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

**MATTHEW-132**. **THE SENTENCE WHICH CONDEMNED THE JUDGES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"11.* *And Jesus stood before the governor: and the governor asked Him, saying, Art Thou the King of the Jews? And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest. 12. And when He was accused of the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. 13. Then said Pilate unto Him, Hearest Thou not how many things they witness against Thee? 14. And He answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly. 15. Now at that feast the governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would. 16. And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas. 17. Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ? 18. For he knew that for envy they had delivered Him. 19. When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of Him. 20. But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus. 21. The governor answered and said unto them, Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you? They said, Barabbas. 22. Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let Him be crucified. 23. And the governor said, Why, what evil hath He done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified. 24. When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just Person: see ye to it. 25. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children. 26. Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified."*

*Matthew 27:11-26*

The principal figures in this passage are Pilate and the Jewish rulers and people. Jesus is all but passive. They are busy in condemning Him, and little know that they are condemning themselves. They are unconsciously exemplifying the tragic truth of Christ's saying, Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken. They do not dislodge it, but their attempt to dislodge it wounds them.

**I.** Matthew gives a very summary account of our Lord's appearing before Pilate, but, brief as it is, and much as it omits, it throws up into strong light the two essential points,--Christ's declaration that He was the King of the Jews, and His silence while a storm of accusations raged around Him. As to the former, it was the only charge with which Pilate was properly concerned. He had a right to know whether this strange criminal was dangerous to Rome, because He claimed kingship, and, if he were satisfied that He was not, his bounden duty was to liberate Him. One can understand the scornful emphasis which Pilate laid on Thouas he looked on his Prisoner, who certainly would not seem to his practical eyes a very formidable leader of revolt. There is a world of contempt, amused rather than alarmed, in the question, and behind it lies the consciousness of commanding legions enough to crush any rising headed by such a person. John's account shows the pains which Jesus took to make sure of the sense in which the question was asked before He answered it, and then to make clear that His kingship bore no menace to Rome. That being made plain, He answered with an affirmative. Just as He had in unmistakable language claimed before the Sanhedrin to be the Messiah, the Son of God, so He claimed before Pilate to be the King of Israel, answering each tribunal as to what each had the right to inquire into, and thus before Pontius Pilate witnessing the good confession, and leaving both tribunals without excuse. Jesus died because He would not bate His claims to Messianic dignity. Did He fling away His life for a false conception of Himself? He was either a dreamer intoxicated with an illusion, and His death was suicide, or He was--what?

The one avowal was all that Pilate was entitled to. For the rest Jesus locked His lips, and He whose very name was The Word was silent. What was the meaning of that silence? It was not disdain, nor unwillingness to make Himself known; but it was partly merciful--inasmuch as He knew that all speech would have been futile, and would but have added to the condemnation of such hearers as Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate--and partly judicial. Still more was it the silence of perfect, unresisting submission,--as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth. And it is a pattern for us, as Peter tells us in his Epistle; for it is with regard to this very matter of taking unjust suffering patiently and without resistance that the apostle says that Jesus has left us an example. There are limits to such silent endurance of wrong, for Paul defended himself tooth and nail before priests and kings; but Christ's followers are strongest by meek patience, and descend when they take a leaf out of their enemiesbook.

**II.** The next point is Pilate's weak attempt to save Jesus. Christ's silence had impressed Pilate, and, if he had been a true man, he would not have stopped at marvelling greatly. He was clearly convinced of Christ's innocence of any crime that threatened Roman supremacy, and therefore was bound to have given effect to his convictions, and let Jesus go. He had read the motives of the priests, which were too plain for a shrewd man of the world to be blind to them. That Jews should be taken with such a sudden fit of loyalty as to yell for the death of a fellow-countryman because he was a rebel against Caesar was too absurd to swallow, and Pilate was not taken in. He knew that something else was working below ground, and hit on envyas the solution. He was not far wrong; for the zeal which to the priests themselves seemed to be excited by devout regard for God's honour was really kindled by determination to keep their own prerogatives, and keen insight into the curtailment of these which would follow if this Jesus were recognised as Messiah. Pilate's diagnosis coincided with Christ's in the parable: This is the Heir; come, let us kill Him, and the inheritance shall be ours.

