

Ps 77:1,2
 Hy 2
 Hy 25:1,2,3
 Ps 63:3
 Ps 42:5,7
 Mt 27:11-26
 Mt 27:19

Yarrow, April 22, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Dreams are fun, and sometimes scary. Innocent dreams we tend to forget, but the scary ones embed themselves in our minds and can even haunt us.

Early on that Good Friday so long ago, someone dreamed, frightfully, and that dream has haunted her ever since. We don't know what the dream was, but we do know that the Holy Spirit has caused Matthew to record the fact of the dream in the Bible God gave to us. Why it's mentioned? It's mentioned, brothers and sisters, in order to impress upon us the more how intensely our Lord suffered for our sins. At the same time, the mention of this dream comforts us in the midst of our bad dreams....¹

I summarize the sermon today with this theme:

THROUGH THE MESSAGE CLAUDIA SENDS TO PILATE, GOD MAKES JESUS SUFFER MORE.

1. The action of Claudia.
2. The implication for Jesus.

1. The Action of Claudia

Pilate had gotten out of bed rather early that morning. Shortly after sunrise the chief priests and elders had arrived at the court of his official residence with a request that he, governor as he was, pass sentence on a man worthy of death. His wife apparently enjoyed the warmth of bed a few moments longer.

But so enjoyable her extra moments in bed were not. She dreamed. And the dream was far from pleasant; this was a nightmare of the worst kind, one that horrified her terribly, that caused her to suffer much. What the dream was? We don't know, except that it involved the same man with whom her husband was occupied out in the judgment hall. And that was enough for her to summon a servant, to send a message to Pilate: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man!"

Dreams. We all have dreams from time to time, be it the soothing, gentle kind that we'd wish would never stop, be it the horrifying type that wake us up in a cold sweat. But –I trust– neither the pleasant nor the awful dreams prompt us to send messages to our husbands or wives recommending a particular course of action determined by our dreams.

With Claudia it was different. (Between brackets: I use the name Claudia because a number of early church fathers say that this was her name. So, for sake of clarity I'll use that name today too.) With Claudia it was different. Was it because she was superstitious that she sent a message to her husband? We don't know the workings of her mind. What we do know is –as we may confess in LD 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism– that things in God's creation do not

¹ cf KS, *Christus in Zijn Lijden*, II, 510ff; TDNT, onar; vanBruggen, *Matteus*

just ‘happen’; such is the power of the Creator, and such is His present involvement in all that He made, that “leaf and blade, rain and drought..., indeed, all things, come not by chance but by His fatherly hand.” And again: “all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.” In other words: Claudia’s dream –like our dreams– was not just a ‘happening’; it was the Lord God Himself who gave this dream to Claudia. Similarly, it was the Lord God Himself who moved Claudia to send to her husband the particular conclusion she harvested from that dream, the conclusion that Pilate dear ought to have nothing to do with that innocent man.

God’s hand lies behind the happenings recorded in our text. That raises for us this question: why would the Lord God cause Claudia to have this dream, to have this dream at this time (while husband Pilate is out in the court involved with the case of Jesus of Nazareth), why would the Lord God have Claudia send her message to Pilate? It’s the answers to these questions, congregation, that open up for us the gospel of our passage. And to answer these questions properly, we need to understand the circumstances in which these events occurred.

We need to observe first of all that out in the court, things were not going as the Lord God had decreed in His law. It was God’s revealed will that justice be done to anyone brought before a magistrate. This was a rule applicable in covenant Israel; this was a rule valid for all peoples everywhere, valid for the Roman governor in Jerusalem also. All authorities govern by God’s appointment, and so are to administer His justice.

But in the court of Pilate justice was not being done. In accordance with the desires of the chief priests and the elders, Jesus stood as the accused before the judge. Jesus readily admitted that He was guilty of the charge brought against Him by the chief priests and the elders; He agreed that He was the King of the Jews (vs 11). But that confession could not carry the death sentence, certainly not the way Jesus was behaving. King of the Jews He claimed to be, O yes, but never did He take up arms against the authorities, never did He encourage any one else to take up arms. In fact, the kingship Jesus claimed to have could be nothing but a joke in the eyes of a man as Pilate; recall only the silliness connected with His entering Jerusalem astride that donkey’s foal a week ago. King?! On that charge justice required Pilate to have Jesus freed.

