

THE TRIAL OF JESUS

By Peter Wiseman, D. D.

"Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas or Jesus?" "Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?" (Matt. 27:17).

There is on this occasion, plainly to be seen, the perplexity of policy, the irony of power in distress, the representative of the Ecclesiastical system of the day at its low ebb, the representative of state craft at its supremest, the representative of world force at its best.

The Roman Governor and Jesus Christ are face to face in the magnificently adorned hall of a Roman Palace. Pilate in all his pomp is seated on his tribunal and on either side are the Roman soldiers in full armour with spear and shield. It is a tragic moment not so much for Jesus as for Pilate.

What has He done? Whence did He come? For what did He come? He healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, raised the dead. He went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. He received sinners, forgave sins, denounced hypocrisy, helped the needy.

After the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, He was arrested. He was brought before Annas; then Caiaphas; then Pilate; then Herod; then back to Pilate; then delivered to the soldiers; then crucified. Two trials in three separate stages or acts. The first was **Ecclesiastical**. Jesus appeared before Annas, the degenerate, an old man of seventy, being high priest twenty years before; then before Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, who was a time-server; then before the Sanhedrim during the night, and back again before the same body early in the morning. The second trial is known as the Civil Trial, before Pilate, the irresolute, the man who represented Imperial Rome. Then before Herod, the superficial. Finally back before Pilate. When He came from the ecclesiastical crowd to Pilate, Pilate demanded to know what accusation they had to bring against the Prisoner. "If He were not a Malefactor, we would not have delivered Him up unto thee." "Take ye Him," answered Pilate, "and judge Him according to your law." That is to say, "If I am not to hear the case, then I will neither pass the sentence nor inflict punishment." Finally they formulated three charges, namely, that He was perverting the nation, that He forbid to pay the imperial tribute, that He made Himself a King. But they never mentioned the actual charge they brought against Him, and for which they had condemned Him, the charge of blasphemy; for it would have no weight with the civil powers, who cared nothing for the Jewish religion.

It seems clear that the religious system, headed by the Sadducees, Annas and Caiaphas, were bent on the death of Jesus. Herod made a pastime of the affair. The responsibility finally fell on Pilate. And Pilate found himself in one difficulty after another, the last of which is expressed in the words, "Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas or Jesus?" "To release the Prisoner meant a risking of a riot and all that it involved; to condemn Him would gratify the rulers. And the governor did not wish to do either. These conflicting forces were like armies which had fought themselves to a standstill, without hope of decision unless reinforcements came to the one side or the other." Pilate surely was in the grip of circumstances.

"The time is out of joint, accursed spite That ever I was born to set it right."

Pilate declared Jesus to be innocent and yet ordered Him to be chastised. After all, what Pilate did with Jesus sent Him to the cross.

The scourging: "The victim was stripped and stretched against a pillar, or bent over a low post, his hands being tied, so that He had no means of defending Himself. The instrument of torture was a sort of a strap with many things loaded with bits of iron or bone. The blows cutting the skin and drawing blood. Sometimes the victim would die in the midst of this scourging. The inability of Jesus to bear His own cross may be traced to weakness from this ordeal."

The soldiers took Him to their own quarters in the palace and called together the whole band of soldiers for sport; for the most brutal treatment. A King should have a coronation. The soldiers got enough of the drift of the trial to know that the charge against Jesus was that He pretended to be a king, and the idea of any king above Caesar! A king must wear **the purple**. They found an old cast-off officer's cloak and threw it over His shoulders. This appears clear. A king must have **a crown**, so they gathered some thorny twigs from without and made them into a rude resemblance of a crown and crushed it down on His precious brow. A king must have **a scepter**, so they found a reed, used perhaps as a walking stick and thrust it into His hand. They bowed their knee, and said, "Hail, King of the Jews." "Passing," said Dr. Stalker, "with mock solemnity, each turned and, with a burst of laughter, struck Him a blow, using for this purpose the reed which He had dropped. And, though I hardly dare to repeat it, they covered His face with spittle!"

