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

**MARK-071**. **CHRIST AND PILATE: THE TRUE KING AND HIS COUNTERFEIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And straightway in the morning the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council, and bound Jesus, and carried Him away, and delivered Him to Pilate. 2. And Pilate asked Him, Art Thou the King of the Jews? And He answering said unto him, Thou sayest it. 3. And the chief priests accused Him of many things: but He answered nothing. 4. And Pilate asked Him again, saying, Answerest Thou nothing? behold how many things they witness against Thee. 6. But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled. 6. Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired. 7. And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection. 8. And the multitude crying aloud began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them. 9. But Pilate answered them, saying, Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews? 10. For he knew that the chief priests had delivered Him for envy. 11. But the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them. 12. And Pilate answered and said again unto them, What will ye then that I shall do unto Him whom ye call the King of the Jews? 13. And they cried out again, Crucify Him. 14. Then Pilate said unto them, Why, what evil hath He done? And they cried out the more exceedingly, Crucify Him. 15. And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged Him, to be crucified. 16. And the soldiers led Him away into the hall, called Praetorium; and they call together the whole band. 17. And they clothed Him with purple, and platted a crown of thorns, and put it about His head, 18. And began to salute Him, Hail, King of the Jews! 19. And they smote Him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon Him, and bowing their knees worshipped Him. 20. And when they had mocked Him they took off the purple from Him, and put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him."*

*Mark 15:1-20*

The so-called trial of Jesus by the rulers turned entirely on his claim to be Messias; His examination by Pilate turns entirely on His claim to be king. The two claims are indeed one, but the political aspect is distinguishable from the higher one; and it was the Jewish rulers trick to push it exclusively into prominence before Pilate, in the hope that he might see in the claim an incipient insurrection, and might mercilessly stamp it out. It was a new part for them to play to hand over leaders of revolt to the Roman authorities, and a governor with any common sense must have suspected that there was something hid below such unusual loyalty. What a moment of degradation and of treason against Israel's sacredest hopes that was when its rulers dragged Jesus to Pilate on such a charge! Mark follows the same method of condensation and discarding of all but the essentials, as in the other parts of his narrative. He brings out three points--the hearing before Pilate, the popular vote for Barabbas, and the soldiersmockery.

**I. The true King at the bar of the apparent ruler (verses 1-6).**

The contrast between appearance and reality was never more strongly drawn than when Jesus stood as a prisoner before Pilate. The One is helpless, bound, alone; the other invested with all the externals of power. But which is the stronger? and in which hand is the sceptre? On the lowest view of the contrast, it is ideas versus swords. On the higher and truer, it is the incarnate God, mighty because voluntarily weak, and man dressed in a little brief authority, and weak because insolently making his power his god. Impotence, fancying itself strong, assumes sovereign authority over omnipotence clothed in weakness. The phantom ruler sits in judgment on the true King. Pilate holding Christ's life in his hand is the crowning paradox of history, and the mystery of self-abasing love. One exercise of the Prisoner's will and His chains would have snapped, and the governor lain dead on the marble pavement.

The two hearings are parallel, and yet contrasted. In each there are two stages--the self-attestation of Jesus and the accusations of others; but the order is different. The rulers begin with the witnesses, and, foiled there, fall back on Christ's own answer, Pilate, with Roman directness and a touch of contempt for the accusers, goes straight to the point, and first questions Jesus. His question was simply as to our Lord's regal pretensions. He cared nothing about Jewish superstitionsunless they threatened political disturbance. It was nothing to him whether or no one crazy fanatic more fancied himself the Messiah, whatever that might be. Was He going to fight?--that was all which Pilate had to look after. He is the very type of the hard, practical Roman, with a practicalman's contempt for ideas and sentiments, sceptical as to the possibility of getting hold of truth, and too careless to wait for an answer to his question about it; loftily ignorant of and indifferent to the notions of the troublesome people that he ruled, but alive to the necessity of keeping them in good humour, and unscrupulous enough to strain justice and unhesitatingly to sacrifice so small a thing as an innocent life to content them.

