

SHIRKING RESPONSIBILITY

Luke 23:1-26

Men were anxious to put to death the Son of God and the Saviour of men. The most tragic drama of the ages was about to be enacted, and, in the plenitude of their powers, Jesus of Nazareth and Pilate of Rome faced each other as the chief actors.

Only a few years before the emperor had appointed Pilate procurator or governor of Judea. Of all the subjects of Rome, the Jews were the most difficult to govern. To be compelled to submit to a foreign people of pagan faith was the most galling humiliation to them. Such a thing stung their pride. To the Jews Pilate was a loathsome stranger and detested barbarian. They hated him and he reciprocated their hatred with contempt for them. He had incurred their wrath by hanging gilt shields in the palace of Herod in Jerusalem, making Jerusalem the headquarters of his army, directing his soldiers to carry great gleaming portraits of the emperor emblazoned on their standards, and taking money from the sacred treasury of the temple and using it for such purposes as the building of aqueducts into the city.

Pilate was a champion fence-straddler. He had a string of cartilage where he should have had a backbone. He was a spineless, weak-kneed, pussy-footer. He knew what he ought to do, but he was too cowardly to do it. Being a man who tried to carry water on both shoulders, Pilate wanted to satisfy both the enemies and the friends of Christ by adopting what is sometimes called a "middle of the road" plan. As anybody might expect, he found that such a course was impossible.

Having the Lord Jesus at their mercy, the elders, chief priests and scribes brought Him before the Sanhedrin for a thorough examination. The members of the Sanhedrin asked Him, "Art Thou the Christ?" He replied, "If I tell you, ye will not believe." Their next question was, "Art Thou then the Son of God?" He answered in the affirmative, and, to their way of thinking, that was all they needed. So they rushed Him off to Pilate. The reason for their action was that the Sanhedrin had only the power to try a case. They could not inflict capital punishment. The members of the Sanhedrin, headed by the chief priests, together with such others as were interested and curious, brought their Prisoner, with His hands bound behind His back, before Pilate's judgment-seat with the demand that He pass immediate sentence upon Him and that he pronounce the death penalty.

Pilate did not want to become involved in this Jewish affair. When they brought Christ before Pilate, he naturally asked, "What accusation bring ye against this Man?" They refused to name the crime with which He was charged. They had condemned Christ for blasphemy, but they did not refer to that charge at all. Neither did they mention the fact that they had already tried Him. They first took the bold stand that they would not have brought Him to Pilate if He had not been an evil-doer. John 18:30.

Pilate's first reaction was to get this case off his hands and let the Jews deal with Christ themselves. He said, "Take ye him, and judge him according to your law." But they revealed their spirit when they said, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." John 18:31. Then, Pilate called for specific accusations. So they brought three charges against the Saviour.

1. Perverting the nation.

When they charged Christ with being a disturber of the national tranquility, Pilate looked the Prisoner over. One look into that face of noble seriousness convinced Pilate that He was not a trouble-maker. As soon as they had a few words together, Christ assured him that He did not have any revolutionary designs.

2. Forbidding them to pay taxes to Caesar.

This, too, was a flagrant falsehood. That very week they had asked Him whether He considered it patriotic and right to pay tribute to Caesar, and He said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." They had tried to get Him to say the very thing with which they had charged Him, but He said the opposite.

3. Claiming kingship over the Jews.

Members of the Sanhedrin knew that if Pilate ignored this charge that Jesus Christ had set Himself up as a rival of Caesar, then Pilate would be accused before Caesar and lose his position and probably his life. So Pilate was compelled to notice this charge.

Pilate was wise enough to have the Prisoner brought into his palace to avoid the examination in the presence of the mob. Within the palace, Pilate asked the Saviour, "Art Thou the King of the Jews?" He replied, "Thou sayest it," thereby admitting the fact. Pilate could not see anything in this admission sufficient to merit judgment from his court. Concluding that Christ was only a harmless enthusiast, but clearly no rival of Caesar in any sense, Pilate announced his decision to the Sanhedrin and the multitude who had assembled, declaring that the Accused was not guilty. He said, "I find no fault in this man." To say the least, Pilate rendered his decision in accordance with the facts as he found them.

Pilate's verdict did not meet with applause, but with howls of rage. Indignant at this acquittal, and thunderstruck by this defeat of their plans of hate and death, the rulers repeated their accusations with numerous additions. Pilate turned to Christ to see if He had anything to say in reply to their charges, but to his amazement the Lord remained silent. Recognizing that Pilate was sympathetic with Christ, they renewed the charge that He was a disturber of the people all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem.