But see now: Pilate wasn’t obliging the law; Pilate declined to release Jesus. Jesus’ accusers in turn pressed their advantage; they forwarded more accusations against their captive to ensure the death penalty they wanted. But to these accusations Jesus refused to give an answer, refused because Pilate the judge had to pass sentence on *the* accusation –is it wrong to claim to be King of the Jews, and is it wrong to claim to be the Son of God?– accusations Pilate was declining to process.

Yet Pilate had to do something. He knew why the chief priests and the elders had delivered Jesus to him in the first place –it was, says Matthew in vs 18, “out of envy”– and that’s why Pilate did not wish to voice the sentence Jesus deserved and so let Him go; to do that would have meant crossing swords with these influential chief priests and elders, would have meant political suicide for himself.

How Pilate could come out of his dilemma? He had not a single legal reason to keep Jesus of Nazareth in custody, and yet he didn’t dare to utter the verdict of innocence the law demanded. Happily for the governor, while he was debating the options, the circumstances came to his help. For the crowds assembled, assembled in order to present to the governor their nomination for which prisoner ought to be released. This, we’re given to understand from

vs 15, was the custom at the Passover feast; each year the governor freed for the people a particular prisoner. So, according to custom, the people gathered on the morning of that Passover Friday with their nomination. The man they wanted? Their preference for freedom was a notorious character called Barabbas. From the other gospel writers we learn that this man was a rebel, was a freedom fighter; we'd say today that he was a terrorist. He had been captured during an uprising, and now undoubtedly awaited the normal sentence for insurrection: the death sentence.

That circumstance gave Pilate the opening he sought. Condemn Jesus he couldn't; there were no grounds. Do justice and let Jesus go he didn't dare; that would have turned the chief priests and elders against him. Hence: *let the people choose*. Their nomination for freedom is Barabbas; Pilate will suggest a second name, that of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, after all, was popular with the people; surely, they would not wish His death, would vote Him free. A shrewd way for the governor to get out of his corner without antagonizing the Jewish leadership.

Yet we're to understand well, brothers and sisters, just what Pilate has now done. Jesus was innocent, and Pilate knew that very well; certainly Jesus did not deserve the death penalty. Barabbas, on the other hand, was guilty, very guilty, and Pilate knew that well too; as an insurrectionist, a freedom fighter, he deserved (by Roman law) the death penalty. These two Pilate lumped together on one nomination. *And in so doing he made an implicit statement about Jesus of Nazareth*. By associating Jesus with Barabbas, Pilate implies that actually they are *two of a kind, both are guilty of something* (cf Isaiah 53:12). Pilate, in other words, blackened Jesus' name even while he sought to provide opening for Jesus' release. Here is *injustice*, injustice on the point that Pilate the judge declined to declare Jesus innocent of wrong-doing and let Him go, injustice also on the point that Pilate the judge lumped Jesus with Barabbas as if they were two of a kind.

It's now at this moment, beloved, just after Pilate has placed a second name on nomination beside the recommendation of the people, just after Pilate has publicly lumped Jesus of Nazareth with Barabbas the rebel, that a messenger –by the providence of God– enters the court room. "Pilate dear", says the note, "I've had a terrible dream involving Jesus of Nazareth; please *have nothing to do with that innocent man!*" Nothing, don't touch Him!

In truth, nothing happens by chance; Almighty God is behind all that happens – behind Claudia's dream and her message to husband Pilate too. But Scriptures mention a second truth that we need now to keep in mind. Not only do Scriptures say that the Lord is behind all that happens; Scriptures teach at the same time that God holds people *fully responsible* for all that they do. We make confession of that Scriptural truth in LD 4 of the Catechism: God "is terribly displeased with our original sin as well as our actual sins" and will therefore "punish them by a just judgment." That Claudia on the basis of that dream sent a message to her husband, a message to have nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth (innocent that He was!), was a deed for which *she* was responsible. Well now, was it proper for her to send this message to Pilate?

