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47900 Rimini, via Flaminia 18
casella postale 106
tel. +39 0541 783100
fax +39 0541 786422

www.meetingrimini.org
Twitter: @meetingrimini
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Reading the Bible with Joseph Weiler: the trial of Jesus

Rimini, august 22 2013 - They return to the Meeting, after a sabbatical year, the long-awaited lessons Joseph HH Weiler on the Bible. Weiler, a lawyer and expert on European constitutional law (he is director of the Straus Institute for the Advanced Study of Law and Justice and co-director of the Tikvah Center for Law & Jewish Civilization at New York University), is known to the people of the Meeting also as a passionate student of the two Testaments.

The two meetings this year are dedicated to the trial of Jesus, addressed by the procedural, cultural and theological point of view. Weiler professional eye, his Jewish identity, as well as the successful formula of his lectures seminars Rimini, offer a valuable opportunity - said Don Stefano Alberto introducing the work - to move closer to the biggest enigma of history of law in a non-granted way, without the complaints of the 'politically correct'.

The lesson of Weiler focuses on trial before the Sanhedrin, the supreme body of the Jews who unanimously condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. The immense bibliography on the subject - began the speaker - is almost entirely devoted to show that it was not possible to treat a fair trial, since the result is unacceptable. Jesus guilty of blasphemy: how could he, as the paschal lamb sacrificed, not to be immaculate? What would Christianity be without the crucifixion of the innocent? You would be able to eliminate Jesus with a murder, theologically it would have been easier. Why do his end had to be made through a process? What is the theological significance of that?

Many questions arise in the speaker and, with him, in all the audience. The process has had a huge impact on the relations between Jews and Christians. For centuries, Jews were considered to be the killers of Christ: in their apologetic literature they blame the Romans. For Weiler, however, the sentence was the responsibility of the Sanhedrin. This is the theme of this first lesson: why Jesus provoked so much public Jewish authorities insomuch as incur the death penalty? Why considering him so dangerous and shedding a conspiracy?

1. Jesus represents a challenge to the temple and its rituals. Under the Romans while in autonomous regime, Jews considered the temple of Jerusalem as the only place of

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sovereignty, which was forbidden to the Gentiles. Jesus enter into the temple and remonstrates violently against the sellers and buyers of animals and money changers. "The chief priests and the scribes heard him, and they wanted to kill him." In this reaction, Weiler identifies four different levels. On the surface, it is a case of disturbance of public order. More on the merits, the priests and the Levites who live off the temple's offerings according to the Law, they feel threatened because implicitly Jesus accuses them of corruption calling the temple "a den of thieves." A third far deeper level emerges when Jesus healed the blind and the lame in the temple. In the biblical culture, the disease is a sign of sin.

In order to obtain the forgiveness of sins, especially of those of impurity, a jew man would have led a victim to the temple (or would have bought it on the spot, hence the need to change money) which only the priest could offer as a sacrifice. Jesus' behavior eliminates the need of the priest and sacrifice, effectively deleting the need of the temple. His contempt towards the temple would appear even more radical when he said that he would have destroyed and rebuilt in three days.

2. Gesù challenges the Sadducees and Pharisees, guardians and interpreters of the Law. The Sadducees (many of whom were priests) observed only the written Law, but the Pharisees also the oral tradition, interpreted by the rabbis. Sole author of the Law is God. Jesus' challenge to the law is expressed, for instance, in the episode of the disciples who, hungry, collect ears on the Sabbath day. The infringement, which occurs only in tradition and not in the Bible, scandalized the Pharisees. Jesus replies first by expert rabbi: the Law was not violated at all, because there are exceptions (the priests themselves are working on Saturday and David ate the bread of the temple's offerings). But then he attaches to himself the unheard and divine authority to change the law: "The Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath." In the relationship between Jesus and the Law there is always this ambivalence: on the one hand, he interprets it, the other he changes it.

Pharisees and scribes are scandalized because he eats with sinners and tax collectors, so Jesus replies "Those who need a doctor are not the healthy, but the sick." It is a fundamental objection to the Jewish biblical religion which is articulated on the basis of distinctions and boundaries (animals pure / impure, Saturday / rest of the week). Jesus challenges the system of boundaries, because in his eyes everyone is child of God. Therefore Jesus evokes Jews biggest nightmare: the end of the exclusive alliance between God and Israel, the disappearance of the chosen people itself, the cancellation of 'national identity: "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, but all are one in Christ Jesus."

In the second part of the lesson, Weiler has investigated the reasons for the hostility of the council, looking into the narrative of John and then that of the Synoptics, with new questions.

According to John it was not a trial, but only an interrogation before Caiaphas. It is recognized that Jesus "performs many signs" which are (according to the language of the Bible) "signs of God." But if the authorities accept that Jesus fulfilled signs of God, why do they unanimously reject him? even the words of Caiaphas are enigmatic: "If we let him alone, everyone will believe in him, the Romans will come and destroy our nation" these fears are evidently real, but what is it? And again: "It 's better that one man should die instead of the whole nation." Why is Jesus considered dangerous to the point?

According to the synoptic Gospels, however, the trial was there. Reading the Gospel of Mark, the oldest, one gets the impression that Jesus was tried in compliance with procedures. In capital cases, in fact, it was compulsory to show at least two witnesses, as in fact happened. Exasperated by the silence of Jesus, Caiaphas finally asked him, "Are

you the Messiah?". Jesus, honest, says, "I am." Caiaphas tore his clothes and accuses him of blasphemy, following the sentencing. But by the time a response like that of Jesus in no way constituted a 'blasphemy' (the word doesn't exist neither in Hebrew nor Aramaic). Why, then, Jesus was condemned to death? The audience, which has been very attentive and has also repeatedly interjected with the rapporteur, is left in suspense, waiting for the second lesson tomorrow.
(C.C.)

Portavoce e capo ufficio stampa: Stefano Pichi Sermolli
Ufficio stampa: Valentina Gravaghi
Tel. 0541-783100
Mail press@meetingrimini.org

Fondazione Meeting per l'amicizia fra i popoli
www.meetingrimini.org
Twitter @meetingrimini
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