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

**JOHN-105**. **JESUS SENTENCED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged Him. And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. And said, Hail, King of the Jews! and they smote Him with their hands. Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring Him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in Him. Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the Man! When the chief priests therefore and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, Crucify Him, crucify Him. Pilate saith unto them, Take ye Him, and crucify Him: for I find no fault in Him. The Jews answered him, We have a law, and by our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he was the more afraid; And went again into the judgment hall, and saith unto Jesus, Whence art Thou? But Jesus gave him no answer. Then saith Pilate unto Him, Speakest Thou not unto me I knowest Thou not that I have power to crucify Thee, and have power to release Thee? Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against Me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered Me unto thee hath the greater sin. And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release Him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this Man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King! But they cried out, Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him! Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar. Then delivered he Him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led Him away."*

*John 19:1-16*

The struggle between the vacillation of Pilate and the fixed malignity of the rulers is the principal theme of this fragment of Christ's judicial trial. He Himself is passive and all but silent, speaking only one sentence of calm rebuke. The frequent changes of scene from within to without the praetorium indicate the steps in the struggle, and vividly reflect the irresolution of Pilate. These changes may help to mark the stages in the narrative.

**I. The cruelties and indignities in verses 1-3 were inflicted within the palace, to which Pilate, with his prisoner, had returned after the popular vote for Barabbas.**

John makes that choice of the robber the reason for the scourging of Jesus. His thought seems to be that Pilate, having failed in his attempt to get rid of the whole difficulty by releasing Jesus, according to the custom, ordered the scourging, in hope that the lighter punishment might satisfy the turbulent crowd, whom he wished to humour, while, if possible, saving their victim. It was the expedient of a weak and cynical nature, and, like all weak attempts at compromise between right and wrong, only emboldened the hatred which it was meant to appease. If by clamour the rulers had succeeded in getting Pilate to scourge a man whom he thought innocent, they might well hope to get him to crucify, if they clamoured loudly and long enough.

One attitude only befitted Pilate, since he did not in the least believe that Jesus threatened the Roman supremacy; namely, to set Him at liberty, and let the disappointed rulers growl like wild beasts robbed of their prey. But he did not care enough about a single half-crazy Jewish peasant to imperil his standing well with his awkward subjects, for the sake of righteousness. The one good which Rome could give to its vassal nations was inflexible justice and a sovereign law; but in Pilate's action there was not even the pretence of legality. Tricks and expedients run through it all, and never once does he say, This is the law, this is justice, and by it I stand or fall.

The cruel scourging, which, in Roman hands, was a much more severe punishment than the Jewish beating with rodsand often ended in death, was inflicted on the silent, unresisting Christ, not because His judge thought that it was deserved, but to please accusers whose charge he knew to be absurd. The underlings naturally followed their bettersexample, and after they had executed Pilate's orders to scourge, covered the bleeding wounds with some robe, perhaps ragged, but of the royal colour, and crushed the twisted wreath of thorn-branch down on the brows, to make fresh wounds there. The jest of crowning such a poor, helpless creature as Jesus seemed to them, was exactly on the level of such rude natures, and would be the more exquisite to them because it was double-barrelled, and insulted the nation as well as the King. They came in a string, as the tense of the original word suggests, and offered their mock reverence. But that sport became tame after a little, and mockery passed into violence, as it always does in such natures. These rough legionaries were cruel and brutal, and they were unconscious witnesses to His Kingship as founded on suffering; but they were innocent as compared with the polished gentleman on the judgment-seat who prostituted justice, and the learned Pharisees outside who were howling for blood.

**II. In verses 4-8 the scene changes again to without the palace, and shows us Pilate trying another expedient, equally in vain.**

The hesitating governor has no chance with the resolute, rooted hate of the rulers. Jesus silently and unresistingly follows Pilate from the hall, still wearing the mockery of royal pomp. Pilate had calculated that the sight of Him in such guise, and bleeding from the lash, might turn hate into contempt, and perhaps give a touch of pity. Behold the man!as he meant it, was as if he had said, Is this poor, bruised, spiritless sufferer worth hate or fear? Does He look like a King or a dangerous enemy?Pilate for once drops the scoff of calling Him their King, and seeks to conciliate and move to pity. The profound meanings which later ages have delighted to find in his words, however warrantable, are no part of their design as spoken, and we gain a better lesson from the scene by keeping close to the thoughts of the actors. What a contrast between the vacillation of the governor, on the one hand, afraid to do right and reluctant to do wrong, and the dogged malignity of the rulers and their tools on the other, and the calm, meek endurance of the silent Christ, knowing all their thoughts, pitying all, and fixed in loving resolve, even firmer than the rulershate, to bear the utmost, that He might save a world!

Some pity may have stirred in the crowd, but the priests and their immediate dependants silenced it by their yell of fresh hate at the sight of the prisoner. Note how John gives the very impression of the fierce, brief roar, like that of wild beasts for their prey, by his Crucify, crucify!without addition of the person. Pilate lost patience at last, and angrily and half seriously gives permission to them to take the law into their own hands. He really means, I will not be your tool, and if my conviction of "the Man's" innocence is to be of no account, you must punish Him; for I will not. How far he meant to abdicate authority, and how far he was launching sarcasms, it is difficult to say. Throughout he is sarcastic, and thereby indicates his weakness, indemnifying himself for being thwarted by sneers which sit so ill on authority.

