

## An Arrest at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Spring 2018

Thomas Ward  
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Imagine a man entering Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan through the doorway on Fifth Avenue and East 50th Street. After proceeding through the vestibule and heading to the right, he frees up one of the brass stanchion posts used to block an exit in the back of the Cathedral.

He charges into the Gift Shop located in the right-hand back corner of the nave of Saint Patrick's. He lifts the brass post and throws it against the displays of rosaries, medals, books and holy statues

available for purchase there. The glass shatters everywhere.

The man next reaches over the pulverized displays and seizes the store's cash register, slamming it against the marble floor. It also smashes into pieces.

Bills and coins spill out onto the Gift Shop steps and into the Cathedral.

He then moves from the bookshop to the adjacent altar to Saint Anthony in the Cathedral's ambulatory. He flips over the two votive candle stands located there. Broken glass, flames from candle wicks, and melted wax pour out onto the Cathedral floor.

The man then turns on the Cathedral's ushers, tour guides, security guards, and vendors. He grabs hold of a cleaning person's broom and coerces Cathedral personnel to exit the building. As he herds them out onto Fifth Avenue, he shouts, "'My house will be called a house of prayer.' But you have made it into a 'den of thieves (Matt 21:12-13)."

The scene draws a crowd in front of Saint Patrick's. The man continues to speak while cell phones record him. He warns congregants wishing to enter the Cathedral that the Archbishop of New York as well as the auxiliary bishops, monsignors, and priests associated with him are deceiving, self-serving "snakes" destined for Hell (Matt 23:33), who will drag the communicants to Hell as well (Matt 23:15).

In the age of cellphones and texting, the man's apprehension and arrest will be almost immediate. Resistance to arrest, through striking the summoned police officers with the broom, would constitute a risk to public safety. That could justify him being tased or possibly even shot to death because of the threat that he posed to the officers, the church officials, and bystanders.

If apprehended, the alleged perpetrator of said crime would be charged with assault and battery as well as with destruction of Church property. Because he acted violently in the confines of a Church and because his attack targeted the adherents of a specific religion, he might also be charged with a "hate crime" as per [Article 485 of New York State Penal Law](#). If arraigned and eventually tried and found guilty on all charges, he might be sentenced to several years of prison time.

Now imagine this same scenario, but two thousand years earlier...

### Jesus' Purification of the Temple and its Consequences

Nearly two thousand years ago, just five days before his death, Jesus of Nazareth unleashed a similar display of outrage on the money changers and merchants in the courtyards of the Temple in Jerusalem. When he drove them from the Temple with a whip and he denounced the Temple leadership, Jesus could have been detained for assault and battery and for the destruction of property. Yet that did not happen, at least not right away...

Indeed, after violating the sanctity of the Temple grounds, Jesus squatted on the periphery of the Temple and began to perform miracles.

That evening Jesus freely headed to the nearby town of Bethany where he spent the night.

The next day he returned to the Temple where he continued his "rant" against the Jewish leadership (Matt 21:23-45). He spoke both plainly and in parables. In his moments of "plain speaking," he denounced the priestly hierarchy. He admonished his followers to do as the chief priests said rather than as they did because the lives that the chief priests led were filled with hypocrisy (Matt 23:1-7).

Jesus' acerbic criticism of the chief priests and Pharisees in those final days of his life festered in the hearts of the offended senior authorities. There was recognition that a line had been crossed and that they needed to do something (Matt 21:45-46). Finally, some decided that they needed to arrest and "kill him

(Matt 26:3-4)." The goal of those who conspired against Jesus was thus not simply to incarcerate him for a few years. They decided that they wanted the Roman authorities to prosecute and execute him for having committed a capital offense.

In his arraignment before Jerusalem's Council of Elders known as the Great Sanhedrin, Jesus was deemed by his accusers as a "fraud" (Matt 27:64) who concocted his "divine identity" and portrayed himself as a future worldly King (Matt 27:11-14), indeed a Counter-King to Caesar, "Hell-bent" on amassing political power.

Gerald Hall explains in *Jesus, the Christ -- A Christology Course* that "Jesus was crucified because he was seen as a threat to the powers-that-be."

This was best represented in Jesus' shocking act of "cleansing the Temple" upon his arrival in Jerusalem. The day-to-day activities and rituals of the Temple reinforced the surrogate governing powers and the authority that Rome devolved to the leaders of the Temple at the time and Jesus had dared to challenge this.

The Jewish religious governing hierarchy, with the Great Sanhedrin or Council of the Elders at the pinnacle of power in Jerusalem, was sanctioned by the Romans who benefitted from the Sanhedrin's implicit acceptance of the Roman occupation. In his arraignment, the Sanhedrin fingered Jesus as a fraud and a dangerous menace to society.

Hall reminds us of the witness who denounced Jesus at his Trial before Pilate. The witness for the prosecution alleged that Jesus was perverting "the nation and forbidding us to give tribute (i.e., pay taxes) to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king (Luke 23:1)." Due to this, "at the very least, Pilate and the Roman authorities had good reasons to put a stop to the Jesus-movement on the basis of its subversive possibilities." Hall concludes: "We can surmise that there was a deal struck between the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities." There was an understanding between both of these constituencies that they "needed to do away with" Jesus.

Throughout Christian history, much has been said, beginning with Peter's speech in Acts 1, which elevates Jesus' Resurrection and downplays the egregious crime of cutting his life short.

Some have argued that without the Trial of Jesus and his consequent execution, the Nazarene's life and teachings would have had no impact on the world. But what would have transpired if Jesus had survived the trial and been found innocent?

Luke 7 recounts Jesus' encounter with a woman who had led a sinful life. Jesus chided those who judged him for welcoming her and then he turned his attention to the woman whom they had scorned:

Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven -- as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:44-50)

Indeed, Jesus could offer both forgiveness and salvation prior to even going the way of the cross.

After a trial where Jesus rather than his accusers prevailed, wouldn't the Sanhedrin have known that, like John the Baptist, Jesus was "hands off" (Matt 21:23-32)? Wouldn't they have allowed him in whom Pilate and Herod had found no wrong to forge ahead with his ministry?

With the leverage of his exoneration, why would Jesus not continue to challenge those who had failed to frame him? Why would Jesus' more prominent supporters not be able to step to the forefront from that point, including Sanhedrin members Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus?

What would have happened if the vindicated Jesus could have met Saul of Tarsus, a Roman citizen, after being found innocent by Pilate? Couldn't Jesus have become a defining actor in Roman-Jewish relations in the decades that followed his trial?

Any suggestion that an exonerated Jesus, who would have been "on a roll," would choose to become a cabinetmaker and live to a ripe old age in Nazareth, rather than pursue the cause that had fueled his life for decades, represents naïve and extreme speculation. Had Jesus been freed by Pilate, the prime of his life and ministry awaited him.