

January 2019

Lenten Meditation: The Finality of the Cross, n.d.

O.P. Kretzmann

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.valpo.edu/kretzmann_collection



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kretzmann, O.P., "Lenten Meditation: The Finality of the Cross, n.d." (2019). *O.P. Kretzmann Collection*. 137.
https://scholar.valpo.edu/kretzmann_collection/137

This Collection Record is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in O.P. Kretzmann Collection by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

1400 years before Calvary and the Cross a man stood under the oak trees at Shechem crying to a great multitude gathered on the hillsides about him: "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve, whether the God of your fathers or the gods of the Amorites in whose land ye dwell." 'Tis hundred years later another man stood on a mountain top in Israel, between the dead altars of Baal and the flaming altars of Jehovah, and cried to an equally great multitude: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, then follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." Two hundred years later still another man stood on the hilltop of Judah crying to all who would hear: "Multitudes, multitudes are in the valley of decision; for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision." Sixty years after Calvary an old man sat on a lonely island in the Aegean Sea writing on a bit of parchment: "So then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth." My dear friend, what were all these men doing? They were hurling the forces of divine power and inspired eloquence against the greatest single obstacle in the onward march of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, the most insidious weapon in the hands of the powers of hell, the most fearful and deadly enemy of the Cross in all ages--Indifference. How devastating and ruinous these appeared to them we can see from the fact that the old prophet Elijah challenges his hearers to follow Baal - and the gentle, quiet St. John the Beloved actually expresses the daring wish that the church at Laodicea would become either cold or hot. He would rather have seen them open, avowed enemies of the Cross of Jesus Christ than the lukewarm, indifferent, uncertain hangerson that they really were.

I have often wondered what these men would have said if they could have seen the Church of the twentieth century. For certainly, if the Church of these later days has any one besetting, dominating characteristic, it is just this halting between two opinions, this lukewarmness, this standing helpless in the valley of decision against which prophets and evangelists hurled the lightning of divine anger. Permit me to point to only one obvious fact -- the fluctuating church attendance in our day. On the holy days -- Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, our churches are crowded -- with whom? With men and women who have never quite made up their minds about their religion, who refuse to believe and refuse to disbelieve, who are neither hot nor cold. When Christmas comes, they remember the faith of their childhood once more; when New Year comes, they have forgotten. When Good Friday comes, they return once more to the shrine of the faith of their fathers and mothers to hear the story of the Cross; when June comes, they have forgotten. And so their lives drag on from the cradle to the grave and in their hearts is always the vague hope that they are really getting by, that they have successfully evaded the issue that they have succeeded in avoiding a clear "yes" or "no."

My dear friend, if there are any men and women of this type within reach of your voice and your influence when you leave this church today, I pray you go and tell them that they are attempting the impossible. And I am so absolutely sure of that fact because behind the voice of the divine Savior Himself "He who is not for me is against me" rises the long record of two thousand years in which countless men and women have tried to avoid offering the living Christ either a cross or a throne and have gone down into the dust crushed and broken, and with the fear of eternity on their faces because finally, in the hour of death, they saw that in their apparently successful lukewarmness and indifference and uncertainty they had given him a cross -- and from the cross He had gone to a Throne to judge them. Even on Calvary it was not one of the indifferent crowd who was saved, but the poor thief; it was not one of the thousands who had followed Him and then left Him, but the Roman captain, his open enemy who had nailed Him to the cross, who cried out: "Verily this was a just man and the Son of God." There is nothing more final and more decisive in the world than the cross.

Perhaps the most pitiful representative of the men and women who have failed to realize this fundamental fact appears in the story of Calvary itself. Humanly speaking, no one had a greater right to be indifferent to the Cross than the proud Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Behind him stood the Roman eagles, the power of Rome, and the legions of Rome -- and before him stood a Jewish rabble, arguing about something which he did not understand and howling for the blood of an unimportant carpenter's Son from the North. Undoubtedly he was at first indifferent; but soon indifference changed to uncertainty and he began that familiar twisting and turning to avoid the issue which has been the mark of all his followers for two thousand years. He sent Jesus to Herod -- and Jesus came back again; He offered the mob the choice between Jesus and Barrabbas -- and they chose Barrabbas and Jesus was still standing there. Finally he relapsed again into his old indifference, symbolized his belief in the fact that he had successfully evaded the issue by washing his hands, and turned again to his business. Was that the end? Ah no, my friend, there enters now the irony of God, and that one man who far more than Annas, and Caiaphas, and Judas, the howling mob, and the heartless Roman soldiers had tried to evade the issue of the cross now stands forever, alone and infamously identified with it. Day by day for two thousand years, first from the depths of caves and cat combs where the followers of Him whom He had condemned were compelled to hide, then rising to light, swelling, surging, spreading over the earth; in the first lisps of childhood, in the solemn celebrations of all churches, in the last confessions of the dying; from ten thousand times ten thousand voices has the tremendous witness of all Christendom gone up to heaven: He suffered under Pontius Pilate." There, my dear friend, is the finality of the Cross--and how deeply the Christian mind has always realized that we can see from the fact that even today there is a legend in Switzerland that on stormy nights one may see in the flashes of lightning over Mount Pilatus, the figure of Pilate--eternally, pathetically washing his hands.

