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## CHRIST BEFORE PILATE

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“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 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.”

Twice in this short passage, Pilate, expressing his opinion of Jesus Christ, says, “I find no fault in Him.” The second time the conjunction of thoughts is peculiar. The text reads, “Crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.” By all logic Pilate adjudged Christ innocent and condemned Him as guilty. The paradox invites examination.

As the chief priests and officers brought vociferous charges of blasphemy and sedition against Jesus, as the soldiers scourged Him and placed the crown of thorns on His head as they smote Him with their hands and spat in His face, as the mob clamored for the crucifixion of the patient Prisoner, Pilate gradually gathered that he was judging an extraordinary person.

The Jews had already condemned Him in their own courts, and now they brought Him before the civil government for the death penalty. Nor would a humane execution satisfy them. They had seen Him scourged and yet they demanded crueler punishment. “Crucify Him!” Fully conscious of the injustice of the charges, as clearly aware of the pains of the cross before Him as of the sting of the scourge just experienced, Jesus “is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth.”

Pilate knew that the accusations were unjust. He knew that they had been brought only through the unreasonable jealousy of the scribes and Pharisees. Having heard of the reputation of the prisoner for going about doing good, for healing the sick, for cleansing the lepers, Pilate knew that the common people heard Jesus gladly. And by the dignified conduct of Jesus in court, Pilate knew that he was judging an extraordinary Person; but he did not know how extraordinary that Person was.

He did not know, for example, that his relation to this apparently obscure Galilean would make him more famous than all his equals – the other Roman governors, more famous than all his superiors, more famous than the Emperor himself, that in fact his name would be on the lips of

countless thousands for ages to come as week after week they repeat, “born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

Pilate knew that this man had said something, not very serious or seditious, about being king of the Jews; but he did not know that in awful truth he was King of kings and Lord of lords. He might have guessed that this carpenter from Nazareth could make a table or a chair, but it never entered his mind that “by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers; all things were created by Him, and for Him.”

Pilate knew that he, the judge, had power to save Jesus from the pains of the cross; but he did not know that Jesus, the prisoner, had power to save him from the pains of hell forever. He knew, of course, and boasted of it, that he had power to release Jesus or to crucify Him; but he did not know that he had no power at all against Jesus except what was given him from above; he did not know that no man took Christ’s life from Him, but that Christ could lay it down and take it again. Pilate did not know that it was this Jesus who gave him the power of which he boasted.

Pilate knew—how could he not know it—that if he let this Man go, the howling Jewish mob would break through the palace doors, trample over the soldiers, and tear Pilate limb from limb; but he did not know that he had the opportunity of being what thousand of Christians would have died thousands of deaths to be: he did not know that he had the opportunity of being the first Christian martyr.

Stephen, to whom God granted this distinction, and the apostles, who with one exception suffered violent deaths for their faith, appropriately refrained from florid reflections on martyrdom. But sub-apostolic literature reveals clearly the attitude of those faithful Christians who faced persecution to glorify God and to transmit the gospel to posterity.

About the year 108, Ignatius was arrested for being a Christian and was taken to Rome for execution. On his journey to Rome, delegates from the churches of the region through which he passed came to pay their respects. There was a college student of the twentieth century who with the modern lack of historical perspective, was inclined to doubt the evidence, because, as he naively argued, if Ignatius had been arrested for being a Christian, his visitors also would run the risk of arrest and death. The modern student, unacquainted with true Christianity, thought no one would willingly run that risk. But that noble army—men and boys, the matron and the maid—climbed the steep ascent of heaven through peril, toil, and pain, and regarded it as an honor highly to be prized to meet the tyrant’s brandished steel, the lion’s gory mane. Thus, Ignatius, fearing perhaps an attempt at a rescue, wrote ahead to the Romans: “I am dying willingly for God’s sake, if you do not hinder it. I beseech you, be not an unseasonable kindness to me. Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God. I am God’s wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts

that I may be found pure bread of Christ . . . I long for the beasts that are prepared for me, and I pray that that may be found prompt for me. I will even entice them to devour me promptly. . . . Let there come on me fire and cross and struggles with wild beasts, cutting and tearing asunder. . . . Cruel tortures of the devil, may I but attain to Jesus Christ.”

