

Eighth Passion Sermon

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Explanation Of Several Points In The History Just Given.

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Matt. 27, 11-31.

And Jesus stood before the governor: and the governor asked Him, saying, Art Thou the King of the Jews? And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest. And when He was accused of the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. Then said Pilate unto Him, Hearst Thou not how many things they witness against Thee? And He answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly. Now at that feast the governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would. And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas. Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ? For he knew that for envy they had delivered Him. When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of Him. But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said unto them, Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you? They said, Barabbas. Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let Him be crucified. And the governor said, Why, what evil hath He done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let Him be crucified. When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children. Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall, and gathered unto Him the whole band of soldiers. And they stripped Him, and put on Him a scarlet robe. And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they bowed the knee before Him, and mocked Him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And they spit upon Him, and took the reed, and smote Him on the head. And after that they had mocked Him, they took the robe off from Him, and put His own raiment on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

This part of the history of our Lord Jesus furnishes us with many excellent points of Christian doctrine, laden with consolation. Since, however, the material presented here is too much for one sermon, and the narrative itself is sufficiently

lengthy, we shall dwell only on three points. The first is this: Pilate and others frequently testify to the innocence of our dear Lord Jesus. The second: Christ witnessed a good confession before Pilate, — which is also highly extolled by St. Paul, 1

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Tim. 6. The third: Both Pilate and the Jews treat the blood of the Lord as a trifle, but it afterward becomes an intolerable and everlasting burden, which sinks them into temporal and eternal misery.

With reference to the first point, you must have noticed throughout that Pilate always insists upon it that he finds no cause of death in Christ. His wife also sent unto him, telling him to have nothing to do with that just and innocent man. Pilate moreover discovers, from all the actions of the Jews and by diligent investigation, that the chief priests and elders were moved against Christ by nothing but malice and envy. Similar testimony, but in greater measure and more powerful, was borne after the death of Christ. Great and glorious miracles then were wrought. The sun lost his lustre and deep darkness reigned, the vail of the temple was rent in twain, the earth did quake, the rocks rent, the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints arose. Then the centurion openly confessed: "Certainly this was a righteous man." And all the people present, beholding and taking to heart the things which were done, smote their breasts, to signify that the rash execution of the dear, innocent Lord gave them pain.

But of what use is this testimony? Why do the Evangelists so carefully relate it? Without a doubt, their only object is to point us to the counsel and will of God, and to admonish us to consider why the Lord, being innocent and just, had to suffer so. In other words, they wish, in view of the abundant proof that Christ was innocent and did not deserve to die, to make us firmer in our faith. They desire to convince us that whatever our blessed Lord Jesus suffered, He suffered for us; and that God laid these afflictions upon Him, and, although He was innocent, would not remove them, so that, by His bearing them, sin might be removed from us and we might be reconciled again to God.

Whenever, therefore, we read in any part of the Passion history how unjustly the Jews and

Gentiles treated the Lord Jesus, how they smote Him before the high priest, set Him at naught before Herod, and mocked and scourged Him in the judgment hall, — whenever, I say, we hear of such treatment, no matter where it is recorded, our thoughts must run thus: Behold, He is innocent; He does not bear this for Himself; He has not merited this. But I and you and all of us have deserved this suffering; death and every misfortune did rest upon us because of sin; but here the innocent and holy Son of God appears, takes upon Himself my debts, thy debts, and the debts of all of us, and discharges them, so that we might be free. When these are our thoughts we shall have such comfort that our hearts cannot despair on account of their sin, and that we shall not flee from God as though He were a tyrant or an executioner; but that we shall turn unto Him with heart felt confidence and praise and glorify His mercy, which, as Paul says in the 5. chap. of Romans, He commendeth toward us in that He delivered His only begotten Son, our Lord and Saviour, unto death, to die for us sinners. Who could or would doubt that God's intentions toward us are good and altogether gracious?

Sin had subjected all of us to the wrath of God and to death, and had transferred us into Satan's kingdom; eternal life was lost, and in its place had been inherited every calamity for time and for eternity. But our Father, merciful and gracious, comes to our relief, and, rather than permit us to remain in such misery, sends His only begotten Son, born of a virgin and made under the law, so that the law, although flesh and blood were unable to do God's will, might not have been given in vain, but might be fulfilled by this Man for all other men. And finally God suffers Him to die upon the cross, by His innocent death to atone for our sins, so that we, being released from eternal death and from the kingdom of Satan, might receive eternal life and be the children of God.

