5th Wednesday in Lent Rev. Carl F. Thrun

West Henrietta - 1961
Rolling Meadows - 1963

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Mark 15: 15 And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged Him, to be crucified.

PONTIUS PILATE

I, Pontius Pilate, Governor of the Imperial Province of Syria from 26 to 36 A.D., passed sentence to crucify your Christ! I did it! I did it! I sent Christ to the Cross! And don't think I can forget it! I can't! Nor will you Christians let me. Day after day, century after century, as millions of you ~~Christians~~ confess your faith in this Jesus, there rumbles through every corridor of hell those deathless, tormenting words: He suffered under Pontius Pilate! He suffered under Pontius Pilate! Oh, what have I done? I sent the Son of God to the Cross! I crucified Christ!

From beginning to end my life was a complete flop. ~~I was a failure.~~ failure I was never very important; merely a minor official in the great Roman empire for a few tragic years. My term of office was marred by continuous rioting. I had nothing but contempt for the fanatic, feverish Jews, constantly bickering and feuding. You may remember that I tried to set the eagles of Rome on the walls of the Temple of Jehovah, but was compelled to remove them after five days. I tried to build an aqueduct from the Pool of Solomon to Jerusalem with money from the temple treasury, and they forced me to abandon the project. In the world of time and power I was a failure.

But it rather delights my Roman sense of irony that I should now have become the most famous Roman of them all. When Caesar and Seneca, and Cicero and Tiberius are forgotten, I will be remembered. The Virgin Mary and I are the only human beings mentioned in your Christian creed. Sometimes I wonder if this is not the ultimate irony in history. To my amazement I find myself famous because early one Friday morning I was face to face for five or six hours with the very Son of the Most High God, One who was greater than I, Whom I sent to the Cross. I, who would have nothing to do with Him in life, am now linked to Him forever.

But let me tell you the story of that memorable Friday morning. You may

remember that in all the imperial provinces of Rome we had kept the right of review and final decision in all capital crimes. This was merely a matter of good administration. Ordinarily we were ready and willing to rubber stamp the decisions of the native courts, because there was seldom more at stake than a single life. An individual is never important to an empire. That morning, however, there was something else in the air. Almost immediately I became interested in the case. You have a saying that one should judge a man by his enemies. This man had the right enemies; in fact, they were mine, too. I was drawn to Him because the right people were against Him. Then there was also His royal bearing and His mysterious indifference to the howling of the mob and the shadow of death over Him. I realized that there were currents and cross-currents beneath the surface of the seene before me which raised it above the ordinary dramas of crime and punishment. I could see that Jesus was innocent right from the beginning. I tried to find a way to let Him go, but there was no chance of that -- the mob and those fanatic priests. When religion goes wrong, it goes all wrong. I was up against a religious hatred, a religious mania for blood, a religious pride. I ran head-on into the ultimate evil, the perversion of religion for the purposes of darkness.

There was one thing, however, in the accusations which the Jews brought against Him which interested me -- that He said He was Christ a King. And so I asked Him, somewhat sarcastically, I must admit: Art Thou the King of the Jews? The answer He gave startled me: My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is My kingdom not from hence. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I found myself face to face with eternity. Your Christ and I became living symbols of two worlds-- The world of power and the world of love! The world of pride and the world of humility! The world of doubt and the world of truth; the world of evil and the world of good! Two types of souls, two ways of life, two worlds, forever separate, forever at war were suddenly face to face. I see clearly now that Jesus was seek-

ing the salvation of my soul, inviting me to accept His Kingship and become a member of His kingdom. For a fatal moment I faltered; for a moment I hesitated -- Can there possibly be another kingdom than the empire of Tiberius Caesar? Can there be another world? Can there be another happiness than that for which I am striving, a happiness not disturbed by the misery of this world? -- But no! That was out of the question! My whole philosophy of life would not allow me to believe it. As one of my pagan contemporaries put it: Only this is certain, that nothing is certain! And yet?.....

