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

**JOHN-104**. **ART THOU A KING? by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover. Pilate then went out unto them, and said, What accusation bring ye against this Man? They answered and said unto him, If He were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered Him up unto thee. Then said Pilate unto them, Take ye Him, and judge Him according to your law. The Jews therefore said unto him, It is not lawful for us to put any man to death: That the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled, which He spake, signifying what death He should die. Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto Him, Art Thou the King of the Jews? Jesus answered him, Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of Me? Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered Thee unto me: what hast Thou done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is My kingdom not from hence. Pilate therefore said unto Him, Art Thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth My voice. Pilate saith unto Him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in Him no fault at all. But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you one at the passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews? Then cried they all again, saying, Not this Man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber."*

*John 18:28-40*

John evidently intends to supplement the synoptic Gospelsaccount. He tells of Christ's appearance before Annas, but passes by that before Caiaphas, though he shows his knowledge of it. Similarly he touches lightly on the public hearing before Pilate, but gives us in detail the private conversation in this section, which he alone records. We may suppose that he was present at both the hearing before Annas and the interview within the palace between Jesus and Herod, for he would not be deterred from entering, as the Jews were, and there seems to have been no other impediment in the way. The passage has three stages--the fencing between the Sanhedrists and Pilate, the good confession before Pontius Pilate, and the preference of Barabbas to Jesus.

**I. The passage of arms between the priests and the governor.**

It was early, probably before 6 A.M. A hurried meeting of the Sanhedrim had condemned Jesus to death, and the next thing was to get the Roman authority to carry out the sentence. The necessity of appeal to it was a bitter pill, but it had to be swallowed, for the right of capital punishment had been withdrawn. A religiousscruple, too, stood in the way--very characteristic of such formalists. Killing an innocent man would not in the least defile them, or unfit for eating the passover, but to go into a house that had not been purged of leaven, and was further unclean as the residence of a Gentile, though he was the governor, that would stain their consciences--a singular scale of magnitude, which saw no sin in condemning Jesus, and great sin in going into Pilate's palace! Perhaps some of our conventional sins are of a like sort.

Pilate was, probably, not over-pleased at being roused so early, nor at having to defer to a scruple which would to him look like insolence; and through all his bearing to the Sanhedrim a certain irritation shows itself, which sometimes flashes out in sarcasm, but is for the most part kept down. His first question is, perhaps, not so simple as it looks, for he must have had some previous knowledge of the case, since Roman soldiers had been used for the arrest. But, clearly, those who brought him a prisoner were bound to be the prosecutors.

Whether or not Pilate knew that his question was embarrassing, the rulers felt it so. Why did they not wish to formulate a charge? Partly from pride. They hugged the delusion that their court was competent to condemn, and wanted, as we all often do, to shut their eyes to a plain fact, as if ignoring it annihilated it. Partly because the charge on which they had condemned Jesus--that of blasphemy in calling Himself the Son of God--was not a crime known to Roman law, and to allege it would probably have ended in the whole matter being scornfully dismissed. So they stood on their dignity and tried to bluster. We have condemned Him; that is enough. We look to you to carry out the sentence at our bidding. So the ecclesiastical authorityhas often said to the secular armsince then, and unfortunately the civil authority has not always been as wise as Pilate was.

He saw an opening to get rid of the whole matter, and with just a faint flavour of irony suggests that, as they have a law--which he, no doubt, thought of as a very barbarous code--they had better go by it, and punish as well as condemn. That sarcastic proposal compelled them to acknowledge their subjection. Pilate had given the reins the least touch, but enough to make them feel the bit; and though it went sore against the grain, they will own their master rather than lose their victim. So their reluctant lips say, It is not lawful for us. Pilate has brought them on their knees at last, and they forget their dignity, and own the truth. Malicious hatred will eat any amount of dirt and humiliation to gain its ends, especially if it calls itself religious zeal.

John sees in the issue of this first round in the duel between Pilate and the rulers the sequence of events which brought about the fulfilment of our Lord's prediction of His crucifixion, since that was not a Jewish mode of execution. This encounter of keen wits becomes tragical and awful when we remember Who it was that these men were wrangling about.

**II. We have Jesus and Pilate; the good confession, and the indifferent answer.**

We must suppose that, unwillingly, the rulers had brought the accusation that Jesus had attempted rebellion against Rome. John omits that, because he takes it for granted that it is known. It is implied in the conversation which now ensued. We must note as remarkable that Pilate does not conduct his first examination in the presence of the rulers, but has Jesus brought to him in the palace. Perhaps he simply wished to annoy the accusers, but more probably his Roman sense of justice combined with his wish to assert his authority, and perhaps with a suspicion that there was something strange about the whole matter--and not least strange that the Sanhedrim, who were not enthusiastic supporters of Rome, should all at once display such loyalty--to make him wish to have the prisoner by himself, and try to fathom the business. With Roman directness he went straight to the point: Art Thou the King of the Jews, as they have been saying?There is emphasis on Thou--the emphasis which a practical Roman official would be likely to put as he looked at the weak, wearied, evidently poor and helpless man bound before him. There is almost a touch of pity in the question, and certainly the beginning of the conviction that this was not a very formidable rival to Caesar.

