

Homily based on the readings from December 15, 2025 (Numbers 24.2-7, 15-17a; Matthew 21.23-27)

Our Gospel reading today depicts a remarkable interaction. The chief priests and the elders were trying their hardest to ensnare Jesus in a trap of his own words. They demanded that he justify the authority upon which he based his ministry – especially his recent expulsion of the money changers from the temple. Their goal, of course, was to present Jesus with an unwinnable scenario. If he maintained that his authority came from God, they could accuse him of blasphemy or even treason. On the other hand, if he claimed to be acting on his own, they could portray him as a fraud. Jesus' response, as we know, completely confounded them all. By turning the tables – by asking *them* the same question in reference to John the Baptist – he deflected their attack with barely any effort.

This episode is substantially less dramatic than many of Jesus' other actions. He was not transforming water into wine, or walking across the

sea, or raising somebody from the dead – all he was doing was making use of his intellect and his rhetorical skills. Nevertheless, there are several important lessons we can take from this event. First of all, we see that Jesus almost certainly could have talked his way out of his Crucifixion. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ himself observed that he could call upon “more than twelve legions of angels” – but that would have been far more than he needed. If he had simply tried to convince Pontius Pilate to release him, he probably would have walked away unscathed. Jesus, of course, understood his Father’s will and voluntarily submitted to it. *Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.*

Another important lesson is that it is perfectly acceptable – and sometimes even necessary – to employ cleverness in the service of the faith. While none of us should run away from martyrdom, there are situations in which the best option is simply to outwit our opponents. Besides the account we just heard, you may recall the incident – recorded in the Acts of the Apostles – where Saint Paul was on trial

before the Sanhedrin. In an effort to disrupt the proceedings, he managed to pit the Pharisees and the Sadducees against each other – reminding them that he himself was “a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees.” There are many *other* examples one could cite, but one of my favorites is Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty – an Irish priest working in the Vatican at the time of the Second World War. During the German occupation of Rome, he spearheaded a covert effort that saved the lives of approximately 6500 individuals – both Allied soldiers and Jewish residents of Rome. His cunning and ingenuity were legendary – involving forged documents, secret safehouses, and elaborate disguises. In fact, he has sometimes been referred to as the “Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican.” As a quick aside, there is a lovely film – called *The Scarlet and the Black* – which dramatizes the events of Monsignor O’Flaherty’s life. I wholeheartedly recommend it, if you are looking for something to watch with your family.

The final lesson I want to mention is more basic. As Christians, we should never be afraid of anything the enemies of our faith have to say.

They may employ deceptive arguments or devious rhetoric – they may even outwit us, from time to time. Clearly, the father of lies is capable of inflicting great damage upon the world. Nevertheless, as servants of the one true God, we know with *confidence* that the truth is always on our side. As Christ himself has promised, *if we remain in his word, we will truly be his disciples, and we will know the truth, and the truth will set us free.*