

believe in condemning innocent men, but he was not always careful of the rights of those whom he regarded as barbarians. But when our Lord Jesus stood before Pilate, innocence was embodied in human form. Men could not by a superficial glance settle subtle questions as to the divine nature, but they could feel the power of his purity. He carried innocence in his looks and words. It was an innocence that could be felt, an innocence that cowed the traffickers in the temple; an innocence that made Peter cry, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord;" an innocence that drew from Pilate the statement "I find no fault at all" an innocence which was like a millstone round the neck of Judas, wringing from him the bitter wail, "I have betrayed the innocent blood." This then, was the power that quickened Pilate's conscience, the presence of a man so much purer than himself, bearing the same human form, but possessing a far nobler soul. We are quickened when we come into the presence of a soul, larger and purer than our own; and in such moments of quickening we must take a solemn step forward or backward, for the soul can never settle down again into exactly the same position. When the Christ comes actually and palpably near to a man, he brings new light, and such light is nearly always troublesome; it makes unwelcome revelations, showing our prejudices and impurities, and disclosing the difficult path of duty immediately in front.

Another influence, tending to deepen the restlessness of Pilate's soul, was the message from his wife. In those days the tendency was for women of high position to be either bold and brazen or to shrink away in modest retirement. It is probable that Pilate had a wife who was gentler and purer than himself, and so more sensitive to spiritual influences. Jesus Christ who at this time was sending a strange thrill through the whole land and stirring in some way the life of a whole people, came into her dreams and disturbed her spirit. From the comparative quiet of her chamber to her husband in the midst of turmoil, she sent this message, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered many things this day, in a dream, because of him." Whatever we may think of dreams in general, this dream was undoubtedly a message from God to this woman, and through her to her husband. She felt its urgent solemnity or she would not have sent the message while he sat upon the judgment seat. He could not reject it scornfully, for it chimed in with his own misgivings, and quickened the conflict in his mind. A pure, good woman, by her very gentleness of nature, often sees and hears spiritual visions and voices which are hidden from men who are too deeply engrossed in all the feverish competition and course intrigue of the world. "Despise not prophesyings." Do not scoff at the fancies or fears of a woman or a little child. They may feel a quiver in the atmosphere or see the angel in your pathway, while you are still careless and unconcerned. God may speak to you through them. The presence of the Christ is God's highest revelation, His clearest voice; but the tender sympathy of wife or child is another voice of God, a gentle cord by which He would bind us to righteousness, and lead us to heaven. Many of us now receive help in this way. To many the atmosphere of their homes

is altogether purer and sweeter, than that which they breathe outside. The memory of a wife's dreams, and hopes, and prayers is a restraining influence in hours of fierce temptation and angry jangle. It is a harder struggle for the man who has no tender voice in the home to cheer him when the battle for righteousness grows fierce.

Pilate in this hour was all uncertain, he could not see clearly where his highest lay; the angry voice of the Jewish mob called him in one direction, while at the same time it was revealed in many ways that the path of duty was in a different course. That the struggle was real was shown by the varied efforts that a man, so aroused and agitated, will make to avoid the dark deed to which he is drifting. He sends the prisoner to Herod. This is not merely a compliment paid to Herod, but an attempt to get rid of Jesus. Pilate is in such great perplexity that he will be glad if some one else will take the responsibility. It will be very convenient if Herod claims jurisdiction over this difficult case. Herod, however, is in no mood to take the matter seriously; he has come to the feast to enjoy himself and is not anxious to be burdened with official calls. Jesus has not come close enough to him to wake in him a sense of the solemnity of life, so he treats with light mockery the claims of one whom he cannot understand. Back again to Pilate the strange prisoner is brought and the question is once more pressing "What shall I do with Jesus that is called Christ?"

Then he offers to release Jesus to the crowd. It appears that for some time there had been a custom of releasing a prisoner on the festival. So Pilate thinks that Jesus may be released on these conditions. He is not a man of fine sentiment and is willing to treat this righteous man as a real prisoner and leave upon him the stigma of guilt if only he can keep from his own hands the stain of innocent blood. Our Lord did not desire freedom on such conditions, but Pilate makes the proposal, thinking that perhaps the followers of this wonderful teacher are in sufficient force to carry the crowd with them. Again he has miscalculated, and there comes back like the raging of a mighty sea, the wild shriek of the mob "Not this man but Barrabas."