Believing that this was done on thy account and for thy welfare, take it as thine own and let it comfort thee. And well may we do this; for

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here we hear not once, not twice, but many times, that all that Jesus suffers He suffers innocently. But why does God tolerate this, yea, why does He ordain and bring it about? Simply that thou mightest be comforted in Christ. He does not suffer for Himself, but for thee and for all mankind, even as John says: "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." For this reason John the Baptist calls Him "The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world," that is, a divinely appointed Sacrifice, who takes the sin of all the world upon Himself, so that this sin may rest upon the world no longer. This accounts for the seeming inconsistency. He is the Son of God, perfectly holy and altogether without sin, and therefore it were but just that He should not be subject to the curse and to death. We are sinners and under the curse and wrath of God, and therefore it were but just that we should suffer death and damnation. But God has reversed this relation; He who knows no sin, who is altogether merciful, and in whom, as John says, dwells the fullness of God's grace, was made a curse for us and had to bear sin's punishment, while we, through Him, have obtained mercy and have become the children of God. We should, therefore, cling to this consolation and take special delight in such testimony for Christ's innocence. For what Christ innocently suffered was caused by our sins. Therefore His innocence comforts us against all sin and suffering; for His innocence is a sure and lasting evidence that His passion is for our benefit, and that our dear Lord and merciful Redeemer has suffered for us and paid our debts. However, since we shall have occasion to speak further of this when we come to Christ's crucifixion between the murderers, we shall now proceed to the second point.

St. Paul, 1 Tim. 6., admonishes Timothy thus: "I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession, that thou keep this commandment," that

is, doctrine, "without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Because this passage mentions so directly the confession which our dear Lord Jesus made before Pilate, and Paul makes use of it for earnestly admonishing Timothy, we have reason to meditate upon this confession and to inquire what it is and what is its purpose. Now, the Gospels tell us plainly what it was that Christ confessed. When the Jews had accused Him of having said that He was a king, and Pilate had taken Him to task on this account, He did not deny, but confessed openly before Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world," i. e., my kingdom is no corporeal, earthly kingdom. Then Pilate asked again, "Art Thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." Do you ask: But of what use was this confession to Paul in admonishing Timothy to keep the commandment, i. e. doctrine, pure and not to adulterate it? Truly, of much, use! Everything, if we desire to be true ministers and Christians, depends upon our believing what Christ confessed, viz.: that He is a king; but that His kingdom is not of this world; that His only work in this world is to bear witness unto the truth. And it follows that His earthly subjects must be like Him, the King. He is indeed called a king; but when He is compared with Herod, Pilate and other temporal kings and rulers, he seems a poor, wretched man. Herod was a great, shining lord, who courted sensual delight, realized his heart's desires, and was looked upon by all the world as glorious. So the world regarded Pilate too and others. But poor, innocent Christ bears no comparison with such as they; yea, men mock and scorn Him as they please; they nail Him to the cross and murder Him. Therefore He said: "My kingdom is not of this world!"

Why, then, is He called a king? Because He is a king, — a king "just, and having

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salvation," as Zechariah says, chapter 9. Therefore, whosoever lives in His kingdom must not expect Him to give money or possessions, to satisfy the body's wants, or to do the other things which earthly kings are wont to do. No, this King forgives sins; He bestows righteousness; He delivers from everlasting death; He bestows the Holy Spirit and eternal life. These are His gifts to all who hear His voice. This kingdom He has established on earth, but only in the Word and in faith.

We have, therefore, an eternal King omnipotent, Christ Jesus, God's own Son, who rescues us from Satan's power, from sin, from never-ending death. Our King does not deliver from bodily death; for earth is the place for suffering and dying, and He Himself had to suffer here and die. Those who recognize this character of the King and His kingdom bear the cross with resignation. For then they know that our Lord Jesus, the everlasting King, also had to bear the cross, and thus, remembering that the servant cannot fare better than his master, are made willing and ready to suffer. And, besides, they take comfort in the knowledge that, although they must suffer here, there in eternity joy and glory shall be theirs. It is this that makes Christians bold, even in the midst of temptation and death; while they who do not know these things cannot do otherwise in days of adversity than mourn, lament, murmur, show impatience, and, in the end, even despair. For the latter think that if God wished them well, He would not permit so much misery to come upon them, or else would soon help and rescue them. Such thoughts unmistakably prove that Christ is held to be a king of this world. Temporal kings must, according to the duties of their office, protect the bodies, lives and possessions of their subjects and defend them against danger. But Christ, the King of glory, permits body and property, life and all to be in danger.

