

Woe



*Matthew 23:1-39; Luke
20:45-47
Year A Proper 26*

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

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| | | 1 |
| ▲ | Priest - another highly ranked priest of the Temple concerned mostly with his own power | ▲ |
| ■ | Caiaphas - the high priest, a suave and amoral politician whose primary goal is the survival of the nation | ■ |
| ● | Elder - a member of the ruling council who's honestly undecided about who and what Jesus is | ● |
| ▲ | Nicodemus - a member of the ruling council who's a secret follower of Jesus | ▲ |
| ■ | Jesus | ■ |
| ▲ | James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group) | ▲ |
| ▲ | Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus | ▲ |
| ▲ | John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples | ▲ |
| ● | Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor | ● |
| ● | Chuza - the open-minded, intellectually curious manager of Herod's household | ● |
| ▲ | Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts | ▲ |
| ▲ | Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past | ▲ |

Performance notes: The setting of this play switches rapidly between a flashback of Jesus preaching his sermon earlier that day and four small groups discussing it afterward. It's all one long scene, but for the purpose of dividing up parts, the distinct groupings of characters are: Priest-Caiaphas-Elder-Nicodemus, James-Joanna-John, Thomas-Mary, and Judas-Chuza. And Jesus, of course.

Scene 1

Caiaphas , Chuza , Elder , James , Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Mary , Nicodemus , Priest , Thomas

{The priests and elders in the Council room.}

Priest *[in a rage]* He's a dead man! A dead man! Do you hear me? Dead!

Caiaphas *[coolly]* I assume you're talking about our favorite rabbi.

Priest Who else? We have to do something this time. This time, he's gone too far!

Caiaphas *[with mock patience]* How has he insulted you this time?

Elder *[deferentially]* Your Eminence? It was really bad this time. Truly bad.

Caiaphas *[more soberly]* Was it? *[to Nicodemus]* What do you say? You're always defending the man, after all.

Nicodemus *[reluctantly after a long pause]* He spoke very harshly.

Caiaphas Well! You'd better tell me exactly what he said, then.

{Flashback to Jesus preaching his sermon at the Temple that morning.}

Jesus *[with authority, and anger that grows all through this play]* The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore, you should act in accordance with their words, but not in accordance to their deeds, for they teach, but do not do. They bind heavy burdens on the people, but they themselves will not lift them with a finger. They do all their works for show. They carry oversized scriptures and wear ostentatious robes. They love the chief seats at feasts and in the synagogue, and to be greeted by people in the marketplace, to be called Rabbi.

{The priests and elders in the Council room.}

Caiaphas *[with a chuckle]* That doesn't seem too bad. It's a spot-on description of many priests I know.

Priest We carry large phylacteries to demonstrate the importance of scripture! And our robes express the beauty of the Lord. The people *invite* us to take the chief seats! Out of respect for what we represent.

Nicodemus *[defensively]* He was only talking about those who do these things from the wrong motives, which the high priest has admitted *is* the case with some priests.

Elder But it got worse. Much, much worse.

{Some of the disciples discuss the same words.}

James And it got better after that! Much, much better!

Joanna What do you mean by better?

James I mean that he really lit into those hypocrites!

John Were they there to hear it?

James I didn't see the high priest anywhere nearby, but some of his flunkies were there. I'm sure they passed the message on.

Joanna I'm sure they did. I just wonder what the message was meant to be.

{Judas discusses the sermon with Chuza.}

Judas He was clearly not talking to the people. That was a message intended for Caiaphas.

Chuza Agreed.

Judas But what precisely *was* the message? What did he say next?

Chuza He counseled the people not to become priests!

{Flashback to Jesus preaching his sermon that morning.}

Jesus Don't *you* seek to be called Rabbi! For there is only one teacher, the Messiah, and you are all brothers. Don't call anyone Father, either, for you have only one father: the one in Heaven. And don't be called teachers, for there is but One. But the greatest among you shall be servants. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but the humble will be exalted.

{Thomas and Mary discuss the sermon.}

Thomas I still don't understand why you think he was trying to get himself killed with this sermon. It seems like pretty good teaching so far. Well, I can see how the priests might take offense at being called hypocrites, but it's not like it's anything they haven't heard before.

Mary It got worse. But even at the beginning, I could tell there was a difference. It was in his voice. It was like a parent with bad kids and they're leaving home in just a few days and she's practically screaming at them because she's desperate for at least one lesson to sink in before they go.

Thomas As if this was his last sermon to the people!

Mary Yes!

{The priests and elders continue their discussion.}

Caiaphas Wait a moment. He referred to "the Messiah" in the third person?

Nicodemus *[in quiet, puzzled realization]* Yes. He did.

Elder What does it mean? Is he *not* claiming to be the Messiah after all?

Priest *[scornfully]* He's just an egotistical nut! He's talking about *himself*! In the third person!

{The group of disciples continue their discussion.}

James Then he started really letting loose on them. "Woe to the scribes and Pharisees!" "Woe to the scribes and Pharisees!" Woe and woe and woe again!

John On *them*? Are you sure? It was all spoken against them and not about people in general?

James Of course I'm sure!

Joanna I'd say it doesn't sound like him, except that I'm not sure anymore that any of us ever really knew him.

John This last part sounded like him, though. To be humble, to not seek a title, prestige.

Joanna I think that's only to say, "This last part is a part of him that I like."

{Back to Jesus that morning.}

Jesus Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against the people; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

{Thomas and Mary discuss the sermon.}

Thomas Wow. I guess this is the part you were talking about.

