

Selected Sermons #19

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

John 11:45-57 Laetare

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”

He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?" But the chief priest and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.

Dear people living under the gracious hand of God –

"The best-laid plans of mice and men," wrote an old Scotch poet, *"often go wrong."* Do you suppose he was right about that? Certainly our experience seems to support his sad judgment, for while we know very little about the plans of mice, it is commonly agreed among us that the plans of men often fail to realize fulfillment. This is true both of the plans of the godly and the plans of the wicked. Abraham planned to save the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by prayer, but he failed. David planned to build for the Lord a temple but never succeeded in this ambition. On the other hand, Joseph's brothers intended to put him out of the way forever, and we know how enormously they failed. Absalom schemed to get his father's throne but instead died like a wild beast. The planning of men has not become any more sure in our day and age.

Some plans we are glad to see go wrong, even some of our own, when we discover how wrong they were – but the failure of other plans may cause great discouragement and

discontent, grumbling and disappointment, and even plunge men into the great weakness of despair. That is a great sin indeed, for it is sinful to cling with narrow-minded eagerness and hope to human plans, our own as well as those of others. People make plans that often fail - both among godly people and the ungodly. On the other hand, we can say that the poet was wrong, for actually human plans never fail. That may seem a strange contradiction, but our experience as Christians shows it to be true, and our Gospel for today supports this truth. We have, in fact, a proverb among us to explain what we mean, and this proverb is better and more truthful than the poet's judgment.

Man proposes, but God disposes.

I. Man proposes

II. God disposes

I. Without a doubt, man proposes. That is by far a better word than the other - namely, "planning." The schemes of human beings are not really worth being called plans, since a "*best-laid plan*" is a thing carefully thought out by someone who cannot see the beginning and the end and everything that lies between. Actually, all we do is **propose** - that is, make a suggestion. We think of an idea and then try to follow it as far as we can go. The end result is made clear by today's Gospel text.

Next to his own resurrection from the dead, the mightiest miracle our Lord performed here on earth was

the waking of Lazarus after he had been dead and in his grave four days. Our text now tells us that many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and Martha during those sad days – and were therefore present in Bethany when Jesus arrived and called Lazarus out of the grave – *believed in Jesus*. The experience of seeing the dead man come out of his tomb and of talking with him worked with tremendous power on their hearts and minds.

While we cannot say *is* how deep or sincere their faith was, yet we must accept the testimony of God's Word that they *believed on Jesus*, and we may not forget this when we are further told that some of them went to Jerusalem and related the story of the raising of Lazarus to the chief priests. For that is what John writes - not that some of the Jews did not believe, therefore went and told Christ's enemies about the miracle – *but that many believed, and some of them went and told the events to the temple's religious leaders*.

Here, then, we have the first case to consider – an instance in which believers (Christians) thought they had a plan – for what would move them to go out of their way in order to give the bitter enemies of Jesus, the men of the Jewish Council, a detailed account of the happenings in Bethany, unless they had a purpose? We can readily see that they thought they had a good reason and a good plan. No doubt they intended to help and promote the cause of our Lord. They would put an end once-and-for-all to the enmity against him. They would go to the chief priests and

say, *“Now listen, this is what happened; we saw it with our own eyes. He quickened Lazarus, whose body had already begun to rot. It convinced us; it is true, and you cannot escape it. He is the Son of God.”* After that, they thought, no one could possibly resist the truth any more.

It was a **well-laid plan** and it looked fool-proof. These were Christian people ready to strike a great blow in favor of the Messiah – but it was not a plan at all, it was just an idea. Men proposed, but they succeeded only in hastening and settling Jesus’ death. The idea back-fired, for the Council immediately called a meeting and reached a decision they had been postponing for three years.

We see, therefore, that good intentions do not keep human plans from miscarrying. This will explain why our plans, if they are made without direct command from God, may not only always fail, but sometimes do so with sad consequences. We are children of God, and the Lord loves us dearly. In our humble, imperfect way we love him too and wish to serve him. This is as it should be, and so long as we serve him on paths which he has clearly outlined for us in his Word, we are following his plan and cannot fail.

But when we begin to propose, when we start suggesting, when we initiate our own ideas of what to do and pursue them – no matter how enthusiastically or how sincerely – we always fail and sometimes cause heartache for ourselves. Yes, at times our proposals work out in such a way that the gospel and the Church seem to suffer a serious setback. This happens often, as with Peter who

went into the courtyard of the High Priest during the trial of Jesus, as with John Mark who was determined to go with Paul and Silas though he had no call and failed so badly.

