

THE ROMAN TRIAL OF CHRIST

Mark 15:1-15

Jesus Christ was the victim of misunderstanding as to Who He was, as to His purpose in the world, as to His relation to men, and as to His plan of redemption. He was the victim of blunders on the part of His honest followers, of indifference on the part of professed friends, of undying hatred that would not be satisfied with anything less than His overthrow and death.

By their Roman conquerors the Jews had been deprived of the right to inflict capital punishment. During their meeting in the night the members of the Sanhedrin examined Christ and condemned Him to death. However, any verdict at which they arrived during the night was not legal. Consequently to give their verdict an appearance of legality they met at dawn to confirm their conclusions and ratify their decision during their meeting shortly after midnight.

The verdict was that the Lord Jesus was worthy of death. But, the Jews could not inflict the death penalty. That had to be imposed by the Roman governor and carried out by the Roman authorities, so they went to Pilate to get their decision endorsed and executed. The charge at which they had arrived was that of blasphemy or insulting God. But that was not the charge which they brought against Christ when they brought Him before Pilate. They knew that Pilate would not have anything to do with a charge which he would have considered a Jewish religious argument. Knowing this, the Jews preferred a charge which had a political complexion. They charged him with treason - perverting the people, forbidding them to give tribute to Caesar and calling Himself a King. They knew that the charge was a lie, and so did Pilate.

Pilate asked Christ, "Art Thou the King of the Jews?" Christ gave him a strange answer, "Thou sayest it." He made it clear that the interpretation that His accusers were putting on His claim was wrong, and Pilate knew that also. Then the Jewish authorities went on to multiply their charges. From that point forward Christ maintained a profound silence to the accusations of the Jews and the interrogations of Pilate. He refused to defend Himself or to attempt to enlighten them.

There is a time when silence is more eloquent than words, for silence can say things that words can never say. There is the silence of wondering admiration. For example, it is a compliment for an address or performance to be greeted with thunderous applause, but it is a still greater compliment for it to be greeted with a hushed silence which knows that applause would be quite out of place. There is the silence of contempt. It is possible to greet someone's statements or arguments with silence which shows that they are not worth answering. There is a silence of fear. A man may remain silent for no other reason than that he is afraid to speak. There is the silence of tragedy. This silence is due to the fact that there is nothing to be said. That was why Christ Jesus was silent. He knew that there could be no bridge between himself and the Jewish leaders. He knew that the communication lines were broken. He knew that there was nothing in Pilate to which He could appeal. It is a terrible tragedy when a man's heart is such that Christ knows it is hopeless to speak. Christ's silence was a solemn thing, for it was virtually a verdict on His examiners.

Pilate was a champion fence-straddler. He was a spineless, weak-kneed, pussy-footer. He knew what he ought to do, but he was too cowardly to do it. Pilate wanted to satisfy both the enemies and the friends of Christ by attempting what is sometimes called a "middle-of-the-road plan." As anybody might expect, Pilate found that such a course was impossible. Concluding that Christ was only a harmless enthusiast, but clearly no rival of Caesar in any sense, Pilate announced his decision that the Accused was not guilty. Pilate's verdict did not meet with applause but with howls of rage. Indignant at this acquittal and thunderstruck by this defeat of hate and death, the rulers repeated the accusations with numerous additions. Pilate saw a chance to shirk his responsibility to get rid of a very troublesome case, so with great delight he sent his Prisoner to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. 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. Herod was too shrewd to be entrapped by Pilate's scheme, so 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. Pilate reaffirmed the innocence of Christ. He knew that he should release Christ. He did not want to sentence Him to death because the Lord was innocent. Neither did he want to release Him under the circumstances, and thereby displease the Jews. Being a coward and fearing the Jews, Pilate 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.

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. He suggested that he set Christ free, but the rabble gave vent to their strong disapproval in the most vicious and vociferous vituperations. As 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. A mighty chorus of voices shouted for the release of Barabbas the bandit. It is impossible to imagine a more contemptible decision by any judge. Hardly knowing what to do, Pilate asked the people, "What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews?" What a question for a judge to ask the public! That was his decision and not theirs. In a wild frenzy they shouted, "Crucify him."

Pilate's surrender was a travesty upon justice and the very 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. He did not have to commit the sin which he did. All are responsible for the wrongs which they do and the ones which they can prevent.

Barabbas and Christ stood for two different ways. Barabbas stood for the heart of hate, the stab of the dagger and the violence of bitterness. Christ stood for the way of love. As has happened so many times, hate reigned supreme in the hearts of men, and love was rejected. Man insisted on taking their own way to conquest, and refused to see that the only way of conquest is that of love.

One of the saddest statements in this whole story is recorded in verse fifteen: "And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified." The scourging of Christ was a terrible thing. He was bent and handled in such a way that His back was exposed. The scourge was a long leather thong, studded here and there with sharpened pieces of lead and bits of bone. It literally tore the victim's back in ribbons. Some men died under scourging. Some emerged from the ordeal of scourging raving mad. Few retained consciousness through it. Christ was subjected to this horrible treatment. Pilate will certainly have to give an account for wilfully doing what was wrong in subjecting Him to scourging, and all because he did not have the courage to do what he knew to be right in this case. A follower of Christ dare not see evil having its way and do nothing about it.