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Lenten and Easter Meditation: Voices of the Passion: I, Pontius Pilate, 1944

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I, Pontius Pilate, Governor of the Imperial Province of Syria from 26 to 36 A.D., would like to say a few words to my intellectual and spiritual contemporaries of the twentieth century. If you ask the reason, I can only point to my increasing importance in all the years since that memorable Friday morning when the world's hourglass was turning and I was one of the grains of sand within it. Beyond that there is no good reason why I, of all men, should speak to you. In life I was never very important, merely a minor official in a great colonial empire for a few tragically 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 resolved to build an aqueduct with temple money, and they forced me to abandon the project. Now after all these clarifying years I am ready to admit that in the world of time and power I was a failure.

Nevertheless, it pleases my Roman sense of irony that I should now have become the most famous Roman of them all. When Caesar and Seneor, 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. Day after day, century after century, millions of human beings have shouted and whispered: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate". 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 One Who was greater than I, Whom I sent to a
cross, and Who in return gave me a reluctant and hateful immortality. I, who would have nothing to do with Him in life, am now linked to Him forever. Seldom has your unpredictable God turned the normal course of events more sharply to His own good purposes.

But let me tell you the story of that Friday morning as I saw it from the judgment seat. 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 empire, as you of the twentieth century well know. 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 were also His royal bearing and His mysterious indifference to the howling of the mob and the shadow of death over Him. You may consider me a coward or a hard, cruel man, but you cannot call me stupid. I knew this Friday morning that there were currents and cross-currents beneath the surface of the scene before me which raised it above the ordinary dramas of crime and punishment. That was why I did a very strange thing for a judge and almost immediately called Him innocent. 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 very 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.

Then an amazing thing happened. I asked the prisoner, somewhat sarcastically, I must admit, "Art Thou the King of the Jews?", and He took the whole trial from my hands and lips and lifted it up and away from the momentary and the personal into the eternal and the spiritual. At that moment I had to meet the Galilean on the highest level I could reach. Your man Spengler has said that this was the most amazing and dramatic meeting of minds in all history. He was right. Suddenly we became the living symbols of two worlds, face to face as the sun rose over Jerusalem on a Friday morning. 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. My judgment seat became a battleground and a confessional.

I must admit I felt something of that. My conversation shows it. I tried hard to keep up with the height and depth of the drama in which I was playing. But, you may 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 that Friday morning? 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 against mine.

And so I decided. Wrongly, you say? Forgive me, but many of you of the twentieth century have given up my prisoner for less than that, for a moment of sin, an hour of price or passion, a bit of money or comfort, the worship of reason. You may throw stones at me if you will; but your 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. I must confess that for a moment I shivered in the warm morning sun. Are you interest in my career after that fateful morning? I stayed in Judea three more years and then — the bitter irony of it — what I had feared on that Friday morning came to pass anyway. I was recalled, exiled to Gaul, and committed suicide. Of the many legends which have grown up around me, the only one which is true in its essential meaning is told by the Swiss peasant. They report that on stormy nights, when the thunder and lightning play over Mount Pilatus, they can see me washing my hands. 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 of blood:

    Out, dammed 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. The desperate attempt to chloroform the soul, to forget the past, to run away from gibbering ghosts that walk with you forever.
Although I have no desire to defend myself so late in the time of man, there is one false impression which I would like to correct. Some of your writers seem to feel that I quickly forgot those five hours with your God. Anatole France, for example, in his "Mother of Pearl" describes a conversation which I supposedly had with a young man many years later. This man is speaking about the Galilean. He tells me that I must have been governor when He was crucified. According to Anatole France I make every effort to recall the case, but finally admit that I do not recall the name. That is not true. I never forgot Him. In fact, I cannot see how any one who has ever come face to face with Him can quite 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 uncompelled, silent and inevitable. This you must learn from me. 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. In your case the latter has happened.

I feel very close to the twentieth century. Since I was reared in the religion of Rome, out of which all life and reality had vanished, I became an agnostic, like so many of you, my friends of the twentieth century. "What is truth?" I said. That was a rhetorical question for me. I thought I knew that 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 century 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 the curtains against the Eternal.

For a long time after that Friday morning I did not sleep very well. One day I arranged to hear Gamaliel, the great teacher of the Jews, who was lecturing in Jerusalem at the time. As I entered his home he was reading from one of their prophets - Isaiah, I believe his name was - "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." For a moment I wondered. The face of the Galilean, covered with the pain of time and the glory of eternity, loomed before me. Was this the man of that Friday morning? If it was, yours is a very wonderful religion. It would seem that under the shadow of the Cross to which I sent Him, there is room for everyone, no matter how evil or how good. Perhaps even, I thought, for me! But, no, for me it is too late.