

*THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST. MARK.*¹

XLVIII. THE TRIAL BEFORE PILATE, XIV. 65, XV. 1-15.

THE reader who has felt the fascination of the personality of Jesus and the mingled affection and awe which it inspires, will shrink from dwelling on the scenes that follow. He may even be surprised at the calm, concise directness with which St. Mark narrates the indignities and tortures inflicted upon Jesus ; he does not find it necessary to express sympathy with Him, or condemnation of His enemies. He is not afraid of compromising His dignity by depicting Him helpless, disgraced, and humiliated. Doubtless the Oriental was not as sensitive as we are on such points ; but, even so, the manner in which the story is told implies that the authority of Jesus was irrevocably established in the mind of the Evangelist ; it could stand the strain of painful and degrading associations. But to return to the narrative.

After the sentence of the Sanhedrim, Jesus was a condemned criminal in the eyes of the Jews ; and the officers who had Him in charge indulged in brutal horseplay at His expense. They spat upon Him ; covered His face and struck Him, bidding Him "prophesy" who had struck Him ; and beat Him with rods.²

But the Jewish notables were not competent to carry out the public execution of Jesus ; the power of life and death rested with the Roman governor. At day-break, therefore, a deputation of high priests and elders, formally

¹ These studies do not profess to be an adequate historical or dogmatic account of Christ ; they simply attempt to state the impression which the Second Gospel would make upon a reader who had no other sources of information as to Jesus, and was unacquainted with Christian doctrine.

² The meaning, however, of the clause rendered in R.V. "received Him with blows of their hands," is uncertain.

invested with the authority of the entire Sanhedrim, took Jesus, bound, before Pilate.¹

Jesus' confession of Messiahship was not only blasphemy in the eyes of the Jews, but also treason against Caesar. The Messiah in ancient days and in the popular language of the times was the King of Israel; when Israel had a king, the dominion of Rome in Palestine must cease. Thus the accusers of Jesus could state that with their own ears they had heard Jesus commit treason against the Emperor by putting Himself forward as King of the Jews.

But He stood there in His simple peasant dress, worn out with the strain of the last few days, with His long vigil, and with the agony of Gethsemane; bearing in His clothing and person marks of the ill-treatment to which He had been subjected; solitary; bound and helpless—He did not look like a dangerous rebel or a would-be king. Pilate was quite capable of estimating the anxiety of the Jews for the interests of Caesar at its true value. The fact that He was obnoxious to the Jews, and that the Sanhedrim had formally and officially denounced Him, showed that His real crime was not anti-Roman fanaticism. At the season of the Passover the governor's mind was burdened with the task of keeping order in the overcrowded, turbulent city; and the arrest of a popular religious teacher might not seem likely to help him in keeping the peace. Nor would he be best pleased at being made the catspaw of Jewish heresy-hunters. Therefore, when he turned from the accusers to the prisoner, it was with a not altogether unfriendly irony that he asked:

“Art thou the King of the Jews?”

The question was equivalent to that of the High Priest “Art thou the Christ?” and again placed Jesus in a

¹ The text and rendering of Mark xv. 1 are uncertain, but the general sense seems to be as given above.

dilemma. If He said "No," He denied Himself and His mission; if He said "Yes," He seemed to plead guilty. But the difficulty was less now than before; His claims did not really involve treason against the Romans. He answered Pilate: "Thou sayest."¹

The words were an acknowledgment of His Kingship; but they are less emphatic than the "I am" with which He replied to the High Priest. The words themselves, their brevity, and the way in which they were spoken, showed that they were not a challenge to the authority of Caesar. Pilate might not distress himself about Jewish doctrine or ritual; but if Jesus had spent His week at Jerusalem in preaching rebellion against the Romans, the governor would have heard of it long since. It is not improbable that representations had been made to Pilate on behalf of Jesus; that he was acquainted with the real state of the case, and knew that Jesus was not a political agitator.