At the mention of Galilee, Pilate saw a chance to shirk his responsibility, and he eagerly seized that chance. If the Lord Jesus came from Galilee, then he could turn Him over to the jurisdiction of Herod, who happened to be in Jerusalem at that time. Finding himself in a very uncomfortable position, and seeing this as a way of shifting his unwelcome responsibility to other shoulders, Pilate decided to send his Prisoner to Herod and let him pass sentence.

Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee. He had been jealous of Pilate and curious to see the Christ. So, Pilate saw a chance to shirk his responsibility and to get rid of a very troublesome case, and at the same time to please a native ruler who was hostile to him. It looked like a flash of genius and good fortune to Pilate in his predicament. He knew that Christ Jesus was innocent, and he really did not want to condemn Him, but if he stuck to the verdict which he had already rendered, the Jews would get very angry at him and get him in serious trouble with Caesar. In a delirium of delight Pilate sent his Prisoner off to Herod Antipas. He was a plain example of one who shirked his responsibility and passed on to others those duties and tasks which he should have performed himself.

Herod, no doubt, was quite surprised to have Christ brought before him, but at the same time he was very glad. For a long time he had been wanting to see Him and to watch Him perform a miracle. Doubtless his real motive was to be able to bring some charge against Him. His obvious interest in Him was only as a sleight-of-hand performer. He wanted Him to perform miracles for his entertainment. But, Christ was not running a side-show, and refused to amuse Herod in this fashion. He bluntly refused to be a plaything for Herod.

After questioning the Saviour and not being able to find anything wrong with Him, Herod gave vent to his wrath by punishing Him, mocking Him, clothing Him in a scarlet robe and sending Him back to Pilate. He was too shrewd to be entrapped by Pilate's scheme. He simply returned the Prisoner with the problem unsolved.

Once again Pilate had the Prisoner on his hands. To him this outcome was very disconcerting. After trying to shirk his responsibility he failed in the attempt and found himself in a worse quandary than before. Seizing upon the failure of Herod to condemn Christ to defend his previous verdict, Pilate reaffirmed the innocence of the Lord Jesus.

Of course, an accused but innocent man should have been declared guiltless and released. Pilate knew that he should release Christ. He did not want to sentence Him to death because He was innocent. Neither did he want to release Him, under the circumstances, and thereby displease the angry Jews. Being a coward and fearing the Jews, he suggested a compromise by proposing to chastise Christ and release Him. By this procedure he hoped to please the populace and, at the same time, not do Christ too great an injury. Naturally, the people knew that, if Pilate was willing to chastise an innocent person, he could easily be influenced to do far more, provided their clamor was only loud enough.

Although he was prompted by the knowledge that Christ was the victim of malicious hypocrisy and he was impelled by the pleadings of his wife to act justly, Pilate took the line of personal interest and that which promised the least interference with his plans. Pilate recalled that it was the custom of the Jews to set free some notorious prisoner at the time of the observance of their Passover. Knowing that Christ was faultless, Pilate suggested that he set Him free, but the rabble gave vent to their strong disapproval in the most vicious and vociferous vituperations. Pointing to the two prisoners--Jesus Christ the Saviour and Barabbas the notorious robber and criminal--Pilate gave the people a choice as to which should be released. He said, "Whom will ye that I release unto you?" The words were scarcely out of his mouth before a mighty chorus of voices shouted, "Barabbas!" Pilate allowed all sense of justice to be cast aside, and he unrighteously delivered the Saviour to the blood-thirsty mob of Jews. It is impossible to imagine a more contemptible decision by any judge. His surrender was a travesty upon justice and the acme of judicial cowardice. He knew that he was violating the Roman law in turning over an innocent person to the rage of the Jews. He had his great opportunity, but failed to use it.

Pilate's effort to prove his innocence by washing his hands and saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person," was in fact an evidence of consciousness of guilt. He was interested in justice being done, provided it did not hurt him. Too many today are like that. They are open to graft, to influence and to patronage. They have no scruples as to the means used in achieving their desired goals. But, thank God, there is a higher rule of life than mere selfish expediency. Pilate did not have to commit the sin which he did. All attempts to shirk responsibility are vain subterfuges. We are responsible for the wrongs which we do and the ones which we can prevent.