So, willing to deliver Jesus, and yet afraid to cross the wishes of his ticklish subjects, Pilate, like other weak men, tries a trick by which he may get his way and seem to give them theirs. He hoped that they would choose Jesus rather than Barabbas as the object of the customary release. It was ingenious of him to narrow the choice to one or other of the two, ignoring all other prisoners who might have had the benefit of the custom. But there is also, perhaps, a dash of sarcasm, and a hint of his having penetrated the priestsmotives, in his confining their choice to Jesus or Barabbas; for Barabbas was what they had charged Jesus with being,--a rebel; and, if they preferred him to Jesus, the hypocrisy of their suspicious loyalty would be patent. The same sub-acid tone is obvious in Pilate's twice designating our Lord as Jesus which is called Christ. He delights to mortify them by pushing the title into their faces, as it were. He dare not be just, and he relieves and revenges himself by being cynical and mocking.

**III.** Having referred the choice to the multitude, Pilate takes his place on his official seat to wait for, and then to ratify, their vote. In that pause, he perhaps felt some compunction at paltering with justice, which it was Rome's one virtue to administer. How his wife's message would increase his doubt! Was her dream a divine warning, or a mere reflection in sleep of waking thoughts? It is noticeable that Matthew records several dreams which conveyed God's will,--for example, to Joseph and to the Magi, and here may be another instance; or some tidings as to Jesus may have reached the lady, though not her husband, and her womanly sense of right may have shaped the dream, and given her vivid impressions of the danger of abetting a judicial murder. But Matthew seems to tell of her intervention mainly in order to preserve her testimony to Jesusinnocence, and to point out one more of the fences which Pilate trampled down in his dread of offending the rulers. A wife's message, conveying what both he and she probably regarded as a supernatural warning, was powerless to keep him back from his disgraceful failure of duty.

**IV.** While he was fighting against the impression of that message, the rulers were busy in the crowd, suggesting the choice of Barabbas. It was perhaps his wife's words that stung him to act at once, and have done with his inner conflict. So he calls for the decision of the alternative which he had already submitted. His dignity would suffer, if he had to wait longer for an answer. He got it at once, and the unanimous vote was for Barabbas. Probably the rulers had skilfully manipulated the people. The multitude is easily led by demagogues, but, left to itself, its instincts are usually right, though its perception of character is often mistaken. Why was Barabbas preferred? Probably just because he had been cast into prison for sedition, and so was thought to be a good patriot. Popular heroes often win their reputation by very questionable acts, and Barabbas was forgiven his being a murderer for the sake of his being a rebel. But it was not so much that Barabbas was loved as that Jesus was hated, and it was not the multitude so much as the rulers that hated him. Many of those now shrieking Crucify Him!had shouted Hosanna!a day or two before till they were hoarse. The populace was guilty of fickleness, blindness, rashness, too easy credence of the crafty calumnies of the rulers. But a far deeper stain rests on these rulers who had resisted the light, and were now animated by the basest self-interest in the garb of keen regard for the honour of God. There were very different degrees of guilt in the many voices that roared Barabbas!Pilate made one more feeble attempt to save Jesus by asking what was to be done with Him. The question was an ignoble abdication of his judicial office, and perhaps was meant as a salve for his own conscience, and an excuse to his wife, enabling him to say, I did not crucify Him; they did,--a miserable pretext, the last resort of a weak man, who knew that he was doing a wrong and cowardly thing.

**V.** The same nervous fear and vain attempt to shuffle responsibility off himself give tragic interest to his theatrical washing of his hands. The one thing that he feared was a riot, which would be like a spark in a barrel of gunpowder, if it broke out at the Passover, when Jerusalem swarmed with excited crowds. To avoid that, the sacrifice of one Jew's life was a small matter, even though he was an interesting and remarkable person, and Pilate knew Him to be perfectly harmless.

But no washing of hands could shift the guilt from Pilate.

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No.

His vain declaration of innocence is an acknowledgment of guilt, for he is forced by conscience to declare that Jesus is a righteous Man, and, as such, He should have been under the broad shield of Roman justice. We too often deceive ourselves by throwing the blame of our sins on companions or circumstances, and try to cheat our consciences into silence. But our guilt is ours, however many allies we have had, and however strong have been our temptations; and though we may say, I am innocent, God will sooner or later say to each of us, Thou art the man!The wild cry of passion with which the multitude accepted the responsibility has been only too completely fulfilled in the millennium-long Iliad of woes which has attended the Jews. Surely, the existence, in such circumstances, for all these centuries, of that strange, weird, fated race, is a standing miracle, and the most conspicuous proof that verily, there is a God that judgeth in the earth. But it is also a prophecy that Israel shall turn to the Lord, and that the blood which has so long been on them as a crime, carrying its own punishment, will at last be sprinkled on their hearts, and take away their sin.