About fifty years later, Polycarp, the only person remaining who had seen the apostles, suffered a similar fate with similar rejoicing. When asked to say, “Lord Caesar,” and save his life, he refused. Since the Christians rejected the pagan gods and were thus considered atheists, the officer asked Polycarp to say, “Away with the atheists.” Hear the account of what then occurred: “Polycarp, with a stern countenance, looked on all the crowd of lawless heathen in the arena, and waving his hand at them, he groaned and looked up to heaven and said, ‘Away with the atheists.’ But when the pro-consul pressed him and said, ‘Take the oath and I let you go; revile Christ?’ Polycarp said, ‘For eighty and six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my king Who saved me?’”

And as they lit the fire, he prayed, “I bless Thee that Thou hast granted me this day and hour, that I may share, among the number of martyrs, in the cup of Thy Christ, for the resurrection to everlasting life, both of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit.”

Not recognizing Jesus for what in truth He was, and blind to the opportunity of being the first Christian martyr, Pilate allowed the occasion to pass by. In his eyes, the judging of this Man was merely a part of his routine business, and he failed to grasp the significance of what was taking place.

In Philadelphia, there is an immense canvas some twenty feet wide and thirteen feet high, on which a consummate artist with vividness and skill has depicted this scene. Caiaphas, conscious of his position and power, is addressing the governor; perched on a high seat, with his back against the wall, is a scribe, haughty and contemptuous; on a bench close to the judgment seat, almost under Caiaphas’ outstretched arm, there rests a portly Pharisee, wealthy and insolent; crouching in a corner, three priests heatedly discuss the case among themselves; in the mob, which is held somewhat in check by a Roman soldier, an impudent halfwit with a giggling sneer leans over to peer curiously into the face of the central figure; an enterprising gentleman in the rear tries to climb over the heads and shoulders of those in front of him to give assistance to Caiaphas in his speech of accusation; and an advocate of direct action, impatient of delay, throws up both arms, opens mouth and lungs, and yells, “Crucify Him!”

Just off center stands Jesus. His calm is a contrast for the mob’s clamor. His erect dignity makes even Caiaphas appear slightly rattle-brained. But He seems unmindful of the circumstances and the proceedings as His even look moves quietly beyond the Roman tribunal to a serene contemplation of the eternal decrees of God.

And on the massive judgment seat sits the Roman Pilate, the imperial executive, the efficient governor – worried, puzzled, and burdened with indecision.

Just as some blind, inartistic souls who look upon this canvas, see the paint but not the picture, so, too, Pilate, blind to God's masterpiece, saw the prisoner but not the Person. The human artist, Munkacsy, called his painting, *Christ before Pilate*, but one may reverently imagine that God called the original scene *Pilate before Christ*. For, as Jesus stood in the presence of Pilate, Pilate sat in the presence of God.

And, though he tried, he could not escape pronouncing judgment. Once and then a second time, he protested to the Jews, "I find no fault in Him."

More recently other men as blind as Pilate, and with less excuse, have repeated Pilate's sentiment. To choose outstanding examples of a century ago, the great William E. Channing said, "I contemplate Him [Jesus] with a veneration second only to that with which I look upward to God." David Strauss confessed, "He represents within the religious sphere, the highest point beyond which humanity cannot go." And Ernest Renan admitted, "Whatever may be the surprises of the future, this Jesus will never be surpassed; none greater than He has been born among the children of men."

Is the true Christian delighted when he hears these words of praise? To be sure, these tributes from Pilate, from last century's liberals, and from this they find no fault in Him; neither do they find the fullness of the Godhead bodily. In effect they say, with the same disregard of logic, "Crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him."

We, too, in hearing the name of Jesus Christ, are brought face to face with God. And we, too, ought to say, "I find no fault in Him," but let us say it in a different sense and with a different connotation. Let us say it, not with a recognition of something vaguely extraordinary, but with a clear understanding of the Person. Consider His active obedience and perfect righteousness. Reflect on His purpose to redeem His own by a propitiatory sacrifice to God the Father. Contemplate the mystery of a divine and a human nature united inconfusedly and inseparably in one divine Person. Believe on Him; trust in Him; accept Him as Lord and worship the adorable Person of the God-Man.

*My Lord, my Master, at Thy feet adoring,  
I see Thee bowed beneath Thy load of woe:  
For me, a sinner, is Thy life-blood pouring;  
For Thee, my Savior, scarce my tears will flow.*

*My Lord, My Savior, when I see Thee wearing  
Upon Thy bleeding brow the crown of thorn,  
Shall I for pleasure live, or shrink from bearing  
Whate'er my lot may be of pain or scorn?*

*O Victim of Thy Love! O pangs most healing!  
O saving death! O wounds that I adore!  
O shame most glorious! Christ, before Thee kneeling,  
I pray Thee keep me Thine forevermore.*