What could such a man see in Jesus but a harmless visionary? He had evidently made up his mind that there was no mischief in Him, or he would not have questioned Him as to His kingship. It was a new thing for the rulers to hand over dangerous patriots, and Pilate had experience enough to suspect that such unusual loyalty concealed something else, and that if Jesus had really been an insurrectionary leader, He would never have fallen into Pilate's power. Accordingly, he gives no serious attention to the case, and his question has a certain half-amused, half-pitying ring about it. Thou a king? --poor helpless peasant! A strange specimen of royalty this! How constantly the same blindness is repeated, and the strong things of this world despise the weak, and material power smiles pityingly at the helpless impotence of the principles of Christ's gospel, which yet will one day shatter it to fragments, like a potter's vessel! The phantom ruler judges the real King to be a powerless shadow, while himself is the shadow and the other the substance. There are plenty of Pilates to-day who judge and misjudge the King of Israel.

The silence of Jesus in regard to the eager accusations corresponds to His silence before the false witnesses. The same reason dictated both. His silence is His most eloquent answer. It calmly passes by all these charges by envenomed tongues as needing no reply, and as utterly irrelevant. Answered, they would have lived in the Gospels; unanswered, they are buried. Christ can afford to let many of His foes alone. Contradictions and confutations keep slanders and heresies above water, which the law of gravitation would dispose of if they were left alone.

Pilate's wonder might and should have led him further. It should have prompted to further inquiry, and that might have issued in clearer knowledge. It was the little glimmer of light at the far-off end of his cavern, which, travelled towards, might have brought him into free air and broad day. One great part of his crime was neglecting the faint monitions of which he was conscious. His light may have been dim, but it would have brightened; and he quenched it. He stands as a tremendous example of possibilities missed, and of the tragedy of a soul that has looked on Jesus, and has not yielded to the impressions made on him by the sight.

**II. The people's favourite (verses 7-15).**

Barabbasmeans son of the father, His very name is a kind of caricature of the Son of the Blessed, and his character and actions present in gross form the sort of Messias whom the nation really wanted. He had headed some one of the many small riots against Rome which were perpetually sputtering up and being trampled out by an armed heel. There had been bloodshed, in which he had himself taken part (a murderer, Acts 3:14). And this coarse, red-handed desperado is the people's favourite, because he embodied their notions and aspirations, and had been bold enough to do what every man of them would have done if he had dared. He thought and felt, as they did, that freedom was to be won by the sword. The popular hero is as a mirror which reflects the popular mind. He echoes the popular voice, a little improved or exaggerated. Jesus had taught what the people did not care to hear, and given blessings which even the recipients soon forgot, and lived a life whose beauty of holinessoppressed and rebuked the common life of men. What chance had truth and kindness and purity against the sort of bravery that slashes with a sword, and is not elevated above the mob by inconvenient reach of thought or beauty of character? Even now, after nineteen centuries of Christ's influence have modified the popular ideals, what chance have they? Are the popular heroesof Christian nations saints, teachers, lovers of men, in whom their Christ-likeness is the thing venerated? The old saying that the voice of the people is the voice of God receives an instructive commentary in the vote for Barabbas and against Jesus. That was what a plebiscite for the discovery of the people's favourite came to. What a reliable method of finding the best man universal suffrage, manipulated by wirepullers like these priests, is! and how wise the people are who let it guide their judgments, or still wiser, who fret their lives out in angling for its approval! Better be condemned with Jesus than adopted with Barabbas.

That fatal choice revealed the character of the choosers, both in their hostility and admiration; for excellence hated shows what we ought to be and are not, and grossness or vice admired shows what we would fain be if we dared. It was the tragic sign that Israel had not learned the rudiments of the lesson which at sundry times and in divers mannersGod had been teaching them. In it the nation renounced its Messianic hopes, and with its own mouth pronounced its own sentence. It convicted them of insensibility to the highest truth, of blindness to the most effulgent light, of ingratitude for the richest gifts. It is the supreme instance of short-lived, unintelligent emotion, inasmuch as many who on Friday joined in the roar, Crucify Him!had on Sunday shouted Hosanna!till they were hoarse.

