

From The Pulpit

by Rev. Donald M. Clark

PERSONAL PROFILES AT CALVARY
("Pontius Pilate")

IT IS TEN YEARS AFTER the crucifixion of Christ, and for our personality study this morning, we journey to a humble villa in Vienna, on the River Rhone in Southern France. Here we come upon a bitter man, aged beyond his years, living in exile amid dilapidated memories of a ruined past. His name is Pontius Pilate, remembered in history for only one act--his Trial and Sentencing of Jesus Christ in far-off Palestine. But we've only heard the story from one side; let him tell his story to us today. . .

Bitter? Of course I'm bitter. Who wouldn't be, after all I've been through! Oh, I know you've heard only one thing--"suffered under Pontius Pilate" as mouthed by His followers, but listen to my story, will you? You see, I thought that Sejanus had done me a favor when he convinced Tiberius that I was the man to succeed Valerius Gratus in 26 AD as the 5th Procurator of Judea. Why, Tiberius even granted me the privilege that no other Governor had, taking my wife with me to the beautiful city of Caesarea Philippi! I had a spacious residence in that city, but the palace at Jerusalem was even more beautiful. It was situated in the Upper City to the southwest of the Temple hill. Between its giant white marble wings, was an open space commanding a breath-taking view of the city, and it was adorned with sculptured porticos and columns of many colored marble, paved with rich mosaics, varied with fountains and reservoirs, and green promenades. From the outside, it was a mass of towers and lofty walls, gleaming roofs, mingled with exquisite varieties of splendor. In its rooms was the finest of ornate furniture and the most beautiful of gold and silver vessels. . . oh, everything added up to an enjoyable and profitable term of office down there, but instead I soon hated everything about it!

Why, no sooner had I arrived in Caesarea, than that crowd of religious hypocrites practically stormed my palace for five days and nights--and over what? Just because I had the silver eagles of imperial Rome transported to their 'holy' city of Jerusalem! Why, it even amounted to a riot! Then, the second time was when they raised an awful tumult over my building an aqueduct to ease the water shortage in Jerusalem. I thought that since it was for their own welfare, that there would be no objection to my paying for this project out of the Sacred treasury, but soon the streets were filled with cursing, screaming mobs. I thought that something had to be done to teach them a lesson, so I sent disguised soldiers throughout the mob, and then gave a signal from the balcony to stab and beat them. It worked, and I can still remember the terrified screams of those accursed Jews as they were crushed, stabbed or trampled on by the crowds. I thought that they would remember that, and not try anything else, but they did. . . Why, all I did was hang some simple gilt shields in Herod's palace in Jerusalem. I was even reported to Tiberius, whom I had originally intended to honor, and he reprimanded me! Do you begin to see why I am bitter?

I'LL NEVER FORGET the time when Herod's trouble-making Galileans caused a disturbance during a feast-celebration. I finally had to cut them down in cold blood; they were uncontrollable! (Luke 13:1) and the time that some imposter gathered thousands on Mount Gerizim to show them the hidden vessels of Moses. Even I knew that Moses had never crossed the Jordan, and that this mob was up to no good, but oh, the loud complaints when I surrounded them and, finding that they were armed, slew many and executed others. What else could I do? I was instructed to keep order in Judea and Samaria,



REV. D. M. CLARK

so I couldn't allow armed insurrection and such continual rioting in the streets, could I? Oh, how I hated the Jews, and loathed that so-called 'holy' city of Jerusalem!

So, when I had to make my yearly journey to that vile place in the year 29, I knew that there would probably be trouble. But even I didn't begin to know how great the trouble was!

We had arrived for the festival of the Pass-over season on Thursday, and after a night of celebrating in the palace, I was awakened very early Friday morning by a shouting mob in the court below. I needed my rest, for my head was pounding like a thousand chariot wheels, but I hurriedly dressed and went to see what was the disturbance. As I looked out, I saw that it was a mumbling, uneasy crowd, led by the same seditious trouble-makers that had bothered me for three years. I frantically searched my mind for anything that I could have done this time to arouse their anger, but was totally at a loss, so I stepped from the side balcony into the Judgment Hall. Then, for the first time, I saw Him. . . He had been thrust into the Hall by the Jews who were afraid of being polluted by such Gentile surroundings, and stood there, silent, as if in deep meditation, yet with the marks of suffering on His face.