Do thou learn and firmly believe that these things are so for the reason, simply, that His "Kingdom is not of this world." Thy Christian

faith is not to be used by thee on earth as the means for obtaining all things in abundance, or for supplying all thy desires. For behold thy King! How does it fare with Him, the Lord Jesus? With what does He make a display? Did He live a life of ease? Do men regard Him as glorious? We see nothing there except the suffering, mocked, reviled and ignominiously slaughtered One.

True, He does sway a scepter, but only over a very small number, even the testimony of truth, that is, the holy Gospel. By means of this, as said already, He sends the Holy Spirit into the souls of men, forgives their sins, and gives them the hope of everlasting life. But all these things take place only in faith and in the Word; we cannot see them; we cannot touch them; they are realized not by reason, but by hope. However, when earth's kingdom ends and we dwell no longer here, then shall His kingdom and His glory be revealed to us, yea, we shall live with Him and with Him rule all things in heaven and on earth.

It was in this way that the Lord was recognized on the cross by one of the malefactors, saying, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." He saw Christ suspended on the tree in the same misery, in which he found himself. The malefactor on the left was offended at Christ's helplessness and helped the Jews to rail on Him: Ah! a very fine king, indeed! He concluded that since the dear Lord was so wretched and poor on earth, it would, of course, be useless to expect help from Him. But he on the right knew Him well; he knew Him not as a worldly, but as a spiritual and an eternal King. For this reason he prays that He would remember him in His kingdom when His body should be lifeless there upon the cross. In this way must we also believe in Him, and then shall we find immutable comfort in Christ Jesus.

Now, all Christians need that consolation which always, in all kinds of distress and disappointment, comes to them when they hold to Christ's confession before Pilate. It makes them

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say to themselves: Why shouldst thou weep? Why complain of this or that misfortune? Think what kind of a King thou hast; what says He before Pilate? "My kingdom is not of this world." Wouldst thou have thy kingdom here? No, no; for here it would not last; this is altogether the laud of suffering! But in the world to come glory and a joyful life shall surely be found. If they could be found here, they would afford only a short and transient joy, for in this world there is nothing firm nor eternal. But Jesus Christ, my King, is a King in the other world, that is, an everlasting King; postpone thy glorying and thy pleasures, therefore, till thou goest thither, and be content with the treatment thou receivest here. Thy King has not given thee orders to remain here; He will have nothing to do with the world outside of the testimony of truth. — All Christians, I say, need this consolation, but especially they who hold the ministerial office and ply the Word.

For this reason St. Paul urges Timothy with these words, referring to Christ's confession before Pilate, to hold fast to the pure doctrine and not to let it be falsified. The world and the devil cannot bear the Word, and oppose it with all manner of confusion. Every pastor should and must, therefore, cling to the testimony mentioned, and recognize Christ as that King, in whom he finds comfort, and whom he hopes to enjoy, — but not on earth. He says, "But now is my kingdom not from hence." And again, "I am a king for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." Whosoever, therefore, desires to have this King Jesus, let him lay hold on the truth, which is His Word, and know that he shall not on account of His kingdom have greater abundance on earth; yea, let him know that he shall have to bear many a misfortune on account of the Word, even as did Christ, the King, Himself. But when life on earth is over, then shall come the full enjoyment of the Lord Jesus' kingdom.

[Some Christians will not know this consolation, but, instead, recognize as king one who

gives money, honor and power of the world.] But St. Paul cautions against such folly. And every pious pastor should earnestly heed this admonition, and depend upon it that we shall not be glorified on earth, and that all our glory here shall be to bear witness unto the truth. Earth's reward for this service shall be in our case what it was in the Lord Jesus' case, the gallows and the executioner. Learn to suffer and to hear such things, and let it be your faith and hope, that, although you must suffer here, still this suffering shall, in the other world, be rewarded and made good by the Lord Jesus, the eternal King! But this must suffice for a brief consideration of the testimony before Pilate.