The answer to be given depended on the sense in which Pilate asked the question, to bring out which is the object of Christ's question in reply. If Pilate was asking of himself, then what he meant by a kingwas one of earth's monarchs after the emperor's pattern, and the answer would be No. If he was repeating a Jewish charge, then, a kingmight mean the prophetic King of Israel, who was no rival of earthly monarchs, and the answer would be Yes, but that Yeswould give Pilate no more reason to crucify Him than the Nowould have given.

Pilate is getting tired of fencing, and impatiently answers, with true Roman contempt for subject-people's thoughts as well as their weapons. I ... a Jew?is said with a curl of the firm lips. He points to his informants, Thine own nation and the chief priests, and does not say that their surrender of a would-be leader in a war of independence struck him as suspicious. But he brushes aside the cobwebs which he felt were being spun round him, and comes to the point, What hast Thou done?He is supremely indifferent to ideas and vagaries of enthusiasts. This poor man before him may call Himself anything He chooses, but his only concern is with overt acts. Strange to ask the Prisoner what He had done! It had been well for Pilate if he had held fast by that question, and based his judgment resolutely on its answer! He kept asking it all through the case, he never succeeded in getting an answer; he was convinced that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death, and yet fear, and a wish to curry favour with the rulers, drove him to stain the judge's robe with innocent blood, from which he vainly sought to cleanse his hands.

Our Lord's double answer claims a kingdom, but first shows what it is not, and then what it is. It is not of this world, though it is in this world, being established and developed here, but having nothing in common with earthly dominions, nor being advanced by their weapons or methods. Pilate could convince himself that this kingdombore no menace to Rome, from the fact that no resistance had been offered to Christ's capture. But the principle involved in these great words goes far beyond their immediate application. It forbids Christ's servantsto assimilate His kingdom to the world, or to use worldly powers as the means for the kingdom's advancement. The history of the Church has sadly proved how hard it is for Christian men to learn the lesson, and how fatal to the energy and purity of the Church the forgetfulness of it has been. The temptation to such assimilation besets all organised Christianity, and is as strong to-day as when Constantine gave the Church the paralysing gift of establishingit as a kingdom of this world.

Pilate did pick out of this saying an increased certainty that he had nothing to fear from this strange King; and half-amused contempt for a dreamer, and half-pitying wonder at such lofty claims from such a helpless enthusiast, prompted his question, Art Thou a king then?One can fancy the scornful emphasis on that Thou. and can understand how grotesquely absurd the notion of his prisoner's being a king must have seemed.

Having made clear part of the sense in which the avowal was to be taken, our Lord answered plainly Yes. Thus before the high-priest, He declared Himself to be the Son of God, and before Pilate He claimed to be King, at each tribunal putting forward the claim which each was competent to examine--and, alas! at each meeting similar levity and refusal to inquire seriously into the validity of the claim. The solemn revelation to Pilate of the true nature of His kingdom and of Himself the King fell on careless ears. A deeper mystery than Pilate dreamed of lay beneath the double designation of His origin; for He not only had been bornlike other men, but had come into the world, having come forth from the Father, and having been before He was born. It was scarcely possible that Pilate should apprehend the meaning of that duplication, but some vague impression of a mysterious personality might reach him, and Jesus would not have fully expressed His own consciousness if He had simply said, I was born. Let us see that we keep firm hold of all which that utterance implies and declares.

The end of the Incarnation is to bear witness to the truth. That witness is the one weapon by which Christ's kingdom is established. That witness is not given by words only, precious as these are, but by deeds which are more than words. These witnessing deeds are not complete till Calvary and the empty grave and Olivet have witnessed at once to the perfect incarnation of divine love, to the perfect Sacrifice for the world's sin, to the Victor over death, and to the opening of heaven to all believers. Jesus is the faithful and true Witness, as John calls Him, not without reminiscences of this passage, just because He is the First-begotten of the dead. As here He told Pilate that He was a king, because a witness, so John, in the passage referred to, bases His being Prince of the kings of the earthon the same fact.

How little Pilate knew that he was standing at the very crisis of his fate! A yielding to the impression that was slightly touching his heart and conscience, and he, too, might have heardChrist's voice. But he was not of the truth, though he might have been if he had willed, and so the words were wind to him, and he brushed aside all the mist, as he thought it, with the light question, which summed up a Roman man of the world's indifference to ideas, and belief in solid facts like legions and swords. What is truth?may be the cry of a seeking soul, or the sneer of a confirmed sceptic, or the shrug of indifference of the practical man.

It was the last in Pilate's case, as is shown by his not waiting for an answer, but ending the conversation with it as a last shot. It meant, too, that he felt quite certain that this man, with his high-strained, unpractical talk about a kingdom resting on such a filmy nothing, was absolutely harmless. Therefore the only just thing for him to have done was to have gone out to the impatient crowd and said so, and flatly refused to do the dirty work of the priests for them, by killing an innocent man. But he was too cowardly for that, and, no doubt, thought that the murder of one poor Jew was a small price to pay for popularity with his troublesome subjects. Still, like all weak men, he was not easy in his conscience, and made a futile attempt to get the right thing done, and yet not to suffer for doing it. The rejection of Barabbas is touched very lightly by John, and must be left unnoticed here. The great contribution to our knowledge which John makes is this private interview between the King who reigns by the truth, and the representative of earthly rule, based on arms and worldly forces.