Pilate wavers and bends before the storm; having failed in his appeal to the loyalty and enthusiasm of fickle men, he thinks to work upon their pity which he trusts is not quite dead. He did not know the men he was dealing with; he had not much insight into human nature, or he would have known that passionate bigotry in its inflammatory moods burns up the gentle feeling of compassion. He only adds fuel to the flame by publicly scourging Jesus. The sight of blood only kindles in wild beasts a keener thirst for blood. Besides he sheds blood to avoid the complete judicial murder. This is the old story of trying to resist wrong by partly yielding to it. Such temporizing policy always leaves a man deeper in the mire.

These varied efforts to save Jesus from death, however, all show what a solemn thing wilful wickedness is, and what a struggle even a worldly man can make in the critical hour to avoid it. Sometimes we stumble into sin carelessly, stupidly, half blindly; but there are times when our eyes are opened, and the light of heaven is around us. Woe be upon us if then we wilfully do the wicked thing. In such an hour if we wilfully transgress, we are slaying ourselves; we are indeed shedding the blood of God's redeeming Christ.

History teaches us that Pilate fell at last into the very condemnation that he feared,

and lost the favor of princes for which he had sacrificed all. He yielded to the Jews lest they should carry their complaint to Rome; the skilful stroke, "If thou let this man go thou art not Caesar's friend," decided him. But in spite of all his trimming policy the misfortune came and crushed him. He might very appropriately have said "Had I served my God as I served my king he would not have forsaken me now."

Pilate sees now that he cannot avoid crucifying Jesus; he has gone too far and cannot resist the popular clamor before which he has wavered so long. He must do the deed, but he will, if possible, shake off the responsibility. How will he accomplish this? By an appropriate ceremony, a piece of ritualism, done dramatically before the public. Such a ceremony was known to the people and was a suitable symbol for an innocent man to emphatically declare his innocence; but it will not serve a man seeking to shuffle out of the responsibilities of his high position.

"See ye to it," he cries. Yes, they must see to it for they are thirsting for innocent blood and are the real murderers, but they cannot see to his part of the business; he must see to that, he bears the sword of justice, why does he bear it in vain? To dwell upon the conduct of a man in such a peculiar position may seem to be only an interesting historical study, but it is really an important spiritual meditation. We are all prone to similar ritualism. We think at times to soothe our conscience and ward off punishment by mere ceremonies instead of seeking a real salvation. Pilate thinks to free himself from guilt by washing his hands in public and declaring that although he is going to do wrong he does not hold himself responsible. In the same way the Jews would not enter the Judgment Hall lest they should be defiled by breaking a ceremonial law, yet their hearts were deeply stained with the spirit of hatred and malice. So there are men who think to frighten the devil away by making the sign of the cross while they are wilfully cherishing devilish tempers in their hearts. These are simply specimens of some of the ways in which we deceive ourselves and palter with the holiest mysteries of life.

We need not discuss now the question of ritualism in the modern sense or give an opinion as to the comparative advantage of simplicity in Christian worship; it is our present business to learn the practical lessons from Pilate's perplexity and the piece of ritualism with which he sought to solve the problem. In this act there is an acknowledgment of responsibility to a higher law. It was true Pilate was most afraid of Caesar's tribunal and that base fear unnerved him, making him a coward in the hour of his heroic opportunity. Still underneath this symbolism there is a confession, though dim, of such a thing as duty. It is so in some sense with all ceremonial, with everything that makes religion visible in symbolic shape. An altar wherever it has been reared speaks of man's sin and prophecies of God's great sacrifice. A church with its spire pointing to heaven reminds us that there is something sacred, that man's proper attitude is the upward look and that we need temples for worship as well as markets for traffic and halls for learning. The visible cross should remind us of Christ's great sacrifice and of the tremendous influence which has transformed a thing of shame into a token of the highest glory. When men bow their heads at the name of our Saviour they acknowledge, at least, the existence of a high and holy personality and man's need of reverence. There may be small sectarian ceremonies which are of little