We must now examine the third point also. It is this: Pilate and the Jews greatly undervalue the blood of our dear Lord Jesus, which, finally, falls on them as a crushing and eternal burden.

Matthew mentions in particular that Pilate washed his hands before the multitude, and said: "I am innocent of the blood of this just person." He thought he had done his whole duty in making several attempts to liberate Christ, and that he could not help it that the Jews resisted him in his efforts. Still he delivered the Lord to be crucified. Just as though his saying "I am innocent" would make him innocent! Had he desired a warning, his wife might have told him how innocent he would be; for she, as related above in the text, had spent a whole night suffering many things in a dream, from which she could judge the severity of the judgment which Pilate would bring upon himself and all belonging to him by consenting to the death of "that just man." But so it always is with the blood of the Lord Jesus and with that of His Christians. Herod the elder slew all Bethlehem's innocent infants. His son slew the holy John the Baptist. Both dared to think themselves benefited by their murder. Neither did Pilate here regard it as much out of the way that he sentenced Christ to die. He thought that his opinion would also be God's opinion, and that God would, therefore, hold him innocent. But without doubt God's wrath did not tarry long till it utterly destroyed the

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house, the tribe, the name of Pilate, and then thrust his body and soul into hell and into the eternal fire. There he discovered how innocent he was of this blood!

But the Jews went about this murder with still greater recklessness. When Pilate said, "See ye to it," they shamelessly burst out with the cry, "His blood be on us, and on our children," that is, in case He should be wronged, we are willing that we and our children shall suffer for it. It was easily said, and seemed to have been spoken with impunity. But before forty years had passed they saw their imprecation about to be answered. And then this "blood" began to flow down upon them in such streams that Jerusalem and the whole Jewish kingdom soon were desolate, the people lamentably slain, and all things overthrown. But even this sufficed not; from that time till this, and it is now nearly fifteen hundred years, they have wandered about in misery, nowhere finding a continuing city.

This temporal punishment, so that they have no cities nor government of their own, is truly severe, but it shall come to an end. But this is truly terrible that their hearts are so horribly im-bittered against Christ, the Son of God. Instead of seeking and expecting forgiveness of sin and eternal life and salvation, as they should, of Christ, their King and God, they abuse and revile Him, thus taking delight in falsehood and error, and diligently seek means of darkening the Sculptures before their own eyes and preventing their understanding it. Therefore, when they fancy that they are calling upon and serving God, they really serve the very devil. Neither does God hear them. And since they desire no freedom from sin through the Son of God, there can be nothing surer to them than that they must die in their sins and be forever ruined. In the 8. chapter of John, Christ tells them this very thing: "If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins."

They did not, at that time, perceive this calamity, and even thought that the sooner Christ

could be slain the better it would be for them. Without any further thought, therefore, they said: If He is wronged, may we and our children be punished! But even as the thirty pieces of silver afforded Judas a joy of only short duration, so also a change soon came upon the Jews. From day to day failure advanced upon all their affairs, until, in the end, they went to utter ruin. This is, therefore, a fit subject for the serious meditation especially of great kings and princes; these should remember what an easy, trifling thing it seemed for Pilate and the Jews to shed innocent blood, and how this finally forced them into the abyss of hell. ...

Pilate was thrust so low that now, no doubt, not a single person of his name or tribe remains. The Jews to this day are laboring under the blood of Jesus Christ, and it will finally press them down to hell. The great and powerful emperors and the mighty princes in all kingdoms, and every one else that has ever persecuted Christians, — they all have been lamentably overthrown and slain.

And surely the same fate awaits the enemies of Christ of our day, who act as tyrants and persecute and murder Christians for the Gospel's sake. Let no one fear that punishment shall fail to come! They who meddle with the innocent blood of Christians, though they may be as mighty as the Emperor Augustus, must still go down, together with all their descendants. They may, indeed, be thinking now that we are heretics and that they do right by slaying us. So thought Pilate, and especially the Jews, but it availed them nothing. Let every one, therefore, take good care of himself and let alone the blood of Christians! At first it seems a little sin, — a trifle merely; but in the end, everything that is stained with Christians' blood shall be utterly destroyed, as all history testifies.

May Almighty God resist all tyrants, mercifully grant peace unto His Church, graciously keep us by His Word and save us forever. Amen.