

TEXT

NOTES

Prayer *Jesus,*
for the *hold our minds still,*
Study *keep us from running off into the past or the future,*
so that we can meet you where we are –
in happiness or in grief,
in confidence or in anxiety,
in life and in death.
Amen.

MARK 14:⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. ⁵⁴ Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. ⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. ⁵⁶ For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷ Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” ⁵⁹ But even on this point their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?” ⁶¹ But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” ⁶² Jesus said, “I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’” ⁶³ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵ Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophesy!” The guards also took him over and beat him. ⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” ⁶⁸ But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. ⁶⁹ And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” ⁷⁰ But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.” ⁷¹ But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” ⁷² At that moment the

cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

MARK 15:¹ **As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.**² **Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.”**³ **Then the chief priests accused him of many things.**⁴ **Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.”**⁵ **But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.**⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.⁹ Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.¹² Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”¹³ They shouted back, “Crucify him!”¹⁴ Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!”¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.¹⁶ Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort.¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him.¹⁸ And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!”¹⁹ They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him.²⁰ After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. *New Revised Standard Version*

Voices at Midnight

1-A

Still more marked, though, is the sense of bewildering *absurdity* in [the trial]. The sentence is settled in advance; the problem is finding evidence. As Lewis Carroll wrote in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – “Let the jury consider their verdict,” the King said, for about the twentieth time that day. “No, no!” said the Queen. “Sentence first – verdict afterwards.” Mark’s trial scenes are more like those in *Alice* than any more conventional legal process. Or, to pick up a more serious echo, they are like Kafka’s terrible and prophetic fantasies in *The Trial*. The process does not make sense – perhaps it is not meant to. Kafka’s hero, Joseph K., is arrested without knowing what the charge is; he is unable to discover what he is accused of, despite increasingly desperate efforts; he infringes unknown procedural rules; his protests turn against him; at last, pathetically and apparently arbitrarily, he is knifed in a disused quarry. The real terror of this story is the growing certainty that no sense can be made of what is happening. As Kafka himself said, it is as if we know we are guilty, but not what we are guilty of. We are going to die, but we are denied the satisfaction of knowing why. ... When you are caught up in such a world, power appears to be purely and simply unaccountable, in both senses of the word. It is answerable to no one, and you cannot give a rational account of how it works.

Page 3f

1-B

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus holds back from revealing who he is because, it seems, he cannot believe that there are words that will tell the truth about him in the mouths of others. What will be said of him is bound to be untrue – that he is master of all circumstances; that he can heal where he wills; that he is the expected triumphant deliverer, the Anointed. ... There is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue.’

Page 6

1-C

Stripped and bound before the court, he has no stake in how the world organizes itself. He is definitively outside the system of the world’s power and the language of power. He is going to die, because that is what the world has decided. It is at this moment and this moment only that he speaks plainly about who he is. He names himself with the name of the God of Israel, ‘*I am*’, and tells the court that they will see the Human One seated at God’s right hand, coming in judgement. Humanity does not live in this world of insane authorities, but with God. ... Mark is inviting us to think again about what we mean by transcendence. Normally, when we use such words, we think of God’s surpassing greatness, but how can we avoid that becoming simply a massive projection of what *we* mean by greatness?

Page 7

1-D

Jesus breaks his silence at this moment in the trial because only now can

what he says be heard. There is little or no danger that we shall now mistake what he means, that we shall confidently describe him in words that reflect our own aspirations. He is who he is, and we can do nothing but let our imagination and our language be reshaped by him – if, that is, we have ears to hear, if we are not already determined to abide by the standards of the insane world that has brought him to trial. Nothing is left to him now: from this point on in the passion story, the only words he speaks are in the despairing cry from the cross, ‘*My God, my God, why have you deserted me?*’ (15:34). ... In this sense, Mark’s trial narrative passes sentence on our understanding of power and significance. *Page 8f*

