

WHAT PILATE SAID ONE MIDNIGHT
First Person Sermon by Dr. Frederick Bruce Speakman
Maundy Thursday –April 13, 2017 –
The Church of the Covenant

“What Pilate Said One Midnight” is the brilliant first-person sermon written by the master of such sermons, The Reverend Dr. Frederick Bruce Speakman of Third Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA. It has Pontius Pilate musing with a friend, Gaius, with whom he had served as Procurator in Jerusalem those fateful days of Holy Week, the week when he pronounced the sentence that sent Jesus to the cross. We listen in as the former Roman governor remembers his part in the crucifixion of Jesus and the impact Jesus Christ made on this one man’s life. The following is an edited version of Speakman’s original first person sermon.

I’ve lost my grip. It was a wretched dinner, wasn’t it Gaius? No, don’t display your fine patrician manners and protest you enjoyed it. Its too late in the night for even courteous lies. Lies use up so much strength. Past midnight there’s only enough strength for truth. What? No, I’m alright. Its that word “truth”. It slips up on me. I use it before I think. And then wince always, as if I had jabbed that old spear scar on my thigh. What is TRUTH, after all???

We were quite the royal pair, my wife Claudia and I. Caesar said to me: “Congratulations, Pontius. To marry a woman of royal blood is the best training for statesmanship that Rome can offer her sons.” We went together when I was appointed Roman governor. But you don’t rule the priests of Jewry. You bluff authority and they bluff humility, and each knows the other’s lying. You scheme and plan and awaken one morning to find yourself a child of cunning. A man of guile. And you lose dignity, and you lose respect, and you fear for your job, and you hate, and you lie. What is TRUTH, after all, Gaius?

Suppose it helps, Gaius, to believe that there’s more to the world that you can see there? Does it help to endure what indeed you see there? Claudia, she had a Jewish hairdresser who talked to her of the Jewish God. One God, mind you! Not many! Which struck me as a sensible economy till I heard what He was like. An interfering God, one I fear wouldn’t leave room in His kind of world for Rome. Or for that matter, a man like me. And it was from this Jewish servant girl that we first heard of the Nazarene. I don’t know what He was. I don’t know who He is, if I ever will. But I checked Him with spies. He seemed a harmless kind of traveling teacher, such as thrive in that climate. I could never understand why the Jews were so upset by Him. Claudia heard Him twice when He was in the city, convinced me that His quarrel was with the Jews, not with us.

Well, she and I had just arrived in Jerusalem that night. It was a time of a great feast, and the air reeked as thick of revolt as it did of pilgrims. And toward morning I was hauled out of bed by their high priest, a certain Caiaphas, my nominee for the “King of the Rats” as I called him. He’d managed to get me heavily into debt to him. Temple funds he’s loaned me that he knew I’d never intended to repay. And he had grown quite bold in his personal demands, and I was sick of it. Sick of it! Late this night he rouses me all secrecy, all very much the sinister conspirator, to announce to me they had arrested this Nazarene, by night. By night, mind you! Had Him tried at a hurried, trumped up session of their Jewish court. Had convicted Him of blasphemy, whatever that is. Somehow its all tied into their monopoly on God. But they were bringing this man to me at dawn, to be condemned to death by Roman law for sedition.

The high priest's warnings were always well staged. Never exactly spelled out, but plain as the knife-like nose on his holy face...that either I'd convict this Man or there'd be trouble with the Jews at least time, the brand of trouble I could ill afford. No more riots in Jerusalem or Pilate would be sent home in disgrace by Caesar. I couldn't sleep after this Caiaphas left. I paced those hot corridors. I finally dressed, full an hour before the dawn. It had all tumbled in on me, the impact of how trapped I was. The proud arm of Rome, bowed and humbled, with all its boasts of justice, trapped I say, about to put a dagger in the pudgy hand of venal priests!

I was waiting in the room I use for court, officially enthroned...when they led HIM in. Well, Gaius, if you value your jaw don't smile at this...but I've had no peace in my life since He walked into my judgment hall that dawn! It has been years, man, but those scenes are emblazoned into the back of my eyelids and I rehearse them without sleep every night. You've seen Caesar when he was young inspect his legions. His air of command was child's play compared with the manner of this Nazarene! He didn't have to strut, you see. He walked toward my throne, arms bound, with a stride of mastery and control that by its very audacity silenced the room for an instant and left me trembling with an insane desire to stand and salute! Who was the judge in that judgment hall? Who condemned? What is TRUTH, Gaius? What Is Truth????

I questioned Him mechanically. He said little. He reacted not at all to the charges leveled at HIM by the priests. But what He said and the way HE said it! His piercing eyes looking deep into my soul. His level gaze pulled my naked soul right up into my eyes and was probing inward there. Who is this Man? Behold, the Man. And a voice kept singing in my ear: "Why, you're on trial, Pilate!" And the Nazarene wasn't listening to the charges. You'd have sworn He had just come in of friendly interest to see what was going to happen to ME!!!! And the very pressure of HIM standing there and looking into my eyes grew unbearable when a slave rushed in all atremble, interrupting court, bringing a message from Claudia. She wrote: "Don't judge this amazing Man. I was haunted this night by HIM in a dream. You'll never have a day of peace."

Gaius, I tried to free HIM. From that moment on I tried, and I'll always think HE knew it. I declared Him out of my jurisdiction. But that didn't work. I appealed to the crowd who had gathered in the streets to release the Nazarene, but the priests had stirred up the crowd and they cried for blood "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" You know how any citizen, just after breakfast, loves to cry for another's blood. I tried to wash my hands of HIM. I tried to wash the blood from my own hands. I tried to wash my hands of the guilt of sending this innocent Man to death. Out, out damned spot! Begone, the deep red stain of this Man's blood. But, Gaius, I can never wash away the stain of what I have done by myself. There is power in this blood to convict. O that there was power in this blood to forgive! As the crowd cried out, "Hail Caesar and crucify the Nazarene" in the same breath, I knew I was beaten. And I gave the order, "Crucify Him". And I did that childish thing, I called for a bowl and there on that balcony I called for water and sought to wash my hands of my guilt. It hasn't worked, Gaius. But as they led Him away I did look up into His face again. And HE turned and looked up into mine. No smile, no pity, He just glanced at my hands, my hands, my hands...and I'll feel the weight of His eyes on them forever...What is TRUTH? What is TRUTH? Gaius, perhaps it stood before me that day...

But do you know why I keep going? Deeper than any curse is the haunting, driving certainty that He's still somewhere near. That I've unfinished business with the Nazarene. And that every now and then, as I walk late at night unable to sleep, down by the lake, in the dark and in the quiet, I feel He's walking with me. I wish this time I'd have stood and saluted. I would this time do the right thing. I would this

time listen to the warning. I would this time not convict an innocent Man. I would this time love TRUTH. Tell HIM, I know I wasn't trapped into what I did, that I had trapped myself.

Yes, I know it is late, Gaius, and I know it is far past time for you to leave. It is quiet tonight, isn't it? Not a breeze stirring down by the lake. Yes and good night. Will you awaken the slave by the door and tell him to bring me my cloak, my heavy one. I believe I'll take a walk by the lake. Yes, Gaius, it is dark down there. But I know I won't be alone. Perhaps I will again encounter the Nazarene. Perhaps there is a power in His blood to forgive and free, even as there is a power to convict. Tonight, Right here. In the quiet. As the candles burn low. Power in HIS blood. Perhaps that is the TRUTH that shall set men free...Amen and Amen...

Written by: The Reverend Dr. Frederick Bruce Speakman

Delivered by: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!