

LENT / 5

The time Barabbas was preferred to Jesus

ECCLESIA

17_03_2023



We publish below the fifth text (here the *first, second, third and fourth*) taken from the Commentary of Father Cornelio a Lapide (1567-1637) on the Passion according to the Gospel of Saint Matthew. The commentaries of the Jesuit and exegete Cornelius a Lapide, aimed above all at offering guidance to preachers, are also precious because they contain numerous quotations from the Fathers of the Church and other subsequent exegetes.

For he had then a notable prisoner called Barabbas. Notorious, that is, for his crimes. St. John terms him “a robber.” St. Mark and St. Luke, “one who had committed murder in the insurrection.” “Notorious,” says St. Chrysostom, “for his bold bearing, and stained with many murders.” Now to be thus compared with Barabbas, and counted his inferior, was a great dishonour and pain to Christ. And His patience under this wrong is a fitting pattern to all Christians when slights are put on them.

Barabbas. In Hebrew “the Son of a father, of Adam, i.e., the first father of all sinners.” And Christ was made lower than Adam when He took on Himself to atone for his disobedience and sin.... Or son of the devil, because “your father is the devil”

When therefore 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. From their general bearing and demeanour, and also from his own knowledge of His holiness, and teaching, and boldness in reproof.

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 (this night) in a dream because of Him. This act of Pilate’s wife is a fresh effort to deliver Him. Her dreams were full of threats against her husband and herself, if he condemned Christ. Some suppose them to have been the work of an evil angel, wishing to prevent His death, lest sinners should be saved by Him....

Others more correctly suppose that it was the work of a holy angel, and that the dream was sent to Pilate’s wife (not himself):

1. That both sexes (as well as all the elements afterwards) might witness to Christ’s innocence.
2. That she might make it publicly known by telling her husband.
3. Because she appears to have been a noble, tenderhearted, and holy woman. Origen, St. Chrysostom, and others consider that she was in this way brought to a true belief in Christ. St. Augustine (in Aurea Catena) says, “that both husband and wife bore witness to

Christ;" "thus presaging," says St. Jerome, "the faith of the Gentiles." And St. Augustine (Serm. cxxi. de Temp.), "In the beginning of the world the wife leads the husband to death, in the Passion she leads him on to salvation."

The Greek Menology terms her Procula; some suggest that she was Claudia (2 Tim. iv. 21), as she probably remained at Rome when he was banished. St. Augustine implies that she converted him (Serm. iii. de Epiph). ...Tertullian, too (Apol. cap. xxi.), speaks of Pilate as a Christian. But all this is at variance with what others say of his banishment and his self-inflicted death. When Pilate then is termed a Christian, it must mean a supporter and protector of His innocence. He yielded, it is true, at last to the threats of the Jews; and so it was that by the just retribution of God he was himself the victim of the like false charge from the Jews, who caused him to be exiled.

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus.... Notice here the effect of anger and malice, and the false and perverted judgments of the world. Jesus, the author of salvation, was to suffer; but Barabbas, the murderer, was to be spared. But God undoubtedly so ordered it that the Innocent should suffer, and thus atone for the guilt of sinners, whom Barabbas represented.

But the Governor answered and said unto them, Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you? They said, Barabbas. That is, after he had given them time for consideration, he again asked them, and demanded an answer.

St. Bede (on Mark xv. 9) strikingly remarks, "The demand they made still cleaves to them. For as they preferred a robber to Jesus, a murderer to the Saviour, the destroyer to the Giver of Life, they deservedly lost both their property and their life. They were reduced, indeed, so low by violence and sedition as to forfeit the independence of their country, which they had preferred to Christ, and cared not to recover the liberty of body and soul which they had bartered away."...

Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let Him be crucified. "Pilate," says St. Chrysostom, "places the matter in their hands, that all might be ascribed to their clemency, thus to charm and soften them down by his obsequiousness. But all in vain. For the Chief Priests had already resolved to insist on His crucifixion, as being not only the most cruel, but also the most ignominious of deaths, the death of robbers and other evil-doers. For they hoped in this way to destroy all His former credit and reputation." ...

The Governor said, Why, what evil hath He done? But they cried out the more (vehemently, πεζισσῶς), saying, Let Him be crucified.

The more Pilate insisted on His innocence, the more did they clamour for His crucifixion, ...

They thus fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah (xii. 11), "Mine heritage (the synagogue) is made unto Me as a lion in the forest; they have uttered their voice against Me;" and David's (Ps. xxii. 13), "They opened their mouth upon Me, as a ravening and a roaring lion;" and Isaiah's (v. 7), "I looked for judgment, and behold iniquity; and for righteousness, and behold a cry." (So S. Jerome.)

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. ἀπενίψατο, washed away. "He adopted," says Origen, "the Jewish custom, and wished to calm them down, not by words only, but also by deed." He washed his hands, but not his conscience. But this took place after the scourging and crowning, of Christ. (See St. John.) Here is a transposition.

Saying, I am innocent. I condemn Him against my will. Ye are the offenders. Ye are guilty of His death. How foolish was this timid, heartless, and slothful Governor in speaking thus! Why opposest thou not the injustice of the people? "Seek not to be judge, if thou canst not by thy power break through iniquities" (Eccles. vii. 6).

1) He ought never to have yielded Him up, but rather rescued Him, as the Centurion S. Paul" (Acts xxi. 33).

2) At another time he let loose the soldiers and the riotous mob (Josephus B. J., xviii. 4). Why does he not act thus firmly now? If he cannot, through the fury of the Jews, set Him free now, at least let him delay the sentence till their fury subsides.

St. Augustine ... "Though Pilate washed his hands, yet he washed not away his guilt; for though he thought he was washing away the Blood of that Just One from his limbs, yet was his mind still stained with it. It was he, in fact, who slew Christ by giving Him up to be slain...

Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children. Let the guilt thou fearest be transferred from thee to us. If there be any guilt, may we and our posterity atone for it. But we do not acknowledge any guilt, and consequently, as not fearing any punishment, we boldly call it down on ourselves. And thus have they subjected not only themselves, but their very latest descendants, to God's displeasure. They feel it indeed even to this day in its full force, in being scattered over all the world, without a city, or temple, or sacrifice, or priest, or prince, and being a subject race in all countries. It was, too, in punishment for Christ's crucifixion that Titus ordered five hundred Jews to be crucified every day at the siege of Jerusalem, as they crowded out of the city in search of food, "so that at last there was no room for the crosses, and no

crosses for the bodies" (Josephus B. J. vi. 12). "This curse," says Jerome, "rests on them even to this day, and the blood of the Lord is not taken away from them," as Daniel foretold (ix. 27)...