The prosecutors were disagreeably surprised to find that Jesus' avowal of His claims did not elicit from Pilate as prompt a condemnation as His confession of Messiahship had done from the Sanhedrim. Pilate hesitated, and asked for further evidence. The priests replied with a string of accusations, but Jesus remained silent. The governor turned to Him again, and asked if He had no answer to make to the serious charges brought against Him.

But there came no response from the prisoner; again He seemed lost to His surroundings, caught away to some other world, or perhaps in a measure indifferent through sheer exhaustion. Pilate was astonished at His silence.

¹ It is sometimes maintained that these words do not acknowledge that Pilate's suggestion is correct, but that they are merely a courteous recognition of the fact that Pilate has spoken and been understood. But this view is improbable.

At this point, however, the proceedings were interrupted by the arrival of a noisy crowd, clamouring for the annual concession to popular feeling, which was wont to be made in honour of the Passover. Let the governor release a Jewish prisoner, according to custom. Pilate did not at once realize that the appearance of the crowd while the trial was going on was a mere coincidence. He supposed that they had come just then of set purpose to ask that Jesus should be set free. He knew that Jesus was in high favour with the common people, and that the action of the priests was due to the jealousy aroused by His popularity. The interruption seemed to present a happy opportunity of escaping from a difficult situation by making a graceful concession to the Jews. Pointing to Jesus, he asked them :

“ You wish me to release for you the King of the Jews ? ”

Left to themselves, they might have agreed ; for Pilate's words contained an attractive suggestion. If Jesus had really put Himself forward as a national sovereign, a leader of revolt against the Romans, it would be pious and patriotic to obtain His release. It says much for Pilate's conviction as to the harmlessness of Jesus, that he was willing to place the people in possession of a “ king.”

The priests, however, promptly undeceived the crowd ; the word was passed round that Jesus was by no means a zealous patriot ; He was a Sabbath-breaker, an enemy of the *Torah* and the national traditions, a traitor to the national cause, and everything else that was obnoxious to a good Jew. He had been solemnly condemned by the Sanhedrim, alike by priests, elders and scribes, by Sadducees and Pharisees. Besides, there was a worthy object of their intercession—a man who had ventured to strike a blow for freedom, and shed Gentile blood ; a real patriot ; the brave Bar-Abbas. Unless they used their privilege for his benefit, he would die for his devotion to God and Israel.

So when Pilate offered them Jesus, they shouted for Bar-Abbas.

And Pilate asked them again :

“ What do you want me to do with the King of the Jews ? ”

They replied with shouts of—

“ Crucify Him ! ”

Pilate knew that the crowd could not at one and the same time be eager for the release of a rebel, and also indignant with Jesus because He was, as the priests said, an enemy of Rome. Possibly he might get from them the real reason for the persecution of Jesus by the Jewish leaders.

“ Why,” said he, “ what crime has He committed ? ”

The common people could not, and the priests would not, answer such a question ; they were content with shouting more vehemently than ever :

“ Crucify Him ! ”

The leading spirits in this particular crowd represented a different stratum of the populace from that which acclaimed Jesus at His entry into Jerusalem and hung upon His lips in the Temple courts. His supporters were largely Galileans, but these turbulent shouters would belong to Jerusalem ; and the men who were anxious to have a jail-bird let loose again upon society were not likely to have been specially impressed with the character and teaching of Jesus. Pilate recognized the presence of an element reckless, truculent, and disorderly, which it was worth while to conciliate at a reasonable price. If they had taken the part of Jesus, the governor would have set Him free in spite of the priests and the Sanhedrim. He was equally willing to gratify the mob by releasing Bar-Abbas and putting Jesus to a shameful and cruel death. Bar-Abbas, therefore, was sent for from prison, and handed

over to his friends, who departed with him in triumph, and Pilate sentenced Jesus to be put to death by crucifixion.