Man proposes. The second example in our Gospel concerns the chief priests. They too had an idea which they called a plan. It was to put Jesus to death at the earliest possible moment. Now, do not for a moment think that they presented it as an evil, wicked plan – not so. Even the most **devilish proposals** are clothed in pious words and hide behind a pious purpose. The Council did not call its plan “*murder*” but “*a service to God and country.*” First came their reasoning. *If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him; and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.*

No doubt these flint-hearted men prided themselves on being forward-looking and wise. If they let Jesus alone, he would finally make himself king and then the Roman government would get angry, send an army, and the result will be the destruction of country and people.

From this it was only a step to the holy-sounding resolution offered by Caiaphas that it *is better for one man to die for the people.* I need not explain to you how viciously dishonest such a suggestion was – how wholly senseless and contrary to the facts – even so, these men believed in what they said. So utterly did the devil rule their hearts that they imagined themselves sanctified benefactors, good rulers, and men of God. **They**

proposed what to their black hearts was a well-laid plan, but it was bound to fail.

Or did it fail? Did it not succeed? If you mean that they succeeded in carrying it out – yes, they crucified Jesus Christ, **but the plan failed**. It did not save land or people or keep the armies of Rome out; instead it destroyed the land and people and brought the Roman armies in, as history shows. Moreover, it did not do away with Jesus, for he lives today more gloriously than he did then.

So, my friends, the world and the men of this world scheme and plan. Great **men propose** with all the weight of their experience and wisdom. They say, *“We will do this and this.”* Always their plans are phrased in pious words and clothed in holy purposes, but they plan without God and against God. What they want to save, they will ruin; and what they want to ruin will be saved. Never trust in the proposals of men – for, behold and see, they all labor under the grievous burden of being only human (they do not have all of the facts) and that makes their plans go against them. Both the Christians who rely on themselves in planning and the unbelievers who despise God and his Word – they all cannot create well-laid plans because they do not know enough to make a good decision.

This is demonstrated by the third example of human proposing presented in our Gospel. We read here of the agreement among the thousands of people who came to Jerusalem in those days to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. The multitude buzzed like a swarm of bees, and

their conversation was about Jesus who had withdrawn himself for a time. They discussed the question of whether the Lord would dare to appear in Jerusalem, now that the Council had put out a reward notice for his capture. They said, *“What think ye - will he not come to the Feast?”* In modern words, *“What will you bet he won’t show up?”*

Again, a human proposition. It was **wrong again**, for Jesus did show up. In fact, he came very publicly, riding into Jerusalem like a triumphant hero in a big procession. Men were wrong about it, simply because they did not know all of the facts. Too much was hidden from them – the great plan of God, the great purpose of Jesus to save all people from their sins. How could they do any intelligent proposing if they did not have all the information needed to make a decision? Therefore, all in all, human plans are misguided affairs. We must expect them to go wrong. But at the same time, let us not be disheartened, but thank God, for -

II. Since man proposes, how grateful we ought to be that God disposes. What does the word *“dispose”* mean? It is indeed a well-chosen word. A commander disposes his men for battle. That is, he takes them and arranges them in such a way that his plan for attacking the enemy can best succeed. So **God disposes**; that is, he takes the plans of men and arranges them so that they fit his plans.

Thus the Lord blesses even the ill-conceived human proposals of his dear children – the ideas they follow in

weakness – and blesses them by **disposing** of them in his wisdom. By their imperfect scheme in telling the chief priests about the miracle of Bethany, they only made the enemies more determined than ever to kill their Savior; they actually brought about the capture of Christ.

This favorable result certainly in no way excuses the mistaken proposals of some of Jesus' disciples, but it comforts us greatly. How often we would cause untold harm by our planning, yet the gracious God turns aside the deadly point of our plan and uses it to further his own glory and our eternal good. Though often for our folly we must suffer temporary pain and anguish, which we well deserve, God turns the real evil away. Moreover, God also **disposes** of the plans of the evil men.

The godless plans of statesmen and presidents and dictators work destruction. No matter how sincere or good their purposes, never expect them to succeed – but expect God to use human plans for his gracious purposes. He redeemed the word, broke Satan's power and death's strength – and he did it by turning the wicked, murderous designs of the Jews to the service of his saving will. At the same time, God sharpens the other edge of his plans as a sword and strikes with it with swift punishment to the wicked schemers. The Jews who claimed to fear Roman intervention suffered the worst punishment that Rome ever dealt out.

God deposes. Yes, he performs according to his own purposes, always. Knowing that, let us guard diligently

against mischievous planning which can only be turned against us in punishment. As we know our own hearts, this will be a daily struggle. Then let us fully trust God's gracious and unfailing providence. As we now know and understand God's heart, this will become our daily blessing. May God dispose himself unto us for our good and dispose of our failings, as always, in Jesus! Amen!

When o'er my sins I sorrow #152

Jesus, my great High Priest #220

Thy ways, O Lord, with wise design #530