

CHRIST'S THREE JUDGES.

II.

PILATE.

(JOHN XVIII. 28-XIX. 16.)

THE difficulty of Caiaphas was that he came to the judgment seat with a mind so biassed that he could only see in Jesus what his prejudice allowed. Pilate's difficulty was of another sort. So far as he had a prejudice it was in the prisoner's favour. As governor, he knew the unreasonableness of the Jewish leaders, and he was not disposed to think badly of a man who had fallen out with them. As a soldier, he had no dislike to blows given in battle or to check a rising; but the sight of this helpless peasant, baited and hounded on to death by a mob of pilgrims, to gratify the spite of priests, moved his sympathy. He was really sorry for their victim, and was convinced of His innocence. But he laboured under a constitutional incapacity to understand anything but material force; and when Christ and he met, their words moved, as it were, on different levels. Common words had different meanings for them. To the judge, an authority which was not backed by troops, and a force which did not command outward success, were insignificant; whilst to the prisoner, an authority which needed force to back it was so inferior as to be unworthy of notice. It was the meeting of a serpent and a bird, of one who found the earth enough, and one who took the heaven of thought and truth as his home. And the dialogue, in so far as it is preserved, is remarkable in this that the two men, though face to face, did not really meet. They talked of different worlds. And when Pilate found no fault in Jesus, the perplexity remained for him of discovering some ray of meaning in his prisoner's words.

In this respect Pilate was a true child of his nation. The Romans, with all their greatness, were a stolid and prosaic race. They had little poetry, and their imagination was most readily kindled by the history and the destiny of their empire. In Christ's age their most vital religion was the empire; the god to whom the most altars were raised, and to whom sacrifices were offered with most zeal, was the emperor himself. And that was not unnatural; for the Roman empire was the embodiment of material force and policy, carried to such a height as to become almost a spiritual thing. Wherever men journeyed they found that power before them; it had swept the sea of pirates, it had built roads and bridges, established posts, tamed the wild tribes. Into one hand was gathered the control of the civilized world. A man had no way of escape; if he were to live within the world of order and culture, he must do as the law enjoined; and if he transgressed, there was still no escape, for anywhere, by land or sea, that mighty hand could seize him and lead him back to face his doom. That is to say, the Romans found in the action of the imperial power something like our notions of providence, omnipotence and omnipresence: it went everywhere, it controlled all, it could do all. And that was their faith—faith in a perfectly organized and victorious force. On the whole that force was justly exercised; but no scruples about human rights were allowed to hamper the course of policy. Force was the principal thing, before which the Greeks, with their pre-eminence in art and thought, had gone down; and nations which had superiorities of other kinds had also failed. For the world, they felt, is subject to the strong hand; all things are possible to it. The great Napoleon, who restored in Europe so many of the ideas of the Cæsars, had the same view. He had a secret leaning to sentimentalism, and had wept over the sorrows of Werther; but that was diversion, it lay off the path of real life. And the

idéologue, the man of ideas and ideals, who is swayed by them, and gives them a place of authority in his life, was for him an object of contempt. In our country the same view prevails, and all things are subjected to the dominion of the practical man; metaphysic is popularly dismissed with a sneer, and pure science is starved in all the universities under every government. For the Briton, like the Roman, prefers what is tangible and effective; what is not visible may have interest for men of leisure, but it is off the path of practical men.

Now before Pilate, who thus judged, stood One who had little concern with our distinctions of seen and unseen: He was interested in real things, whether seen or not. When the disciples returned, uplifted with their small successes, He exclaimed, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." The faint, first indication was enough for Him, who in the mere hint of prosperity rejoiced in the far-off consummation. "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed," He said again, "you will say to this mountain, Depart and be cast into the sea, and it will obey you; and nothing shall be impossible to you." The Roman, judging by his rule, says, "Here is only one obscure man; we need not stand in fear of him." And Christ, following His rule, reckons, "Here is a man with faith—the smallest and feeblest measure of it, but with faith; he can go far, the world has no gates shut against him." Again He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, the least of all seeds"; "it is like leaven which a woman hid in three measures of meal." On which the practical man remarks, "The least of all seeds, and it has been the occupation of a lifetime!" A man, who might have been usefully employed, has done nothing else than discover or proclaim this inconspicuous, commonplace truth! He has laboured night and day at preaching, and has grown old, and the world gives no sign. Why cannot men give their

strength to that which shows? But Christ comments, "The least of seeds, likely to be overlooked by men, but it becomes a tree. The leaven passes out of sight, but it leavens the lump." For the one force which Jesus did believe in was the force of ideas, of truth; and He was persuaded that, in presence of that force, the great fabric of Roman power and of every empire built on material considerations must crumble and then vanish. Thus they faced each other, the representatives of widely diverse systems, Pilate seeing in the world the prevalence of organized, material force, and Christ watching for the swift advances of the victory of truth. Was a harder task ever given to man than this of Pilate—to understand and judge his own opposite?

