almost lawless, his idea of freedom is close to license. On the other hand, when the fancy

takes him, he can be more demanding than any of us. Moses allowed divorce and re-marriage; he rules it out completely, makes no allowance for it at all. In our tradition we have always had schools of thought, we have had those who are liberal and those who are conservative. Think of Hillel and Shammai, for instance – but this man is beyond any such distinctions.

There **must** be continuity in Law, custom, tradition and doctrine, or we are reduced to nothing. But he refuses to limit himself to any of this; he makes the most sweeping claims. He says, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life.’ Who does he think he is? The truth is that he’s an upstart from nowhere, and he presumes to teach us the Law of Moses. If he isn’t stopped, our traditions will fade away before our eyes. His popularity is too dangerous; he leads people astray, he...

Caiaphas: (*in measured tones*): Thank you, Daniel, you have made your point well. Jesus challenges and compromises all that have made our faith and our nation endure. If he continues, we, our religion, our nation, our position, will end. (*Annas glares at when he mentions ‘position.’ Caiaphas corrects himself, recovers.*)

We have been patient with Jesus; we have tried to channel his energies constructively, we have tried to moderate his excesses, his extremism, but he is unyielding. In the face of our paternal solicitude, he has shown himself incorrigible. He is so sure that he is right. He refuses entirely to compromise. He wants a perfect world; he has even said, ‘You must be perfect as your

heavenly Father is perfect.’ We were all over-enthusiastic in our youth, but we learned; time is a great teacher... (*Annas glares again; Caiaphas corrects himself, continues.*) I’ve wandered from the point. It is not a matter of mere youthful enthusiasm gone wild; it is more serious than that. Although I fully accept what you, my friends, Daniel and Jacob, have said, it goes much further. We must see to the heart of the matter. The essential core of this problem – and we must grasp this with total clarity – is that Jesus is a blasphemer. You remember when they spoke of Abraham, and he said, ‘I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’ Did not the Most High reveal himself, His Holy Self, to our father Moses by saying, ‘I am who I am.’ Jesus mimics the very words of the All-Holy. He goes even further; he says, ‘The Father and I are one.’

Brothers, the matter is simple and clear-cut. We must not confuse it with lesser issues. Jesus makes himself equal to God. That is blasphemy. The penalty for blasphemy is death by stoning. There is no other, and it is our duty to see that the penalty is applied. The outraged justice of the Most High demands it.

Jacob: It is true. It must be done.

Daniel: The Law requires it.

(*Annas nods his assent in silence, then speaks.*)

Annas: All true, but the manner of dealing with this problem is not simple. We have to face the fact that we

live under Roman rule. We are deprived of the power to utter the death sentence. Only Pilate can do that. In presenting this matter to him, there is no point in speaking of blasphemy; it means nothing to him. He must be told that Jesus is a rebel against Rome. With the people properly prepared beforehand and speaking with one voice, Pilate will not be able to refuse. But we... we must be very prudent in handling this affair. Jerusalem will be crowded with pilgrims for the Passover; we do not want the holy season disturbed by a riot. But, above all else, we must ensure that nothing is done to make a martyr of Jesus. If that were to happen, the last state would be worse than the first. He must die for blasphemy, as the Law demands... nothing else.

Jacob: Pilate is the key. He can be manipulated by his fear of Rome. If he is reminded of the trouble caused by previous Messiahs – he could be told about Theudas, for example. If it is pointed out to him that the crowd only this week acclaimed Jesus as **king** when he entered our capital, that should be enough to rouse him. We wouldn't have to spell it out for him that trouble here where he rules would be the end of his career, and maybe of his life.

Daniel: We scribes will use our influence. We will not fail when the time comes. We have strong support among the people, and we will see to it that the matter is put to them simply so that they will understand that it is a matter of blasphemy. We can remind them of what Jesus said and implied; he has left us with many sayings which we can use to make it clear what the situation is.

Caiaphas: One man must die for the sake of the people.

Annas: It must be done so that what will be remembered later on by our people is his blasphemy. In time, all this will be forgotten; the crisis will pass. Only his blasphemy must be remembered.

This problem must be solved once and for all, and in such a way that, if the necessary action is misinterpreted by future generations, the blame will fall on Pilate: he condemned Jesus for making himself king; his soldiers carried out the sentence. They will crucify him, and everyone knows that crucifixion is a Roman penalty, not a Jewish one.

Stability will be restored and continuity re-established. Our children and our children's children will thank us for assuring their future.

(The others nod their approval.)

Caiaphas: We have put our hands to the plough. We must not look back. Thank you for coming. Go in peace.
(All leave.)

Act 3. (*Jesus has been executed and buried. It is late on the evening of the Passover. The ceremonies of commemoration have been completed. Caiaphas and Annas are together in Annas' house.*)

Annas: The Passover ceremonies were long. I feel tired. When you grow old, it takes longer to recover. But I feel renewed by the crowd. Seeing such a multitude gathered in the Temple makes me appreciate the strength of the faith of our people. How do you feel?

Caiaphas: (*edgy*) The crowds were numerous indeed. The ceremonies were never so well performed... and yet I feel uneasy.

Annas: (*surprised*) Why?

Caiaphas: When I went in to the Holy of Holies as my duty requires, I was shocked to see that the veil of the Temple was torn, ripped from top to bottom as if by a powerful force.

Annas: Oh, don't be silly. There's a perfectly simple explanation. It was that earth tremor; they're common enough in these parts. And besides, how old was that cloth? It probably needed replacing anyway.

Caiaphas: You may be right.

Annas: The other business went off well. Better than we expected, in fact. It was a stroke of luck when that

disciple of his, Judas, turned up and offered to do the job for us. What was his motive, I wonder? Was it just the money? Not that we paid him a fortune. After all, thirty pieces of silver is only the price of a slave. Still it was the best thirty we ever spent. Judas' motives don't matter; the job is done, and well done at that.

(There's a knock at the door. Annas answers it and returns. While he's at the door, Caiaphas is pacing fretfully up and down.)

Annas: My servant has just brought me the news that Judas has committed suicide. *(Caiaphas is shocked.)* He threw the money back into the Temple, and went and hanged himself on the branch of a tree overhanging a cliff. The rope broke, he ripped his stomach open on a rock, and his guts spilled out.

Caiaphas: What a wretched end! Suicide is a grave sin. We mustn't use the money for the Temple; it is blood money. I feel anxious about this. I hope nothing comes of it.

Annas: There's nothing to worry about. On the contrary, the death of Judas has a certain advantage: it ties up what might have been a loose end; it reduces the risk of any undesirable gossip. Who knows what he might have said. Well, we don't have to consider that now. The money will come in handy, too. We could use it to buy a burial ground for strangers.

Caiaphas: Have you heard the rumours that are going around? I heard it said that there were strange sights in the city this evening. People spoke of the graves of the dead being opened, and shades being seen on the streets.

Annas: Really, Caiaphas, I'm surprised at you... a man in your position talking such nonsense. You should know better. You are disturbed by this affair of Jesus. Rest assured. You only did what had to be done, your duty. Jesus was a blasphemer; we all heard him. And he was punished for it, as the Law requires. It is as simple as that. Far from any feeling of unease, we have every reason to feel proud. We have been tried, Caiaphas, and not found wanting. We have been true to our faith and to our nation. The honour of the Most High has been vindicated, and our position has been assured.

(He moves the window and looks out.)

We have been here for so long that the night is almost gone. Rest here for what is left of the night.

(They retire to their rooms just before dawn breaks on the following day.)