The answer here turns out to be a clear No. It was God's revealed will that Pilate, judge in the land as he was, dispense justice, allow no injustice. God had ordained the woman as help for the man, had joined Claudia to Pilate as his help. Her God-given responsibility, then, was that she encourage her husband in the task God had given to him, that is, encourage Pilate to *dispense justice*. If she were convinced that Jesus was innocent and so advised her husband to *declare Him innocent* and *release Him*, that'd be one thing. But that's not her advice. She tells husband Pilate to have nothing to do with this man – and that's to say that she wants Pilate to make no judgment on Jesus, to wash his hands of Him. And that advice is simply not her mandate to give. She failed, then, dismally, to be a good help for her husband, failed to push

him along in the direction God required. So she was not a *help* for her husband, but instead a *hindrance*. And Yes, she is responsible for that.

And behold, beloved, the result of her failure. *Weak-kneed Pilate took over the wrong recommendation of his wife*; he judged her advice to be sound. This, of course, was *his* responsibility; his duty before God was to keep his eye on the will of God and so dispense justice. He knew that the right thing to do was to release Jesus, so he should take responsibility to do precisely that. But he didn't dare to oppose the Jews..., and his wife's ill advice consolidated his chicken-heartedness – he left Jesus at arms' length from him, let the dual nomination of Jesus and Barabbas stand so that *the people* will decide what's to become of Jesus....

But God will not let Pilate off the hook so easily.... While Pilate hesitates, while Pilate keeps hoping that the people will vote for Jesus and so take this politically hot potato out of his hands, the chief priests and the elders take the opportunity to work the crowds to vote for Barabbas. So when the question was put to the people again as to whom they would prefer to see released, the shout was for Barabbas, Barabbas. *And Pilate was left with Jesus still on his hands.*

Yet even now what Pilate ought to do is dispense justice, release the man he knew to be righteous. But the advice from his wife still rung in his ears; he dared not take a firm stand on Jesus of Nazareth, he wanted nothing to do with Him. So, when the crowds showed signs of starting a riot, when Pilate realized that the crowd would not take Jesus off his hands, he ordered the wash basin brought forward and he washed his hands before the people with the words: "I am innocent of this man's blood; it is your responsibility." You see: *he took his wife's advice quite literally.*

How far, beloved, has fallen that noble marriage relation created in the beginning, created as a picture of the relation between Christ and the church! *She* wasn't the helper she was supposed to be, and *he* wasn't the leader he was supposed to be, and the result was the death of the innocent Son of God....

And none of that happened by chance....

2. The Implication for Jesus.

What, now, brothers and sisters, has this to do with our salvation? Why was it that the Lord God directed circumstances in such a way that Pilate should be so hesitant about Jesus, that there should come to him this message from his sleepy wife?

The dream, and hence the message too, concerned Jesus; it was *with Him* that Pilate was to have nothing to do. Already Jesus *on His own* stood before the judge. His disciples had fled when He was first arrested (Mt 26:56), then Peter had come back and disowned Him (26:69ff). The leadership in Israel (that's the chief priests and the elders) sought His death (Mt 27:1). Pilate didn't side with Jesus either; in not daring to carry out the God-given duties of his office, he was not *for* Jesus and therefore was he *against* Jesus. The people, too, sided against Jesus; a bit of priming from their priests and elders, and all shouted for the release of Barabbas. In other words, on that Good Friday of long ago, Jesus in Pilate's courtyard was alone, *all alone*. In the words of Isaiah the prophet: "*He was despised and rejected by men*" (Isaiah 53:3).