1-E

God is not and cannot be what guarantees success or provides a convincing explanation of the strange behaviour of those who refuse the world’s ways. That would be to let God become again a competitor in the world’s business, whose power can ‘trump’ all other claims at the end of the day. *Page 12*

1-F

To speak of God as being seen most clearly in situations where the service of God offers no possible success, where even the hope of eternal life is so abstract that it might be a proposition in higher mathematics, is often to invite protest. This cannot be *gospel*, surely? It does not sound like good news. But the challenge remains, to re-imagine what it is for God to speak to us as God – not as a version of whatever makes us feel secure and appears more attractive than other familiar kinds of security. For if our talk about God is a religious version of talk about human safety, the paradox is that it will fail to say anything at all about salvation. It will not have anything to do with what is decisively and absolutely *not* the way of this world. *Page 15*

1-G

[B]y underlining Jesus’ reluctance to be pigeonholed as healer, exorcist and miracleman, by underlining the ‘messianic secret’, [Mark] says, in effect: if Jesus truly makes all the difference, beware of reducing this difference to a series of spectacular improvements in the human condition. Whatever he makes possible must be more than this. *Page 16*

1-H

We learn to read Mark’s Gospel best when, as a community of people reading in faith, we are aware of lives and narratives that repeatedly re-present this aspect of the Gospel; when we are able to reflect on stories and styles of life in the community that show something of the ‘*obstinate uselessness*’ of witness to God’s truth. *Page 17*

1-I

Paraphrasing St Paul, we might say that ‘liberal’ Christians look for a clear and purified future and ‘traditionalists’ look towards a more faithful and less compromised past. Yet the gospel remains the gospel of the crucified, asking of us an attention to the reality that is before us and within us here and now, a reality that will be scandalous and painful. Pascal’s stark

assertion that 'Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world' is much in the spirit of Mark; and it is not an observation about the deplorable state of unbelievers, but an exhortation to believers to keep awake – awake to their own inability to stay in the almost unbearable present moment where Jesus is – rather than look for an unreal future or past to run to. *Page 19f.*

Supplementary Material

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov, from Chapter 2: *Pontius Pilate*

TEXT

NOTES

In a white cloak with blood-red lining, with the shuffling gait of a cavalryman, early in the morning of the fourteenth day of the spring month of Nisan, there came out to the covered colonnade between the two wings of the palace of Herod the Great the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

More than anything in the world the procurator hated the smell of rose oil, and now everything foreboded a bad day, because this smell had been pursuing the procurator since dawn.

It seemed to the procurator that a rosy smell exuded from the cypresses and palms in the garden, that the smell of leather trappings and sweat from the convoy was mingled with the cursed rosy flux.

From the outbuildings at the back of the palace, where the first cohort of the Twelfth Lightning legion, which had come to Yerushalaim with the procurator, was quartered, a whiff of smoke reached the colonnade across the upper terrace of the palace, and this slightly acrid smoke, which testified that the centuries' mess cooks had begun to prepare dinner, was mingled with the same thick rosy scent.

'Oh, gods, gods, why do you punish me? ... Yes, no doubt, this is it, this is it again, the invincible, terrible illness ... hemicrania, when half of the head aches ... there's no remedy for it, no escape ... I'll try not to move my head ...'

On the mosaic floor by the fountain a chair was already prepared, and the procurator, without looking at anyone, sat in it and reached his hand out to one side. His secretary deferentially placed a sheet of parchment in this hand. Unable to suppress a painful grimace, the procurator ran a cursory, sidelong glance over the writing, returned the parchment to the secretary, and said with difficulty:

'The accused is from Galilee? Was the case sent to the tetrarch?'

'Yes Procurator,' replied the secretary.

'And what then?'

'He refused to make a decision on the case and sent the Sanhedrin's death sentence to you for confirmation,' the secretary explained.

The procurator twitched his cheek and said quietly:

'Bring in the accused.'