It is interesting to observe in detail how Pilate's lack of understanding for what was not material led him astray. It appears at once in the fear which led him to condemn Christ. He had pronounced Him innocent, for His offence, at worst, was in some question of Jewish doctrine, and he would fain have let Him go. But the streets were thronged with pilgrims, with their religious zeal blown up to white heat, bent on having this man's blood who had spoken blasphemous things of their Temple. Pilate looked out on that stormy sea of faces, and he came back to his prisoner. His instinct as a judge told him he must dismiss the accused; his self-respect as a Roman and a governor made him reluctant to yield to this horde of shrieking zealots. If justice meant anything, he was bound to set the man free. But he counted over the men at his command, and he reckoned the hosts of pilgrims who would have picked down his castle with their claws rather than miss their prey; and he was afraid. Another legion within call might have made the difference, or a week or two later in the year when the pilgrims had gone home. The question whether Jesus Christ should live or die was suspended on so ignoble a

consideration as the fitness of the Roman garrison to hold the castle; and Pilate asked himself, not if this were just, but if he had soldiers and supplies to bear him out in it. This is an old question of truth or force. Joseph was pressed by it when his position and his good name were at stake, when youthful passion and self-interest and assured secrecy all pointed in one way. "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" he cried, bursting free from the nets which circumstance was weaving about him. "Here I stand. I can do no other, so help me God!" said Luther—one little monk in face of the authority of Empire and Church, with nothing of physical force to uphold him. And all noble deeds are done by men who ask no other backing than that of truth; and all works of shame are wrought by those who put first the question of force. When John Brown was in hiding, his retreat was known to many who hated him, but none of them dared an attack; and the reason he gave for his security was that "perhaps they felt they lacked a cause," and "they did not wish their last act in the world to be a wrong one." Though the material power was theirs, they achieved nothing at that time; for the "cause" was his, and it bore him out. The first thing a man must learn who desires to go with Christ is a noble blindness to all selfish considerations of worldly prudence. A course of action is safe enough if it is right; and whether safe or not, it must be followed to the end.

Pilate might have risked something if he had thought the case one of importance. Frequent complaints were carried up from the provinces to Rome, and the central authority was so overburdened that a governor was in danger who was much complained of. But if there had been some considerable interest at stake, Pilate, who did not lack hardihood, might have faced the worst. But it was a question of a provincial, a peasant, the companion of fisher-

men and outcasts, who had enjoyed a momentary popularity in the north, but whose following had dwindled until He was almost alone. The world already had judged Him, and marked Him for failure. It was scarcely to be looked for that a governor should risk his reputation for such a reason. He looked at his prisoner, a man prematurely old, with hope gone out of His enterprise; he thought of himself and his ambitions, of his wife and the luxuries which office brought to them; and he measured the one against the other. What would Rome say of a magistrate who kindled revolt throughout his province in order to lengthen out the experience of failure of a peasant teacher? His error lay in the misapplication of the standards of material force; for all who know anything of truth and justice know that considerations of great and small are foreign to them. In morals, as in mathematics, the proof does not depend on the scale. The relations of sides and angles in a triangle are not changed when we pass from the minute diagram in a textbook to the inconceivable distances which separate star from star; and duties and truths are no less obstinate, allowing no distinction of great or small. The two mites, in Christ's right-judging eye, were a great thing; the ointment poured on His head shall be mentioned wherever His gospel is preached; a cup of cold water shall be named and rewarded in the judgment of the Great Day. "I give all my goods to feed the poor"—that, surely, is great; it is nothing, says Paul. "I give my body to be burned"—how noble a man, a martyr and saint! It is nothing, says the Apostle again. The trifling occasion on which, it seems, a man may please himself has eternal issues; this diplomatic yielding on Pilate's part, because the matter was so small, has marked him for all time. And every one who presumes to measure duty, and to make terms with it according to its apparent magnitude and urgency, is running in the same direction.