The finality of the Cross--I truly believe, my dear friend, that the tragic telling words "too late" still have an important place in our life and thought today the grace and mercy flowing down from the Cross is timeless and eternal and yet there came a time when it was too late for Judas, too late for Caiaphas, too late for Pilate. Slowly but surely the treacherous years build up a wall of ice around the heart against which finally even the hammer blows of the living God can avail nothing. The horrible thing about indifference is that it is progressive. It grows. Some years ago a young mountaineer in Scotland was let down over an abyss to a ledge far below. As he stood on the ledge to gather herbs the rope slipped and swung far out over the yawning chasm. It swung toward him again. It was nearer than it would ever be again. Slowly it swung out again--then back once more, but now no longer so near as the first time. With a gasp of horror the young man realized that fact, made one desperate leap for the rope and was pulled back to safety. My dear friend, Christ has been near you, perhaps many a time nearer to you than He is today--but this is God's truth that He is nearer to you now than He ever will be again. If you let Him go there is less chance, less hope for you tomorrow than there is today. That is the finality of the Cross.

It is three o'clock on the day of crucifixion--the hour of consummation. The strange, noonday darkness has ended and the last rays of the dying sun are gilding the three crosses on Calvary, but the sense of terror, the sense of vast spiritual forces in final conflict over the souls of men still hangs like a pall over the Universe. No bird sings in the olive trees of Gethsemane; no wolf howls on the plains of Judea; no man walks the streets of Jerusalem but with a sense of that great unknown terror which has covered the world with silence. The tides of time surge upward from the cross. The world's hour glass is turning. The sands of life once more sift into eternity of triumph. On the banks of the Nile men are telling each other that the great God Pan is dead; in the valley of the

Kidron lies the body of a man who no longer has thirty pieces of silver; in Europe our ancestors look with wonder and fear at the darkened sky. In the great halls of heaven Cherubim and Seraphim bend their listening ear for the last line in the world's great drama of atonement. It comes. He is coming home, the long adventure over, brave banners down, a suppliant from pain: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." He is coming home. And the tall cities of heaven bend left and right as He comes. The choirs of eternity stand silent, and the only sound is the sound of the tearing of a veil. "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit." That night, when the sun had gone down, the disciples gathered behind locked doors in hidden houses in Jerusalem and wept over His failure. He had been beaten by life, beaten by His enemies, torn and crushed on a cross. But in heaven the Holy City stood complete in glory--the city that has no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it, for the Lamb is the light thereof. The shame of the Cross has changed into the splendor of the throne. And, on earth, hope, itself once dead, but now alive forever, looks into the future with the fullest confidence that earth's darkest days are over and that man has been drawn, finally and forever, to the vision of God-given righteousness and the consummation of God's eternal purposes in the person of the man whose weary head drooped under the crown of thorns as He said farewell.

My dear friend, I have never seen another man die like that. It was the world's easiest farewell. When you and I die it will not be easy to say farewell to life. There will be so many things which we shall have left undone--so many things which the pitiless light of eternity will reveal as small and useless--so many things which we should like to change and amend before we go into the valley of the shadows. But there was nothing like that for Him. His brief day had come to eventide in God's own good time. His farewell was the farewell of work done, of atonement completed, of sin forgiven. There was nothing more to do now He could come home. And as He came, all He had to show for the 33 years of loving a world that hated Him, for the crown of thorns and the long hours of agony and loneliness and blood--was one poor thief. And yet--all the morning stars sang together and all the angels of heaven shouted for joy because they saw in that one soul the first of a long procession of men and women who would storm the gates of heaven with His blood on their souls, His forgiveness in their hearts, and His farewell on their lips.

My dear friend, I am fully aware of the fact that the world "doctrine" is most unpopular today and that the world would fain be content with a vague, emotional response to religion without inquiring too closely into the ideas underlying it. And yet we shall never touch the meaning of Calvary until we see that it is essentially an idea. It is God's idea. Will you permit me to state it once more, clearly and definitely, and not in my own words? "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Calvary is the execution of that plan, conceived before the world began, and carried out here in terms of blood, and agony, and tears and the Cross. And the Savior's farewell "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit" is the divinely imposed period on the historic execution of that idea. There was nothing more to be done. And so His farewell becomes the world's easiest farewell. His eyes, torn with pain and filled with blood, turn from the earth that had crowned Him with a crown of thorns to His Father in heaven who was waiting to crown Him with the many crowns of universal Kingdom. And as He comes He carries on His lips the one word which He has again given to the world in its highest and truest meaning: "Father."

My dear friend, there were several thousand people on that hill outside the gates of Jerusalem on that first Good Friday who heard that farewell ring out over the valley of the Kidron--And there were perhaps a half dozen who knew what

it would mean to them and to the world. And today when there are millions of souls in all the churches of Christendom hearing the same words, the proportion is about the same. When the sun went down on that first Good Friday many a man and woman turned away from the three crosses standing gaunt and bare against the evening sky--turned away and said farewell to the cross. And that was also an easy farewell--the farewell of carelessness, the farewell of indifference, the farewell of sin. And exactly 34 years later the living Christ returned once more to say His hardest farewell to them, the far well which they had laughingly pressed to His eyes on Good Friday, the farewell which He had seen so dearly on Palm Sunday through eyes dimmed with tears. Jerusalem felt the bite of the scourge, the crack of the whip, and the sickening thud of stones striking human flesh. My Lord Christ had come back in the roar and confusion of war and before His crowned head and His uplifted arm. Jerusalem crumbled into dust and ashes. My friend, there is another farewell in the story of the eternal Christ--a farewell which I pray you will never hear. Judas heard it, Pilate heard it, Caiaphas heard it--and before God I tell you today they are not good company for you.