And at once two legionaries brought a man of about twenty-seven from the garden terrace to the balcony under the columns and stood him before the procurator's chair. The man was dressed in an old and torn light-blue chiton. His head was covered by a white cloth with a leather band around the forehead, and his hands were bound behind his back. Under the man's left eye there was a large bruise, in the corner of his mouth a cut caked with blood. The man gazed at the procurator with anxious curiosity.

The latter paused, then asked quietly in Aramaic:

‘So it was you who incited the people to destroy the temple of Yershalaim?’

The procurator sat as if made of stone while he spoke, and only his lips moved slightly as he pronounced the words. The procurator was as if made of stone because he was afraid to move his head, aflame with infernal pain.

The man with bound hands leaned forward somewhat and began to speak:

‘Good man! Believe me...’

But the procurator, motionless as before and not raising his voice in the least, straight away interrupted him:

‘Is it me that you are calling a good man? You are mistaken. It is whispered about me in Yershalaim that I am a fierce monster, and that is perfectly correct.’ And he added in the same monotone: ‘Bring the centurion Ratslayer.’

It seemed to everyone that it became darker on the balcony when the centurion of the first century, Mark, nicknamed Ratslayer, presented himself before the procurator. Ratslayer was a head taller than the tallest soldier of the legion and so broad in the shoulders that he completely blocked out the still-low sun.

The procurator addressed the centurion in Latin:

‘The criminal calls me “good man”. Take him outside for a moment, explain to him how I ought to be spoken to. But no maiming.’

And everyone except the motionless procurator followed Mark Ratslayer with their eyes as he motioned to the arrested man, indicating that he should go with him. Everyone generally followed Ratslayer with their eyes wherever he appeared, because of his height, and those who were seeing him for the first time also because the centurion’s face was disfigured: his nose had once been smashed by a blow from a Germanic dub.

Mark’s heavy boots thudded across the mosaic, the bound man noiselessly went out with him, complete silence fell in the colonnade, and one could hear pigeons cooing on the garden terrace near the balcony and water singing an intricate, pleasant song in the fountain.

The procurator would have liked to get up, put his temple under the spout, and stay standing that way. But he knew that even that would not help him.

Having brought the arrested man from under the columns out to the garden, Ratslayer took a whip from the hands of a legionary who was standing at the foot of a bronze statue and, swinging easily, struck the arrested man across the shoulders. The centurion’s movement was casual and light, yet the bound man instantly collapsed on the ground as if his legs had been cut from under him; he gasped for air, the colour drained from his face, and his eyes went vacant.

With his left hand only, Mark heaved the fallen man into the air like an empty sack, set him on his feet, and spoke nasally, in poorly pronounced Aramaic:

‘The Roman procurator is called Hegemon. Use no other words. Stand at attention. Do you understand me, or do I hit you?’

The arrested man swayed, but got hold of himself, his colour returned, he caught his breath and answered hoarsely:

‘I understand. Don't beat me.’

A moment later he was again standing before the procurator.

A lustreless, sick voice sounded:

‘Name?’

‘Mine?’ the arrested man hastily responded, his whole being expressing a readiness to answer sensibly, without provoking further wrath.

‘The procurator said softly:

‘I know my own. Don't pretend to be stupider than you are. Yours.’

‘Yeshua,’ the prisoner replied promptly.

‘Any surname?’

‘Ha-Nozri.’

‘Where do you come from?’

‘The town of Gamala,’ replied the prisoner, indicating with his head that there, somewhere far off to his right, in the north, was the town of Gamala.

‘Who are you by blood?’

‘I don't know exactly,’ the arrested man replied animatedly, ‘I don't remember my parents. I was told that my father was a Syrian . .

‘Where is your permanent residence?’

‘I have no permanent home,’ the prisoner answered shyly, ‘I travel from town to town.’

‘That can be put more briefly, in a word – a vagrant,’ the procurator said, and asked:

‘Any family?’