Meanwhile the Prisoner stood patient and silent, uttering neither plea nor protest, while His life was sacrificed to save His judge from passing discomfort. In Gethsemane He had recognized that His hour was come, and had submitted Himself to the will of God ; He was indifferent to the forms of human law by which the Divine purpose was fulfilled. He had asserted to the last His mission from God ; His accusers had proved nothing against Him ; the only ground of condemnation by the Sanhedrim was His confession of Messiahship ; and Pilate had declared Him innocent of any secular or political crime. His disciples could still believe in Him.

But there was to be one more stage in the proceedings before Pilate ; a criminal condemned to be crucified was scourged before he was fastened to the cross ; and this preliminary torture was now inflicted upon Jesus. Then the governor gave orders for the carrying out of the sentence, and Jesus was led away to be crucified.

XLIX. JESUS MOCKED BY THE ROMAN SOLDIERS, XV. 16-20.

The soldiers took Jesus from the judgment hall to their own quarters ; for them, as for the attendants of the priests, a condemned prisoner was an opportunity for indulging the popular form of humour which finds its pleasure in the pain and humiliation of helpless sufferers. They called together their comrades to share their enjoyment in deriding this haggard Jew, bound, bleeding and dishevelled, who claimed to be a King. They took off His outer garment, and wrapped Him in a purple cloth that might do duty for a royal robe. They wove a wreath

from the branches of some thorny shrub, and placed it on His head as a royal diadem ; and in His hands they placed a reed for a sceptre. Then they offered Him homage in mockery, greeting Him with the salutation, " Hail, King of the Jews," and kneeling to Him in feigned reverence. Not content with derision, they snatched from Him His sham sceptre, and beat Him about the head with it, and spat upon Him.

When they were tired of their sport, they stripped Him of the purple, re clothed Him in His own garments, and led Him out to crucify Him, together with two robbers condemned to the same punishment.

L. THE CRUCIFIXION, XV. 21-27.

It was the custom that a criminal condemned to be crucified should carry his cross¹ to the place of execution, where the preliminary scourging was usually inflicted.² Some attempt, therefore, was made to place this burden upon Jesus ; but He sank under the load, and it was plain that it was too much for Him. The soldiers, loath to do work that could be forced on some one else, laid hold of a man who was passing on his way in from the country to the city, and made him carry the cross. Years afterwards his two sons felt it an honour that their father had rendered this service to Jesus ; and those who first told the story thought it well to speak of the modest distinction enjoyed by their brethren ; and so we read that the man's name was Simon of Cyrene, and that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus.

When the cross had been laid upon Simon's shoulders, the grim procession started once more, the soldiers partly leading, partly carrying the half-fainting Jesus to a hill outside the walls called the Skull, where the cross was to

¹ Or a part of it. *Encycl. Bibl.*

² *Encycl. Bibl.*

be erected. It was now about nine o'clock in the morning, so that Jesus had been four or five hours in the hands of His enemies, for much of the time a victim to insult and outrage.

Before He was fastened to the cross He was offered, according to custom, drugged wine, as a narcotic, to deaden pain; but He refused it. While life remained, some Divine Act or Voice might yet vindicate His innocence and again confirm His mission, even if it were spoken only to His own heart. He would not shut Himself out from the full consciousness of any word which God might yet have for Him. Therefore, with His physical sensitiveness undiminished, except in some measure by exhaustion, Jesus was stripped and fastened to the cross, which was raised and fixed upright; and He was left hanging there, His feet a few inches above the ground. At the head of the cross an inscription set forth His crime; it ran, "The King of the Jews." His accusers had not been wholly successful in branding Him as a blasphemer and a traitor to the Law; the casual spectator would imagine that He died a martyr for the Hope of Israel—one of the many cases in which men arrive at the truth by devious paths. His two companions in misfortune were crucified beside Him, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then the soldiers who were left on guard sat down to watch; the clothes of the criminals were, it seems, their perquisites, which they divided amongst themselves by lot.¹

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¹ Verse 28 is omitted by the Revised Version, following Lachmann and Tischendorf (so also Westcott and Hort, and Weymouth), on the authority of \aleph ABCD, etc. It was apparently introduced by the scribes from Luke xxii. 37.