Relieved that I for once was not the object of their wrath, I stepped outside the door and asked them 'What accusation bring ye against this man' (John 18:29), hoping to get the business over with and get back to bed. They shouted something about His being an evildoer (John 18:30), and a trouble-making imposter who called himself a King (Luke 23:2). Well, when they mentioned about a king, I turned back into the Hall and asked Him if indeed he were a king, for if he were, then Caesar should know about it. But, he looked at me with a dignity and a majesty I've never seen before or since, and I marvelled greatly (Matt. 27:14).

WELL, THIS ONE WAS no criminal, and I told the accusers that I could find 'no fault in him at all' (Luke 23:4, John 18:38). But, oh, these Jews! They started to shout and scream, 'He stirreth up the people; he refuseth to give tribute to Caesar,' and a half dozen other trumped-up charges. The mob took up the cry, and I couldn't make myself heard above the tumult, so I ordered the trumpeters to sound for silence. After repeated blasts, the shouting diminished, and I signalled for one of the soldiers to bring out Barabbas.

As I remember, he was in for murder and sedition, an ugly man, with huge purple blotches across his face, and evil eyes--well, he was dragged out, and stood next to Jesus on the balcony before the crowd. I felt that with such a contrast, the mob would surely select Jesus to be released, for it was a custom to release one of the prisoners on the feast day. But, do you know what they did? They all began to shout 'Release Barabbas'. Oh, how I wished that I could spit in their faces and release the Nazarene, but I couldn't. . . Tiberius would not stand another tumult. Fool that I was--even with my temporizing, and compromising, I still was relieved of my office and banished! Oh, how I wish that I had heeded my wife's warning that morning. . . but I didn't, and here I am. . .

But, after they shouted for the release of Barabbas, I again leaned over the balcony and asked--'What shall I do with Jesus, which is called Christ?' (Matt. 27:22). And, oh, the clamor of that day--with frenzied fanaticism, worse than any I had ever heard, they began to chant 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!' until the very walls echoed the crazed cry 'Crucify--crucify--crucify!' I didn't know what to do, for my head was aching, my heart was pounding, and my hands were trembling and my soldiers were watching for any sign of weakness, for any sign. . . Finally, there was only one thing to do--call for a basin of water, and display to the mad mob that which words could not do. I washed my hands, and in a moment of unearthly quiet, I flung the words at them--'I am innocent of the blood of this just man, see ye to it.' (Matt. 27:24). And then, I had him scourged with cruel thongs, and they led him away to be crucified. . .

WHAT CAN I SAY? What can I say? That day lives in the halls of my memory as if it were yesterday. The angry people, the long procession up Calvary, the fearful darkness at noon-day, the terrifying earthquake, the unearthly silence after the turbulence had died. I couldn't sleep; I couldn't talk; I was afraid, and yet not wishing to admit it to fellow Romans. Then, those, those animals came back to me the next day, and asked for a guard to be placed at His

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tomb--they were afraid too, now that their deed was done! I told them that they could do what they wanted to, I was sick of the whole matter.

I thought that time would heal the matter, and that it was over, but I was wrong, for this One--it is reported--conquered death as no Caesar before or since, and became alive again. I do not know; I do not know. . .

No, I haven't written any record, and I never will, but I will tell you what my heart has learned. It has learned that my standard of values was all wrong. I thought of kings and empires in terms of this world. I thought that I was judging Him. I thought He was the prisoner, and I the Governor! Ah, no, I soon shall pass from this scene, my only monument being the black mistake of that day, and men shall write that the Caesars are gone; Pilate is dead, and the most important buildings in our city are not named for either, but for Pilate's Prisoner. It has learned also that compromise is the road of total defeat. I knew what I should have done, but I did it not. I compromised with truth, for "expediency's sake", and here I am, broken, exiled, hated by everyone who hears my name. What is gained by such compromise? Nothing. I betrayed my own soul for less than Judas did his. I knew what I should have done, but I didn't do it; I didn't do it. . .

YES, AND IT HAS LEARNED that mere water can never wash away my responsibility of that day. My responsibility that day was to answer my own question 'What then will I do with Jesus, which is called the Christ?'