**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**JOHN-107**. **THE TITLE ON THE CROSS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Pilate wrote a title also, and put it on the cross."*

*John 19:19*

This title is recorded by all four Evangelists, in words varying in form but alike in substance. It strikes them all as significant that, meaning only to fling a jeer at his unruly subjects, Pilate should have written it, and proclaimed this Nazarene visionary to be He for whom Israel had longed through weary ages. John's account is the fullest, as indeed his narrative of all Pilate's shufflings is the most complete. He alone records that the title was tri-lingual (for the similar statement in the Authorised Version of Luke is not part of the original text). He alone gives the Jewsrequest for an alteration of the title, and Pilate's bitter answer. That angry reply betrays his motive in setting up such words over a crucified prisoner's head. They were meant as a savage taunt of the Jews, not as an insult to Jesus, which would have been welcome to them. He seems to have regarded our Lord as a harmless enthusiast, to have had a certain liking for Him, and a languid curiosity as to Him, which came by degrees to be just tinged with awe as he felt that he could not quite make Him out. Throughout, he was convinced that His claim to be a king contained no menace for Caesar, and he would have let Jesus go but for fear of being misrepresented at Rome. He felt that the sacrifice of one more Jew was a small price to pay to avert his accusation to Caesar; he would have sacrificed a dozen such to keep his place. But he felt that he was being coerced to do injustice, and his anger and sense of humiliation find vent in that written taunt. It was a spurt of bad temper and a measure of his reluctance.

Besides the interest attaching to it as Pilate's work, it seems to John significant of much that it should have been fastened on the Cross, and that it should have been in the three languages, Hebrew (Aramaic), Greek, and Latin.

Let us deal with three points in succession.

**I. The title as throwing light on the actors in the tragedy.**

We may consider it, first, in its bearing on Jesusclaims. He was condemned by the priests on the theocratic charge of blasphemy, because He made Himself the Son of God. He was sentenced by Pilate on the civil charge of rebellion, which the priests brought against Him as an inference necessarily resulting from His claim to be the Son of God. They drew the same conclusion as Nathanael did long before: Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God, and therefore Thou art the King of Israel. And they were so far right that if the former designation is correct, the latter inevitably follows.

Both charges, then, turned on His personal claims. To Pilate He explained the nature of His kingdom, so as to remove any suspicion that it would bring Him and His subjects into collision with Rome, but He asserted His kingship, and it was His own claim that gave Pilate the material for His gibe. It is worth notice, then, that these two claims from His own lips, made to the authorities who respectively took cognisance of the theocratic and of the civic life of the nation, and at the time when His life hung on the decision of the two, were the causes of His judicial sentence. The people who allege that Jesus never made the preposterous claims for Himself which Christians have made for Him, but was a simple Teacher of morality and lofty religion, have never fairly faced the simple question: For what, then, was He crucified?It is easy for them to dilate on the hatred of the Jewish officials and the gross earthliness of the masses, as explaining the attitude of both, but it is not so easy to explain how material was found for judicial process. One can understand how Jesus was detested by rulers, and how they succeeded in stirring up popular feeling against Him, but not how an indictment that would hold water was framed against Him. Nor would even Pilate's complaisance have gone so far as to have condemned a prisoner against whom all that could be said was that he was disliked because he taught wisely and well and was too good for his critics. The question is, not what made Jesus disliked, but what set the Law in motion against Him? And no plausible answer has ever been given except the one that was nailed above His head on the Cross. It was not His virtues or the sublimity of His teaching, but His twofold claim to be Son of God and King of Israel that haled Him to His death.

We may further ask why Jesus did not clear up the mistakes, if they were mistakes, that led to His condemnation. Surely He owed it to the two tribunals before which He stood, no less than to Himself and His followers, to disown the erroneous interpretations on which the charges against Him were based. Even a Caiaphas was entitled to be told, if it were so, that He meant no blasphemy and was not claiming anything too high for a reverent Israelite, when He claimed to be the Son of God. If Jesus let the Sanhedrim sentence Him under a mistake of what His words meant, He was guilty of His own death.

We note, further, the light thrown by the Title on Pilate's action. It shows his sense of the unreality of the charge which he basely allowed himself to be forced into entertaining as a ground of condemning Jesus. If this enigmatical prisoner had had a sword, there would have been some substance in the charge against Him, but He was plainly an idea-monger, and therefore quite harmless, and His kingship only fit to be made a jest of and a means of girding at the rulers. Practical menalways under-estimate the power of ideas. The Title shows the same contempt for mere theorisersas animated his question, What is truth?How little he knew that this King, at whom he thought that he could launch clumsy jests, had lodged in the heart of the Empire a power which would shatter and remould it!

In his blindness to the radiant truth that stood before him, in the tragedy of his condemnation of that to which he should have yielded himself, Pilate stands out as a beacon for all time, warning the world against looking for the forces that move the world among the powers that the world recognises and honours. If we would not commit Pilate's fault over again, we must turn to the base things of this worldand the things that are notand find in them the transforming powers destined to bring to nought things that are.

