

The Quiet Hour

For Dominion Presbyterian.

Christ Before Pilate.*

What is called the trial of our Lord passes through several phases. The meeting of priests and elders during the night was informal, and had to be followed by a regular meeting in the early morning. Then, as the Jewish Council could not in such a case exercise power over human life, our Lord was taken from the ecclesiastical to the civil court. The charge might be different, but the purpose was the same, namely, to take away the life of the innocent sufferer. The charge that He claimed to be the Messiah, or made Himself the Son of God, was not of a kind to stir the Roman Governor to serious action; for that purpose they must have a political charge, that he called himself a king and excited the people against the government of Imperial Rome. Thus it came to pass that our Lord was not only crucified on a false charge, but for a thing which if it had been true, should have commended Him to the bigoted zealots who demanded a Messianic kingdom of this world. Those who would have construed it as a crime against patriotism for Him to approve the payment of tribute to Caesar, came with this lie upon their lips: "We have no king but Caesar," and prevail by this insidious plea: "If thou let this man go thou art not Caesar's friend." Thus we find the Son of Man led away to be tried by the Roman Governor, a Governor whose name has ever since been linked in sad association with the name of the world's Saviour, "Crucified under Pontius Pilate."

It was early in the morning, and the Jewish leaders have a heavy dark day's work before them; they have long nursed their jealousy and hatred, and now, when revenge seems to be near at hand, they push eagerly forward to grasp it; but mark how they pause on the threshold of the "judgment hall," showing that malice, which makes the heart unclean, may be linked with great scrupulosity concerning ceremonial defilement. They force Him into a place which they consider unclean, and others may do foul work there, but they will eat the passover with clean hands, when their victim has been put away. When Pilate wishes to know the charge they are indignant, for is not their word sufficient; the One whom they have condemned is a criminal, not fit to live.

That may be so, but Pilate is not their servant, and he must know what he is doing when he administers a law in the name of Rome, and when a Roman Governor was not utterly corrupt he felt the importance of public justice. The trial of Jesus has already been the trial of the Jewish leaders, and now it is the trial of Pilate. Pilate is tested at his strong point, where he should have been firmest and most dignified; and in betraying the justice he was set to guard he rejected the Christ.

He is willing that the Jews should take Him and judge Him according to their law—in fact he is willing that any one should judge Him, Herod or the mob, so that he is freed from responsibility in what seems likely to be a troublesome business. If life were all plain sailing and easy work there would be no need of heroes; but, alas, there are moments of perplexity and times of great responsibility, when courageous loyalty to truth and God are indispensable. It is here that Pilate is lacking; he is weak and vacillating; the night is dark, and he has no guiding star. To such a man the words of Jesus, which seem to us now so radiant with heaven's light, are only an additional perplexity. This kind of king he cannot understand; petty kinglets he had known conquered by the power of Rome, and dragged in chains to the Imperial City; but this calm, gentle prisoner does not suggest anything of that sort. What kind of king is this? Is He insane or is He the victim of a foul conspiracy? Jesus has been a perplexity to many who have approached Him in the wrong way. Pilate's cry: "What then shall I do with Jesus that is called Christ?" is still a pertinent question; we must ask our own conscience that question, and not try to shirk our personal responsibility. Pilate is annoyed to sit on the judgment seat before this calm prisoner with a second-hand question upon his lips, he feels himself in the presence of reality. The words of Jesus are at once a denial of any seditious purpose; His servants are not called to fight with carnal weapons; He restrains them, not for fear of Caesar's power, but because of the nature of His own Kingdom, it is not of this world. He who denies being the "King of the Jews" in Pilate's sense makes a still bigger claim; He is King of men. The truth is universal, not local; it is meant for all mankind, not for a petty clan or small sect. The truth has a world of its own; those who love it recognize the King when they hear His voice. This seems mystical, unreal, to

the coarse, sensual mind, but it is a statement of highest, holiest realities.

"What is truth?" A great question carelessly put, and the questioner does not wait for answer. Pity for him that he had not sufficient truth to lead him to do his duty at all cost. Between Jesus and the Jews he is in a dilemma, but one truth he speaks: "I find no fault in Him." (In the revised version the word is "crime.") If that is so, Pilate's course is clear; let him go where duty guides. But we are often illogical intellectually, and more often morally; we are ruled by passion, prejudice, or supposed interest, rather than by reason. If He is innocent (and the world accepts Pilate's testimony in that particular), then let Him be treated as innocent. But Pilate's next step is to treat Him as guilty by casting Him on the pity of the crowd; it was the hour and power of darkness; the crowd was "stirred up," inflamed by cunning means, misled by evil councillors; hence this mad cry, this unanimity of wicked infatuation. "Then cried they all again, saying not this man, but Barabbas; now Barabbas was a robber," a man of violence and blood. Now it has become the trial of the people. "He came to His own and His own received Him not."

Note—"The palace, Pilate's house, the Praetorium. Our translators have varied their rendering of it capriciously (Matt. xxvii., 17.) "Common hall," with "Governor's house" in the margin (Mark xv., 16), "Praetorium" (John xviii., 3 and xix., 9), "judgment hall." Yet the meaning must be the same in all these passages. Compare (Acts xxiii., 35), "judgment hall" (Phil. 1, 13), "the palace." The meaning of Praetorium varies according to the context. The word is of military origin, (1) the "general's tent," or "headquarters." Hence in the provinces (2) the "governor's residence," the meaning in Acts xxiii., 35, in a sort of metaphorical sense; (3) a "mansion" or "palace" (Juvenal 1: 75); at Rome (4) "the Praetorian guard," the probable meaning in Phil. 1: 13. Of these leading significations the second is probably right here, and throughout the Gospels, the official residence of the Procurator. Where Pilate resided in Jerusalem is not quite certain. We know that "Herod's Praetorium," a magnificent building on the western hill of Jerusalem, was used by Roman Governors somewhat later (Philo. Leg ad Gaium, p. 1034). But it is perhaps more likely that Pilate occupied part of the fortress Antonia, on the supposed site of which a chamber with a column in it has recently been discovered, which it is thought may possibly be the scene of the scourging.—Rev. Dr Plummer.

In our fluctuations of feeling it is well to remember that Jesus admits no change in His affections; your heart is not the compass Christ saileth by.—Samuel Rutherford.

*International Sunday School Lesson for May 28th, John xviii., 28-40. Golden Text.—"I find no fault in Him." John xix., 4.