Then Jesus was dressed in His own clothes and led away to be crucified. "From the scene of the trial to the supposed site of execution is nearly a mile." "This distance Christ carried His cross with an increasing multitude of spectators gathering in the procession. He finally went under, and a Cyrenian was compelled to help Him, with a bleeding body, the crown of thorns still on His head and the cross on His shoulder, is it any wonder He went under?"

The Crucifixion: He was placed on a cross the form of a T, arms extended bound and nailed through the palms of the hands, his feet placed on a ridge or seat for the purpose and a large nail or spike driven through; the cross erected dropped into a hole made for the purpose.

The mocking and terrible insults were renewed: "If he be Christ, let Him come down from the cross," which closely corresponds to His temptation in the wilderness, "If thou be the Son of God."

Thus ended the trial which had been a mere mockery of justice: "On the part of the ecclesiastical authority it was a foregone conclusion, and on the part of the civil authority it was the surrender of a life acknowledged to be innocent to the ends of selfishness and policy." Over the cross was placed the inscription: "Jesus the King of the Jews." Pilate said, "What I have written, I have written." As Dr. Stalker well says, "He might almost have said, 'What I have written, God has written.'" For these three great languages are representative languages of the ancient world: Hebrew, religion; Greek, culture; Latin, law and government. On His head are many crowns. He is King of the realm of religion; King in the

realm of culture, art, philosophy, and literature; King in the political realm, King of kings and Lord of lords, entitled to rule every relationship national, social, and commercial and religious.

"What shall I do with Jesus?" What a momentous question! It is the question of the church. Who is Jesus? What is His relationship to the church? It is the question of the state. Do we as a country need Him? Can we get along without Him? Has He affected the state according to history? It is the question of the world. It comes down the ages gathering momentum as it comes. It is an individual question. "What" — a perplexing question. "What shall I"—a personal question. "What shall I do"—an unavoidable question. "What shall I do with Jesus"—a universal question; for Jesus is "the arbiter of destiny whose smile is heaven and whose frown is hell."

It is illuminating to note how this question was answered.

What did Judas do with Jesus? How did he answer the question. The most sacred evening of the most sacred season in the calendar, the Passover season, Judas led the enemies of Jesus to the sacred place of the Master's devotion, Gethsemane, to arrest Him. Then he profaned the sacred sign of discipleship by a kiss of betrayal.

Annas, the degenerate, and Caiaphas, the time-server, answered the question in the light of their depraved hearts. And so did Herod. He is one of the sons of Herod who reigned during the infancy of Jesus; the Herod who was reproved by John for having his brother Philip's wife. He sported with Jesus. He represents the frivolous worldling who tries to turn the whole of life into a joke.

Pilate answered his own question. He represents a worldliness which works around to make self the center of success. He was non-committal. He asks the people, and asks the priests. He knew well that for envy they had delivered Jesus. He tried, it seems, to deliver Jesus. He did about everything, except the thing he should have done; then left Jesus with the people. He kept his office and yet within a few short years Pilate was accused of treachery, summoned to Rome, banished, and in exile committed suicide. Then the man who was the chief character in the trial of Jesus, the public man, the man who could not bear the thought of being accused of lacking in loyalty to Caesar: this man, so soon was before Jesus. And the question then with Pilate might well have been, "What will Jesus do with me?"

Poor Pilate! The morally weak man, the man who lacked settled convictions, and failed to do the right thing when he had the chance.

The Jews answered the question by their prayer: "His blood be on us, and our children." It has surely been answered.

The Greeks answered the question by their philosophy of the cross, namely, foolishness. They thought that by their culture they would save themselves, but they did not. And where is ancient Greece?

The Romans answered the question by their boast of power, but where is ancient Rome?

The grave question at the present time is, How am I, as an individual, answering this question? What am I doing with Jesus? How are we, as a people, answering the question? What are we doing with Jesus? What is the so-called church of Christ doing with Jesus? How are they answering the question?