Pilate's impression of the smallness of the occasion is given picturesquely in the pantomime by which he relieved himself of responsibility. He called for water, and washed his hands before the crowd, declaring thus that it was not his doing; that, had he got his will, the prisoner would have been free; so he turned down the page and hastened to forget a trivial incident. That is in the very spirit of the practical man, who thinks that small offences do not matter and great offences do not matter much, and that the world has as short a memory as the casual onlooker. How long has Pilate stood there washing his hands? Will he never come down from that pillory, or see the stain remove? To every generation of men he must renew his apology, and show afresh that the will to crucify was not in him; but the stain is there, and will not rub out. Public works of his day in the province have long since disappeared; roads are buried deep, palaces and baths fallen to ruins, fortifications have scarcely left a trace. Nothing he did has been enduring except this one insignificant act of compliance. For even thus it may be seen how much stronger the spiritual is than the physical. George Eliot reckoned that in a few years the good she did would outweigh any possible consequences of her great mistake, in which we chiefly see her inexpertness in judging the higher laws of life. For who can measure a good and evil as if they were masses of fixed dimensions? The evil strikes upon another man, incarnates itself in him, and uses his energy and genius to propagate its own life; and thus it may run out and out in ever-widening circles. So also may the good; the anxious fidelity of a good man in trifles may impress his neighbour more than any greater achievement. Good and evil, truth and falsehood, are living powers which grow more and move and capture men's lives in spite of them. And thus in the world we inhabit our works, whether we count them large or small, live

on ; our judgment and our remembrance of them matter nothing. And hence it is for ever true that the final judgment on a man comes not at his own death, but at the world's end ; sooner it cannot be. For what went out from him and is now forgotten, is living on, and turning towards the better or the worse men he never saw. Until human life on earth is complete, it cannot be truly said of any man what he has done or how great his work has been.

In another way which has not lost currency Pilate showed on this occasion the spirit of the practical man. He brought Jesus out to the crowd and pointed to Him, a figure to move pity in the most cruel. He was sorry for his prisoner, and he thought they might also be sorry when they saw how wretched and suffering a man He was. Sentiment is often a worldly man's substitute for mercy. It was all Pilate had to give to Jesus ; he felt no awe in His presence. He recognised no truth or authority in His words. All he had was a movement of pity for a broken man ; and that was on the surface, whilst his will was clear to sacrifice the man if this last appeal failed. Sentiment at all times makes truth and justice a little thing. And a wrong is done to truth by those who dwell entirely on the emotional side of Christ's suffering, and depict the pains and horrors of the cross so that sentiment is awakened, and crowds are moved to weep for the agony of Christ. That emotion of pity is a great part of some men's religion ; they are not held by the power of truth, and drawn to submit in will and conscience to the authority of Jesus Christ ; they are held by their emotions, and they fancy themselves good and religious because they are touched by the story. Like Pilate, they give way to pity for a moment, and then they turn back, under constraint of what is constant in their nature, to surrender Christ and His cause into the hands of His enemies. That is the religion of the crucifix, and it is a caricature of the religion of Jesus. He

is not now upon the cross ; He has risen out from the shadow of that passing eclipse into clearest light. He asks not for our tears and our emotion, but, as Lord, He calls for our obedience, our homage, our trust. The truth in its tone is ever lordly ; it does not entreat, it commands. And to the persuasiveness of truth Jesus Christ commits the fortunes of His cause.

This temper of Pilate's is one against which we need to watch, for the temptation is near of looking to other resources than the bare truth of the Christian message. When we are cheered by the numbers and influence of the members of the Church, by the prominence of the Christian nations in the world, by the roll of famous men who have been Christians, we may dwell so much on these external things as to miss the comfort of the truth itself. When there is an outward decline, many are despondent, as if the truth itself were in decline. And Church history in many of its chapters is altogether lamentable, as it tells of men's forgetfulness of the native power of the Christian facts. They have sought the countenance of kings as if the Church could not stand alone ; they have imitated the trappings and the gaudiness of courts "as if the Church were a kind of second-rate world." It is needful for us to get clearness as to what it is we believe in, and why we believe in Christ ; not, I trust, because of the visibility and impressiveness of the Church, not because the world is setting that way, or because of the fascination of a preacher who flatters our mood. A true disciple waits for no outward authority ; when Christ speaks, his heart makes answer to the truth ; when Christ calls, he rises, waiting for no man's example, and follows. He walks with Christ, content though the world take the other way, careless though men threaten, for he knows what force is on his side.

If any man will judge Christ rightly, he must receive into his mind the fact that of the powers which move the

world the greatest is that of truth. "The natural man," says Paul, "comprehendeth not the things of the Spirit of God"; he is so much engaged in learning to measure the things he can understand that, when he looks at Christ, he brings his ill-adjusted measures with him. "The things are spiritually discerned." In the roar of modern life, with its vast demands and its contempt for the unsuccessful, we need more than ever to pray, as the prophet did for his servant, "Lord, open his eyes!" For then he saw, between the town and the encompassing enemy, a host of heavenly protectors. If we had the open eyes, we should think less of the visible forces and the threat which is declared in them, for we should see the greater facts of truth, and right, and God. To make us proof against the solicitations of the worldly mind, we need with open face to behold the glory of God.

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