‘None. I'm alone in the world.’

‘Can you read and write?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know any language besides Aramaic?’

‘Yes. Greek.’

A swollen eyelid rose, an eye clouded with suffering fixed the arrested man. The other eye remained shut.

Pilate spoke in Greek.

‘So it was you who was going to destroy the temple building and called on the people to do that?’

Here the prisoner again became animated, his eyes ceased to show fear, and he spoke in Greek:

‘Never, goo...’ Here terror flashed in the prisoner's eyes, because he had nearly made a slip. ‘Never, Hegemon, never in my life was I

going to destroy the temple building, nor did I incite anyone to this senseless act.'

Surprise showed on the face of the secretary, hunched over a low table and writing down the testimony. He raised his head, but immediately bent it to the parchment again.

'All sorts of people gather in this town for the feast. Among them there are magicians, astrologers, diviners and murderers,' the procurator spoke in monotone, 'and occasionally also Ears. You, for instance, are a liar. It is written clearly – "Incited to destroy the temple". People have testified to it.'

'These good people,' the prisoner spoke and, hastily adding 'Hegemon', went on: '... haven't any learning and have confused everything I told them. Generally, I'm beginning to be afraid that this confusion may go on for a very long time. And all because he writes down the things I say incorrectly.'

Silence fell. By now both sick eyes rested heavily on the prisoner.

'I repeat to you, but for the last time, stop pretending that you're a madman, robber,' Pilate said softly and monotonously, 'there's not much written in your record, but what there is is enough to hang you.'

'No, no, Hegemon,' the arrested man said, straining all over in his wish to convince, 'there's one with a goatskin parchment who follows me, follows me and keeps writing all the time. But once I peeked into this parchment and was horrified. I said decidedly nothing of what's written there. I implored him: "Burn your parchment, I beg you!" But he tore it out of my hands and ran away.'

'Who is that?' Pilate asked squeamishly and touched his temple with his hand.

'Matthew Levi,' the prisoner explained willingly. 'He used to be a tax collector, and I first met him on the road in Bethphage, where a fig grove juts out at an angle, and I got to talking with him. He treated me hostilely at first and even insulted me – that is, thought he insulted me – by calling me a dog.' Here the prisoner smiled. 'I personally see nothing bad about this animal, that I should be offended by this word . . .'

The secretary stopped writing and stealthily cast a surprised glance, not at the arrested man, but at the procurator.

'... However, after listening to me, he began to soften,' Yeshua went on, 'finally threw the money down in the road and said he would go journeying with me...'

Pilate grinned with one cheek, baring yellow teeth, and said, turning his whole body towards the secretary:

'Oh, city of Yershalaim! What does one not hear in it! A tax collector, do you hear, threw money down in the road!'

Not knowing how to reply to that, the secretary found it necessary to repeat Pilate's smile.

**‘He said that henceforth money had become hateful to him,’
Yeshua explained Matthew Levi’s strange action and added: ‘And
since then he has been my companion.’**

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov

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[Rowan Williams in his book, *The Trial of Christ*, thinks that there is a progression in the trial in which transcendence becomes apparent; for me, that means a time when the language can change from compromise to single-minded clarity. And does change. Here is a sonnet I owe to Rowan Williams and to the “I am” of Jesus. My meditation for the evening. March 5, 2004:

Harold Macdonald]

THERE IS A TIME FOR TRUTH

There is a time when scales fall from the eyes
when might stands clear without deceit
caring not the where or when or whys,
its lie required not, its arrogance complete.
Power pretends as if to please
briefly bows before its god
then, unabashed, displays its sleaze
strips off good will like husking pods.
Then the truth will out and God will speak it plain
The time for coaxing words being past
Equivocation never crosses lips again
The prophet speaks the word at last!
 In such a way, the Last Day comes in miniature
 The truth lies close! Will come if only we endure!

Poems from the Eighth Decade

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