Well, at any rate, He was certainly not worthy of death. But, you ask: Why did you not let Him go? Well, I almost did. As the hours wore on toward the final scene, the mob troubled me less and less. The Tenth Legion would have been able to handle the situation. There was, however, one man in the crowd who understood me. He knew how my mind worked. His name was Caiaphas. At the critical moment, when everything hung in the balance, he cried: If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend. That got me. My enemies lined up with my ambitions and I was lost. How often has that not happened since my time? A man has a secret fault, a hidden weakness, and his friends or enemies find it, use it -- and he crashes. Suddenly I saw myself summoned to Rome and condemned to exile or to death. My career and my life were at stake. It was His life or mine.

Who knows, I told myself, if, after all, there is a God, another world, if there is truth? Who knows? At least it is better, I reasoned, that I take the certain instead of the uncertain, that I do not risk Caesar's disfavor. Certainly the favor of a visible God is better than the favor of a dubious God.

And so I decided; I made my choice. Wrongly, you say? Forgive me, but how many of you of the twentieth century have not given up my prisoner for less than that, for a moment of sin, an hour of passion, a bit of money or comfort, the worship of reason. You may throw stones at me if you will; but your own hands ought to be clean when you pick them up.

At that moment then I set my feet on the road to everlasting fame and to eternal shame. Oh, how I dreaded making the decision! How I wanted to avoid making a choice! Believe me, I tried to release Him without putting my career into jeopardy. I tried, only to learn that once you meet Christ you cannot side-step Him. You cannot remain neutral! You cannot walk a middle road! You have to take a stand for or against Him. To my regret I cast my lot against Him! Don't think it was easy. His character and manner were so different from the ordinary man. It was not human to suffer such agony and abuse so patiently. No mere man is capable of such patience, I thought. As I looked at Him, a terrifying fear came over me. And then to add to my problems my wife sent me a letter telling me to have nothing to do with Him. God was still warning me, inviting me. But I couldn't see it then, or rather I wouldn't. That's usually the way it is. We refuse to hear and recognize God's warning grace. We refuse...until it is too late.

The Swiss peasants tell a legend about me. They report that on stormy nights, when the thunder and lightning play over Mount Pilatus, they can see me washing my hands. I tried to wash my hands of the whole thing, crying: I am innocent of the blood of this just person -- but my conscience could not be washed. I am sure that your poet Shakespeare was thinking of me in the scene in which Lady Macbeth tries to wash her hands of the indelible red blood:

> Out, damned spot! Out I say! --
> Here's the smell of blood still!
> All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

I know what she means: I hope you will never know.

Learn this from me -- Once you come face to face with Christ you cannot forget Him. No matter how hard you try, you can never forget Him. You may reject Him as I did, but you cannot ignore Him. You may send Him off to some Herod of your own, but He will always come back again. You may bend your head over your own dark basin of water, but when you look up, He will still be standing at the door of your heart, quiet and uncompelling, silent and inevitable. There is no getting

away from Him. Your own century has tried to rid itself of Him in the noise of war, the wine of pleasure, the pride of reason, but He will always come back, either in mercy or in judgment.

I feel very close to the twentieth century. Since I was reared in the religion of Rome, out of which all reality had vanished, I became an agnostic, like so many of you. What is truth? I said. That was a rhetorical question for me. I thought I knew there was no such thing as truth; only myths, the creations of the minds of men, wild guesses at the riddle of the universe and of life. What difference did it make what a man believed? I see all this in your world and I feel very modern and very sad. There is really nothing new under the sun: the same mistakes, the same blindness, the same desperate efforts to do the impossible, to get away from God, to dismiss the inevitable Christ, to close the windows of your soul and to pull down the curtains against Eternity.

It now appears rather ironic[3] -- what I feared on that Friday morning came to pass anyway. I stayed in Judea three more years and then I was recalled, exiled to Gaul, and committed suicide. Down through the centuries one phrase has been ringing in my ears, running through my mind, torturing my soul: Jesus loved me; I crucified Him! Jesus loved me; I crucified Him! If you will take a word of advice from a lost soul in hell, believe me when I tell you: Hold on to Christ! He loves you! No matter what you may have done, He loves you! He is the Son of God, your Redeemer! Amen.