But the offer, or sarcasm, whichever it was, missed fire, as the appeal to pity had done, and only led to the production of a new weapon. In their frantic determination to compass Jesusdeath, the rulers hesitate at no degradation; and now they adduced the charge of blasphemy, and were ready to make a heathen the judge. To ask a Roman governor to execute their law on a religious offender, was to drag their national prerogative in the mud. But formal religionists, inflamed by religious animosity, are often the degraders of religion for the gratification of their hatred. They are poor preservers of the Church who call on the secular arm to execute their laws. Rome went a long way in letting subject peoples keep their institutions; but it was too much to expect Pilate to be the hangman for these furious priests, on a charge scarcely intelligible to him.

What was Jesus doing while all this hell of wickedness and fury boiled round Him? Standing there, passive and dumb, as a sheep before her shearers, Himself is the least conspicuous figure in the history of His own trial. In silent communion with the Father, in silent submission to His murderers, in silent pity for us, in silent contemplation of the joy that was set before Him, He waits on their will.

**III. Once more the scene changes to the interior of the praetorium (vs. 9-11).**

The ruler's words stirred a deepened awe in Pilate. He was the more afraid; then he had been already afraid. His wife's dream, the impression already produced by the person of Jesus, had touched him more deeply than probably he himself was aware of; and now this charge that Jesus had made Himself the Son of Godshook him. What if this strange man were in some sense a messenger of the gods? Had he been scourging one sent from them? Sceptical he probably was, and therefore superstitious; and half-forgotten and disbelieved stories of gods who had come down in the likeness of menwould swim up in his memory. If this Man were such, His strange demeanour would be explained. Therefore he carried Jesus in again, and, not now as judge, sought to hear from His own lips His version of the alleged claim.

Why did not Jesus answer such a question? His silence was answer; but, besides that, Pilate had not received as he ought what Jesus had already declared to him as to His kingdom and His relation to the truth, and careless turning away from Christ's earlier words is righteously and necessarily punished by subsequent silence, if the same disposition remains. That it did remain, Christ's silence is proof. Had there been any use in answering, Pilate would not have asked in vain. If Jesus was silent, we may be sure that He who sees all hearts and responds to all true desires was so, because He knew that it was best to say nothing. The question of His origin had nothing to do with Pilate's duty then, which turned, not on whence Jesus had come, but on what Pilate believed Him to have done, or not to have done. He who will not do the plain duty of the moment has little chance of an answer to his questions about such high matters.

The shallow character of the governor's awe and interest is clearly seen from the immediate change of tone to arrogant reminder of his absolute authority. To me dost Thou not speak?The pride of offended dignity peeps out there. He has forgotten that a moment since he half suspected that the prisoner, whom he now seeks to terrify with the cross, and to allure with deliverance, was perhaps come from some misty heaven. Was that a temper which would have received Christ's answer to his question?

But one thing he might be made to perceive, and therefore Jesus broke silence for the only time in this section, and almost the only time before Pilate. He reads the arrogant Roman the lesson which he and all his tribe in all lands and ages need--that their power is derived from God, therefore in its foundation legitimate, and in its exercise to be guided by His will and used for His purposes. It was God who had brought the Roman eagles, with their ravening beaks and strong claws, to the Holy City. Pilate was right in exercising jurisdiction over Jesus. Let him see that he exercised justice, and let him remember that the power which he boasted that he hadwas given. The truth as to the source of power made the guilt of Caiaphas or of the rulers the greater, inasmuch as they had neglected the duties to which they had been appointed, and by handing over Jesus on a charge which they themselves should have searched out, had been guilty of theocratic felony. This sudden flash of bold rebuke, reminding Pilate of his dependence, and charging him with the lesser but yet real sin, went deeper than any answer to his question would have done, and spurred him to more earnest effort, as John points out. He sought to release Him, as if formerly he had been rather simply unwilling to condemn than anxious to deliver.

**IV. So the scene changes again to outside.**

Pilate went out alone, leaving Jesus within, and was met before he had time, as would appear, to speak, by the final irresistible weapon which the rulers had kept in reserve. An accusation of treason was only too certain to be listened to by the suspicious tyrant who was then Emperor, especially if brought by the authorities of a subject nation. Many a provincial governor had had but a short shrift in such a case, and Pilate knew that he was a ruined man if these implacable zealots howling before him went to Tiberius with such a charge. So the die was cast. With rage in his heart, no doubt, and knowing that he was sacrificing innocent bloodto save himself, he turned away from the victorious mob, apparently in silence, and brought Jesus out once more. He had no more words to say to his prisoner. Nothing remained but the formal act of sentence, for which he seated himself, with a poor assumption of dignity, yet feeling all the while, no doubt, what a contemptible surrender he was making.

Judgment-seats and mosaic pavements do not go far to secure reverence for a judge who is no better than an assassin, killing an innocent man to secure his own ends. Pilate's sentence fell most heavily on himself. If the judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted, he is tenfold condemned when the innocent is sentenced.

Pilate returned to his sarcastic mood when he returned to his injustice, and found some satisfaction in his old jeer, your King. But the passion of hatred was too much in earnest to be turned or even affected by such poor scoffs, and the only answer was the renewed roar of the mob, which had murder in its tone. The repetition of the governor's taunt, Shall I crucify your King?brought out the answer in which the rulers of the nation in their fury blindly flung away their prerogative. It is no accident that it was the chief priestswho answered, We have no king but Caesar. Driven by hate, they deliberately disown their Messianic hope, and repudiate their national glory. They who will not have Christ have to bow to a tyrant. Rebellion against Him brings slavery.