But the fact that men rejected Him was not the worst of it! Inasmuch as the dream and the message to Pilate did not happen by chance, but came rather from His Father in heaven, *His own Father too* was already turning away from Him! Here was the horror for Jesus in the message of Claudia to Pilate; through that dream *God His Father* sovereignly passed on a message to His Son: *I want nothing to do with you any more!* Here already the Father piled rejection upon rejection on His Son; here already the Father turned people away from Jesus –

the judge included!– turned *Himself* away from Jesus. Not only was He “despised and rejected by men” (Is 53:3); He was also “smitten by *God*, and afflicted” (vs 4). Yea, “it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; *He* has put Him to grief” (vs 10). *That’s* what this whole episode regarding the dream is all about: here is rejection from men *and rejection from God*.

Be not mistaken, brothers and sisters: here was great suffering for Jesus. And hence great temptation too! To be rejected by men is one thing. But to know that behind men’s rejection is implicit *God’s* rejection of you, *that* is something quite different! The psalmist could complain about how he was rejected by men –and heartfelt complaints they were!– but that psalmist could always know that his God would never really forsake him, no matter how terrible he felt. Not so Jesus. Men reject Him, yes, His only legal hope –God’s representative Pilate– turns against Him on advice from the helper God once gave him, turns against Him on advice born in a dream *God* sent. Here was suffering, here was temptation: *My God, My Father rejects Me!!* It’s a pain we creatures cannot even begin to understand. And hence was it a temptation too that we cannot even begin to comprehend; if this is Father, better to join the disobedient son at the pig troughs in some far away land. Yea, better to curse God and die....

But behold here the gospel, my brothers and sisters! *We do not read anything to the effect that Jesus cursed God on account of this heavenly rejection!* We read instead in the remainder of the chapter that Jesus continued faithfully on the road upon which His God in wisdom had set Him. He went to the cross, and endured there the total rejection that had begun in the courtyard of Pilate the governor. He carried on to the cross, carried on even when utter blackness settled around Calvary as graphic presentation of how totally God rejected the Son-become-sin. He carried on in the midst of that absolute rejection; instead of giving in to the temptation to curse God and die, He rather paid for sin, satisfied God’s wrath so that the *cause* of God’s rejection was taken away. And when that had been accomplished, God according to His faithfulness received His Son again, yes, gave Him a seat at His right hand in heaven, crowned Him with glory and honour. He endured the suffering, withstood the temptations that climaxed so horribly at the end of His life on earth, and in so doing has opened the way for many thousands to join Him in the presence of His Father.

This, then, congregation, is the gospel of our text: Jesus was rejected, already in Pilate court, *that we might never be rejected by God*. Jesus was told then already, via a dream from God, that God wished to have nothing to do with Him –why?– so that we might *never* be told that God wishes to have nothing to do with us!

Then we have dreams today, dreams that may very well fill us with horror, dreams that highlight our sinfulness, dreams that tempt us to think that we don’t love God anymore, and God certainly doesn’t love us anymore, nor care for us. But the fact of the matter is, beloved, that long ago *God rejected His Son so that we might never be rejected*. This is a truth we may believe despite the dreams almighty God may grant us, may grant our loved ones. He used a dream to tell His Son that He wanted nothing to do with Him, rejected Him – and that on account of our sins. When dreams now come upon us, horrible dreams that haunt us time and again, it’s for us to recall the gospel He sets before us in Christ, and that gospel is this: because of Christ’s triumph in the face of rejection, I never forsake My own any more; their sins – including the ones that haunt our dreams– are washed away and God is our caring Father always.

That’s the gospel. And we, beloved, are responsible for how we now respond to the dreams God permits. Do we permit ourselves to be devastated by those dreams, driven by

them? Or shall we, in the face of such nightmares, cling to the promises of our God in Jesus Christ, and so believe that God loves us still and cares for us too – even when He in wisdom tests us by means of a horrifying dream? For Yes, *that is the promise flowing from our text: bad dreams notwithstanding, we're always secure in His fatherly hands.* On that Friday so long ago, He wanted nothing to do with His Son so that He might never say that He wants nothing to do with us.