Mary It was terrible to hear. It was the voice I used to hear in my head, condemning me for my sins.

Thomas And now you were hearing it from the teacher you once loved.

Mary Still love! Though he slay me.

{The priests and elders.}

Caiaphas *[thoughtfully]* "Twice the son of hell"?

Priest That's what he said!

Nicodemus You can't deny that it's sometimes the case.

Elder But it's wrong to teach it as if it was the *intention* of our priests and teachers.

Caiaphas *[still thoughtfully]* "Therefore you will receive the greater condemnation."

Priest *[coldly]* I think you understand that as well as I do. He's not just talking about divine condemnation. He's indirectly calling upon the *people* to condemn us!

{Jesus that morning.}

Jesus Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? He who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.

{The disciples.}

Joanna Do people actually swear by the gold of the Temple? And do they really say that swearing by the Temple is nothing?

James If the rabbi says that they do it, they do it! I wouldn't put it past those hypocritical priests.

John He's probably speaking figuratively. People don't literally swear by the gold rather the temple or the sacrifice rather than the altar, but they often value wealth more than spiritual things.

Joanna Does it really sound that way to you? It sounds pretty literal to me.

{The priests and elders.}

Caiaphas I fear I've underestimated our man.

Priest Finally! You see how dangerous he is now?

Caiaphas I see how delusional he is. We can't count on him *not* to foment a riot, because he probably doesn't know what he's going to say next himself!

Nicodemus *[desperately]* I'm sure he's a good man!

Elder A good man would not fabricate the outrageous accusations that this man has!

Caiaphas Actually, he *is* a good man. I see that now. And that's the danger! You can reason with a sane man, or bargain with an evil one. But a good man who believes beyond reason that you are the Devil himself can only do one thing: seek your destruction.

{Jesus that morning.}

Jesus Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, but have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you! For you are like whitewashed tombs which appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones.

{The disciples.}

Joanna *[in a worried tone]* He really laid it on.

James And why not? They deserved it!

John *[uncertainly]* I wish...I wish he had preached the same sermon, but to everyone: the priests, the crowd, us. I don't understand why he's targeting *them*.

James *They* are the Enemy!

Joanna The "enemy"?

James Yeah, the opponents of the Kingdom.

John Shouldn't that be the Romans? Or our own fearful selves?

James *[confused]* Yeah, but...but...

{Jesus that morning.}

Jesus Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' In this way, you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt! Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

{Judas and Chuza.}

Judas *[grimly]* I think I understand the message now.

Chuza He's asking the people to depose the priests and set him up in their place!

Judas No. The people were not the intended recipients.

Chuza It can't be the priests. Is he simply railing against their sins? In the hope they'll repent? If so, I'll have to say that I overestimated him.

Judas Well you can keep your high opinion of him, because that's not the message. He's speaking to them, all right, but he's not asking them to repent.

Chuza Then what?

Judas He's asking them to do what they must do in response to provocations like his.

{Thomas and Mary.}

Thomas Are you sure? It's kind of an outlandish hypothesis, you know.

Mary I'm sure. And you are, too. You weren't there, but you've heard his words now. I know your head has to doubt what I believe, but what does your heart say?

Thomas It doesn't want to accept it, which means it's probably true. But it's just so crazy! Why would he ask for something like that? And why would he ask *them*?

Mary Who else can he ask? He can't ask us. We won't hear it. And as for "why that?", who can know the ways of God?

Thomas Then you still think this is the Kingdom?

Mary It has to be.

{The priests and elders.}

Priest Murderers! He's calling us murderers! Not just of the prophets, but of everybody! Of Abel!

Nicodemus *[trying desperately to defend Jesus]* No! No, that's not what he was saying at all. What he meant was...was that we are all guilty, collectively, of these past crimes. They're part of our heritage. And those who try to disavow complicity...

Priest Come off it! He called us murderers, plain and simple.

Caiaphas *[quietly]* I'm more concerned about what he called *himself*.

Elder What? I don't remember him calling himself anything.

Caiaphas Oh, but he did. "Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes."

Nicodemus He was just talking about the sages that God continues to send us, now and into the future.

Caiaphas That *who* continues to send?

{A pause while they think about this.}

Elder *[shocked]* Dear God, he said, "I"!

Priest He's calling himself God! That's blasphemy! That's a capital offense!

Caiaphas Well, we already have plenty of material to secure a judgment against him when the time comes. The problem has always been how to do it safely. We have to weigh the potential consequences, but I think the equation has been altered.

Priest Finally! When do we take him?

Caiaphas *[impatiently]* The equation has altered, but it has not disappeared entirely! We still need to look for the right opportunity, but from now on, we'll pursue it more aggressively, and be willing to take a bigger chance when it comes. The odds of catastrophe befalling us through inaction are now too great.

Elder I'll have him watched 24/7, and send reports by the hour to your office.

Priest And I'll prepare a detachment of guards that can strike quickly when the moment arrives.

Caiaphas Very good.

{The Priest and Elder exit.}

Nicodemus *[awkwardly]* Your eminence...

Caiaphas *[not unkindly]* Are you going to plead for him? Don't waste your breath. I don't know what your relationship is with him - friend? supporter? secret disciple? (Yes, I know about your late night talks with him!) - and frankly, I don't care, so don't bother denying anything. My advice, however, would be to terminate the relationship. The safety of the nation itself is now at risk and I will do whatever it takes to preserve it. I don't know if I'll succeed. I don't know if the nation will still be standing when these days have passed. But the one thing I can promise you is that he will not.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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