

Week 24

Jesus Confronts Religious Leaders

Guide: Tension and Hypocrisy



Over the past eleven weeks we have contemplated the life of Jesus. He has shown himself to us in the context of our examining his mission and our own way of life. We have considered two ways of desiring in Week 17 and three kinds of responses in Week 18. In contemplating his calling his disciples, in Week 21, we considered three degrees of being with Jesus.

We now begin to contemplate how all this is played out in Jesus' life. We begin to feel the tension developing as Jesus speaks more and more prophetically. As we read the readings, we grow in awe at his freedom and clarity. He sees through hypocrisy and names it. The fear of reprisal doesn't in any way deter him from denouncing injustice. Jesus knows what happens to prophets. His words come out of the purest of poverty and indifference. He can surrender to humiliation and rejection and death itself, for he has become a humble servant of his mission.

This week we want to enter into the tension and the freedom. We want to keep asking to be drawn to him as we let him show us this prophetic part of his spirit. He is the teacher, the healer, and the one who calls for justice, even at the cost of his own life.

In all the background moments of our week, we can be imagining the words of Jesus that would confront hypocrisy. We can feel the tension and the freedom of his spirit there. We can let it address our hearts.

We can speak with Jesus about our love and admiration for him, and our desire to be placed with him in a life that does justice.

To get started, "For the Journey," and prayers will be especially helpful this week. The photo can inspire us this week and become a symbol of our desire to be free for mission. The late Fr. John Cortina, SJ, one of the inspiring Jesuits in El Salvador, preaching in front of a mural with an image of Archbishop Óscar Romero, can remind us all week of how the following of Jesus continues to show forth in heroism and martyrdom, in the name of justice, even in our day.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

We are all inspired by a *hero*—someone who shows great courage in risking self in accomplishing a tremendous goal. This week we let ourselves be inspired by the heroic in Jesus. It is his spirit that has inspired and empowered the vision and freedom of countless martyrs and witnesses down through the ages and even in our day.

To get started, we need to read the readings and really experience what it took for Jesus to confront the religious leaders of his day. To enter more deeply into an example of the powerful inspiration of the prophetic spirit in our time we might rent three movies: *El Salvador*, *Romero* and *Roses in December*.

They would offer some dramatic images from one country's struggle for justice to complement the Gospel scenes—especially in the lives of Archbishop Óscar Romero and Jean Donovan, who along with three American nuns, was brutally murdered in El Salvador.

We are approaching the part of Jesus' life that will call him to journey to Jerusalem and surrender his life. He does this not as a passive and meaningless victim of some insane force. Jesus spoke what he had become—God's Word, for us.

We are also moving through these weeks of the retreat with part of our minds and hearts reflecting on how we will be changed by this experience. Our desire to choose more freely—which is being shaped by our growing admiration and love for Jesus—becomes more and more concrete. This week we continue to let ourselves be drawn to Jesus, because our desire to *be with him* will indeed transform our day-to-day lives.

As we wake each day, we recall his prophetic clarity, how he came to proclaim liberty to captives and to bring good news to the poor as their advocate. During the day, in all the background times, we will be more sensitized to see the *forces at work* that are contrary to religious values, contrary to the dignity of human life, contrary to justice. As we read the paper or listen to the news, we will better hear the cry of the poor in world and local headlines, and we will be more attuned to the voices that speak for values and justice. Each evening we can speak our thanks to Jesus for showing us who he is for us and how he is, even now, drawing us to be with him in being women and men for others.

For the Journey: Praying with the Man of God

We pray this week with a man in conflict, not within himself but with those who hear him as new and different. The Pharisees and their scribes, as the religious leaders of their times, were being faithful to their ancient and well-lived traditions. They were well-trained in their scriptures and the art of searching them for their depth of wisdom and meaning. Jesus rises from the same religious traditions and enters the discussions with the Pharisees with a new way of interpreting those same scriptures. Jesus is seen as a rebel and a disturber of the

people. It is their fidelity's meeting that personal fidelity of Jesus causes the tensions that lead so frequently to Jesus' being confronted in the pages of the Gospels.

We could easily pray with such opposition to Jesus' teachings in our own lives. During these past weeks we have prayed with the history of our resistance to his ways. This ongoing tension between our ways and his will always form the drama of our own following of him.

This week, it is more appropriate, however, to pray with Jesus as a peaceful and self-accepting man of God. Ignatius moves us to contemplate the freedom that Jesus possesses stemming from his having heard and having believed who he is in the eyes of his heavenly Father. He knows who he is and he knows too the holiness of the ancient traditions and practices that his teachings build on, yet challenge. We are watching and listening to a person of fidelity both to himself and to his conflicts.

He is free to hear the arguments against him and his ways. He desires the engagements with his opponents as he was eager to engage the sick and needy around him. Fidelity is not being stubborn. Jesus fearlessly stays open to the dialogue and even to the threats. Rather, the word is *passionate*. For Ignatius, the word *passionate* means a fiery openness to whatever is offered. We consider this man of passion, of intense, open-hearted, open-handed availability for him to be revered as well as offended.

In watching and listening to Jesus this week, we ask God for that kind of self-acceptance that frees us from both the inner conflicts and the fears of being rejected by those who may fear us and our freedom. Self-acceptance is more than a psychological conclusion. We are invited to accept the created, the redeemed, and the blessed-and-sent self who has found acceptance in Christ. In this sense and in the eyes of the world, we too, then, would join Jesus in being new and different, rebellious, and a disturber to our culture as he was to his.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

How do you do it? I have prayed this week with the readings and I watch, as your encounters with the religious and political leaders grow tenser. I see how you increasingly threaten them, as you grow more critical of them. And what draws me to you even more is the calm peace you have about you.

I watch you face the people in authority who don't trust you. You look them in the eye, confront them, and raise your voice. I am usually frightened by anger but not your anger here. It seems right. You seem so clear on what is right and what is wrong, and you have no fears about your own safety. It seems as though your only thought is to be true to the person God called you to be.

Your own sense of who you are has freed you to serve God in ways I can't imagine. I feel so limited by my fears and trepidation, and yet so drawn to the freedom I see in you, the freedom to serve God.

Help me, Jesus, to see where God is calling me to serve. I see so many things that are wrong or unjust in the world, in my country and city, even in my family. But I am afraid. How can I change things? How can I learn to confront? Maybe more important, what is God calling me to do?

As I watch you, dear friend Jesus, I grow in love for your strength and the freedom you have in the way you serve God. I am so drawn to that. I want that ability to serve God unencumbered by all of my fears. You seem to have such a sense of who you are and how you are being called by God to serve. I want so much to be courageous enough to confront the structures and authorities I see that are wrong. But Jesus, I'm afraid. Confronting brings back frightening memories that need healing, and I need to feel your love and freedom to serve as the core of my own. I've never been a fighter, only someone who slinks from conflict.

But as I stay with you this week, I see that the constant confrontations with the authorities seem to give you a sense of greater peace and firmer resolve. It's as if it is becoming clearer to you exactly who you are and what God is calling you for.

That's what I want, Jesus. I want to be able to put my head up and, like you, look people in the eye as I challenge them. I want the courage to speak up for those who need help. I want the courage to stay by your side in all of this; to work like you, for justice; and to bring good news to the poor.

Thank you for sharing so much of your life with me. I feel my love and my connection with you increasing as I get to know you each day. Thank you for inviting me to be with you on this journey. Give me the courage I need to walk it as you do.

Scripture Readings

Matthew 21:12–17

Matthew 21:33–45

Matthew 23:1–39

John 11:45–57