Pilate plays a cowardly and unrighteous part in the affair, and tries to make amends to himself for his politic surrender of a man whom he knew to be innocent, by taunts and sarcasm. He seems to see a chance to release Jesus, if he can persuade the mob to name Him as the prisoner to be set free, according to custom. His first proposal to them was apparently dictated by a genuine interest in Jesus, and a complete conviction that Rome had nothing to fear from this King. But there are also in the question a sneer at such pauper royalty, as it looked to him, and a kind of scornful condescension in acknowledging the mob's right of choice. He consults their wishes for once, but there is haughty consciousness of mastery in his way of doing it. His appeal is to the people, as against the priests whose motives he had penetrated. But in his very effort to save Jesus he condemns himself; for, if he knew that they had delivered Christ for envy, his plain duty was to set the prisoner free, as innocent of the only crime of which he ought to take cognisance. So his attempt to shift the responsibility off his own shoulders is a piece of cowardice and a dereliction of duty. His second question plunges him deeper in the mire. The people had a right to decide which was to be released, but none to settle the fate of Jesus. To put that in their hands was an unconditional surrender by Pilate, and the sneer in whom ye call the King of the Jewsis a poor attempt to hide from them and himself that he is afraid of them. Mark puts his finger on the damning blot in Pilate's conduct when he says that his motive for condemning Jesus was his wish to content the people. The life of one poor Jew was a small price to pay for popularity. So he let policy outweigh righteousness, and, in spite of his own clear conviction, did an innocent man to death. That would be his reading of his act, and, doubtless, it did not trouble his conscience much or long, but he would leave the judgment-seat tolerably satisfied with his morning's work. How little he knew what he had done! In his ignorance lies his palliation. His crime was great, but his guilt is to be measured by his light, and that was small. He prostituted justice for his own ends, and he did not follow out the dawnings of light that would have led him to know Jesus. Therefore he did the most awful thing in the world's history. Let us learn the lesson which he teaches!

**III. The soldiers' mockery (verses 16-20).**

This is characteristically different from that of the rulers, who jeered at His claim to supernatural enlightenment, and bade Him show His Messiahship by naming His smiters. The rough legionaries knew nothing about a Messiah, but it seemed to them a good jest that this poor, scourged prisoner should have called Himself a King, and so they proceed to make coarse and clumsy merriment over it. It is like the wild beast playing with its prey before killing it. The laughter is not only rough, but cruel. There was no pity for the Victim bleeding from the Roman rods, and soon to die. And the absence of any personal hatred made this mockery more hideous. Jesus was nothing to them but a prisoner whom they were to crucify, and their mockery was sheer brutality and savage delight in torturing. The sport is too good to be kept by a few, so the whole band is gathered to enjoy it. How they would troop to the place! They get hold of some robe or cloth of the imperial colour, and of some flexible shoots of some thorny plant, and out of these they fashion a burlesque of royal trappings. Then they shout, as they would have done to Caesar, Hail, King of the Jews!repeating again with clumsy iteration the stale jest which seems to them so exquisite. Then their mood changes, and naked ferocity takes the place of ironical reverence. Plucking the mock sceptre, the reed, from His passive hand, they strike the thorn-crowned Head with it, and spit on Him, while they bow in mock reverence before Him, and at last, when tired of their sport, tear off the purple, and lead him away to the Cross.

If we think of who He was who bore all this, and of why He bore it, we may well bow not the knee but the heart, in endless love and thankfulness. If we think of the mockers--rude Roman soldiers, who probably could not understand a word of what they heard on the streets of Jerusalem--we shall do rightly to remember our Lord's own plea for them, they know not what they do, and reflect that many of us with more knowledge do really sin more against the King than they did. Their insult was an unconscious prophecy. They foretold the basis of His dominion by the crown of thorns, and its character by the sceptre of reed, and its extent by their mocking salutations; for His Kingship is founded in suffering, wielded with gentleness, and to Him every knee shall one day bow, and every tongue confess that the King of the Jews is monarch of mankind.