Pilate's gibe was an unconscious prophecy. He thought it an exquisite jest, for it hurt. He was an instance of that strange irony that runs through history, and makes, at some crisis, men utter fateful words that seem put into their lips by some higher power. Caiaphas and he, the Jewish chief of the Sanhedrim and the Roman procurator, were foremost in Christ's condemnation, and each of them spoke such words, profoundly true and far beyond the speaker's thoughts. Was the Evangelist wrong in saying: This spake he not of himself?

**II. The Title on the Cross as unveiling the ground of Christ's dominion.**

It seemed a ludicrous travesty of royalty that a criminal dying there, with a crowd of his subjectsgloating on his agonies and shooting arrowy words of scorn at him, should be a King. But His cross is His throne. It is so because His death is His great work for the world. It is so because in it we see, with melted hearts, the sublimest revelation of His love. Absolute authority belongs to utter self-sacrifice. He, and only He, who gives Himself wholly to and for me, thereby acquires the right of absolute command over me. He is the Prince of all the kings of the earth, because He has died and become the First-begotten from the dead. From the hour when He said, I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me, down to the hour when the seer heard the storm of praise from ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousandsbreaking round the throne, every New Testament reference to Christ's dominion is accompanied with a reference to His cross, and every reference to His cross merges in a reference to His throne. The crown of thorns was a revelation of the inmost nature of Christ's rule. The famous Iron Crown of Milan is a hard, cold circlet within a golden covering blazing with jewels. Christ's right to sway men, like His power to do so, rests on His sacrifice for men. A Christianity without a Cross is a Christianity without authority, as has been seen over and over again in the history of the Church, and as is being seen again today, if men would only look. A Christ without a Cross is a Christ without a Kingdom. The dominion of the world belongs to Him who can sway men's inmost motives. Hearts are His who has bought them with His own.

**III. The Title as prophesying Christ's universal dominion.**

The three tongues in which it was written were chosen simply to make it easy to read by the crowd from every part of the Empire assembled at the Passover. There were Palestinian Jews there who probably read Aramaic only, and representatives from the widely diffused Jewish emigration in Greek-speaking lands, as well as Roman officials and Jews from Italy who would be most familiar with Latin. Pilate wanted his shaft to reach them all. It was, in its tri-lingual character, a sign of Israel's degradation and a flourishing of the whip in their faces, as a government order in English placarded in a Bengalee village might be, or a Russian ukase in Warsaw. Its very wording betrayed a foreign hand, for a Jew would have written King of Israel, not of the Jews.

But John divined a deeper meaning in this Title, just as he found a similar prophecy of the universality of Christ's death in the analogous word of Caiaphas. As in that saying he heard a faint prediction that Jesus should die not for that people only, but that He might also gather into one the scattered children of God, so he feels that Pilate was wiser than he knew, and that his written words in their threefold garb symbolised the relation of Christ and His work to the three great types of civilisation which it found possessed of the field. It bent them all to its own purposes, absorbed them into itself, used their witness and was propagated by means of them, and finally sucked the life out of them and disintegrated them. The Jew contributed the morality and monotheism of the Old Testament; the Greek, culture and the perfected language that should contain the treasure, the fresh wine-skin for the new wine; the Roman made the diffusion of the kingdom possible by the pax Romana, and at first sheltered the young plant. All three, no doubt, marred as well as helped the development of Christianity, and infused into it deleterious elements, which cling to it to-day, but the prophecy of the Title was fulfilled and these three tongues became heralds of the Cross and with loud, uplifted trumpets blewglad tidings to the ends of the world.

That Title thus became an unconscious prophecy of Christ's universal dominion. The Psalmist that sang of Messiah's world-wide rule was sure that all nations shall serve Him, and the reason why he was certain of it was for He shall deliver the needy when he crieth. We may be certain of it for the same reason. He who can deal with man's primal needs, and is ready and able to meet every cry of the heart, will never want suppliants and subjects. He who can respond to our consciousness of sin and weakness, and can satisfy hungry hearts, will build His sway over the hearts whom He satisfies on foundations deep as life itself. The history of the past becomes a prophecy of the future. Jesus has drawn men of all sorts, of every stage of culture and layer of civilisation, and of every type of character to Him, and the power which has carried a peasant of Nazareth to be the acknowledged King of the civilised world is not exhausted, and will not be till He is throned as Saviour and Ruler of the whole earth. There is only one religion in the world that is obviously growing. The gods of Greece and Rome are only subjects for studies in Comparative Mythology, the labyrinthine pantheon of India makes no conquests, Buddhism is moribund. All other religions than Christianity are shut up within definite and comparatively narrow geographical and chronological limits. But in spite of premature jubilations of enemies and much hasty talk about the need for a re-statement (which generally means a negation) of Christian truth, we have a clear right to look forward with quiet confidence. Often in the past has the religion of Jesus seemed to be wearing or worn out, but it has a strange recuperative power, and is wont to startle its enemiespaeans over its grave by rising again and winning renewed victories. The Title on the Cross is for ever true, and is written again in nobler fashion on the vesture and on the thighof Him who rides forth at last to rule the nations, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.