

Christianity has over the 2000 years of its existence actually produced more and greater music than any other religious tradition, if you want to group it that way, on the face of the earth. When you contemplate what we look at tonight you can understand why, because to merely speak words does not capture the depths of emotions that necessarily flow when we realize what it is that God has done for us. So you look for something more than just words, you want somehow to give fuller expression, and song is that way.

The title of the message is only half presented to you [on the program]. It is supposed to be “The Will of God and the Desires of Men.” The reason I mention that is because we are going to be looking at a couple of men who had close association with Jesus on His last day. Reading the account of Good Friday is at one and the same time that which is surreal and human all too human. Matthew opens his account in chapter 27 by making this comment: *“When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus, to put him to death. And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the Governor.”* Jesus, if you are familiar [with the story], had already been up all night; already He had endured the agony of His prayers to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, already He had endured the desertion by all His disciples; already Judas has gone into the night from the fellowship of the last supper; already he betrayed Jesus to those who have now determined to have Him killed; already Jesus has been falsely accused before Caiaphas the high priest; already Peter has denied knowing Jesus; already the darkness of human sin has gathered thickly around Him; already before He was brought to stand before Pilate, the pagan governor sent from Imperial Rome, the center of worldly power in that age; and Jesus knows why He has been sent to stand in front of Pilate; it is because the Jews want Him dead, and only Pilate can execute a man’s life.

Later Jesus will declare to Pilate, *“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above, therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”* That is a statement that has two parts. The first concerns what Jesus meant as the source of authority. The second concerns who had delivered Jesus into Pilate’s hands. As to the first, Pilate had received his appointment from the emperor in Rome. Pilate was a functionary, a creature of the empire. He had no inherent or intrinsic authority in himself. He was just a man, and when you read the accounts you realize that even as just a man he was scarcely equal to the task that had been given to him being governor, let alone standing in judgment over Jesus. As to the second part of the statement, Pilate had taken custody of Jesus from the temple guards. It was the Sanhedrin, the ruling counsel of the Jewish people, the covenant people of God who had delivered Jesus to Pilate, and it was therefore they who had the greater sin. How bizarre that they would do that to their messiah.

However there is yet another strain of truth in Jesus’ words. The scriptures are clear that it is God who raises up kingdoms and kings, and it is God who determines the unfolding of events, seen most clearly in those bearing directly on the plan of salvation. The freely chosen acts of men fulfill the will and purpose of God. If there is nothing else that I would have go away with tonight it is that you would be very clear on that point: the freely chosen acts of men fulfill the will and purpose of God. As in the case of the brothers of Joseph when they sold him into slavery in Egypt, the brothers meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. You and I are the beneficiaries of that good.

Nowhere is this seen in greater clarity and even shock than in the case of Judas, and that is the first of the two men I want to talk about. He was the man who delivered Jesus into the hands of those who were determined to kill Him. John says of Judas, he was a thief, and having charge of the money bag for the disciples he used to help himself to what was put into it. Ah, think about that. Judas was one of the chosen twelve, the disciples of Jesus, personally selected by Jesus to travel with Him as he roamed through Galilee and Judah preaching the gospel of the kingdom and performing miracles. Think about that. Think of this man standing in the presence of Jesus, observing the miracles and reaching his hand into the money bag to take “a little.” Neither power nor truth captured the heart of Judas. Even as a member of Jesus’ personal entourage Judas remained a servant to the evil

desires of the heart. John’s gospel tells us he was a petty thief, but betrayal is not a petty crime. Judas was a man whose heart and mind were enslaved by small things. What, we might wonder, did he do with the money that he stole? Did he plan to serve himself so slyly when he agreed to be the treasurer? Had he asked to be the treasurer? Did he buy special treats to eat as he walked along the road? Perhaps he got himself a better grade of sandals or an upgrade for the money bag; a petty thief. Did Jesus know? Jesus surely knew. Jesus apparently never alluded to the matter. Had Jesus ever confronted Judas? We are not told. We are told this, that at one point Jesus said it would have been better for the man who betrayed him to have never been born. At another time Jesus said of this man that he was a son of destruction. What is clear is that God left Judas to do freely what his fallen nature prompted him to do. He satisfied his desires, and that was his most horrific undoing.

Judas deeply troubles and fascinates many. How are we to understand him? A famous Broadway musical – how many are familiar with “Jesus Christ, Super Star”? – Well, that musical tried to portray Judas a kind of tragic hero. But Judas was not a tragic hero. He was just a sinner trapped in his sin. And as is so often the case there were moments of clarity in his life, points in time when the grip of evil desire faded and he could see in moral terms what he had chosen to do, what he had done, and Matthew tells us: *“When Judas His betrayer saw that Jesus had been condemned, he changed his mind.”* Clarity! *“And he brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’”* What had Judas thought? Did he even think? He knew Jesus was innocent. Did he think innocence would protect Jesus from the evil machination of those to whom Judas sold Him for that silver? Whatever he thought beforehand, when the mists of his self-serving passions cleared Judas was devastated. We are told that he throws down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departs and he hangs himself. Suicide is not the action of a hero. It is the action of a soul unequal to the weight of its own moral insights and the despair that comes when hope is dissolved by the acid of self-pity. This is not to condemn Judas; he is condemned on his own ground. It is only to see him clearly. Judas was not constrained to do what he did by anything other than the free play of his own desires. If there is a lesson for us in his ruin, it is that we should not entrust our lives to our desires, but rather we need to entrust ourselves to the Father whose love for us has conquered despair through the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus for our sin. He died that we might be justified, forgiven and gifted with eternal life and the indwelling of the Spirit.

Perhaps the strangest thing to happen on Good Friday, though not the most significant, was the dream that trouble the sleep of Pilate’s wife. When Pilate was sitting in judgment of a man whom he knew to be innocent of the charges against him, charges he knew to be motivated by envy: Pilate is sitting in judgment on a man he knows to be innocent and he knows that those who are persecuting him are motivated by envy: This is what we are told: *“...his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.’”* Pilate’s wife is a pagan. It is impossible to think that she could even be a God-fearer. Who gave her that dream, and what was its content? It is worth noting that her dream did not lead her to appeal for Jesus’ life, even though she apparently realized that He was innocent or righteous. All she was concerned for was the well-being of her husband. “Hands off” she seems to say, “this man is righteous and you don’t want to get tangled up in his story or caught in his death.

Of course Pilate is already entangled and there is no way out for him. The gospel writers tell us that Pilate made efforts to spare Jesus’ life. But he would only go so far. *“So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd...”* Pilate was trouble by these proceedings. Like Judas he knew that Jesus was innocent. Finally Pilate was moved beyond discomfort to fear. *“Pilate went out again and said to them, ‘See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.’ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the man.’”* We have turned [this phrase] into sort of a glorification. That was not what Pilate was doing at all. He was saying, look, this is just a bunch of “human garbage”, he is bloodied, he is ripped, he is disgraced. You don’t have to have any concern about him.” How do they respond? “Crucify him; crucify him, crucify him.” *“Pilate said to them, take*

*him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.’ The Jews answered him, ‘we have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.’ Then we are told, “When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.” John’s words indicate that what was at work in Pilate was an underlying fear. But what did he fear? At least he feared trouble. He was the governor of Palestine and was responsible for keeping things under control. The Jews were notoriously difficult to keep under control. That Jesus might actually be some sort of minor divinity – remember that the pagans believed that [sort of thing], that he might be a minor divinity, a god or a demi-god of some sort would ratchet up Pilate’s anxiety. Pilate knew, if you could believe the priests at the idol temples that the demon gods were harder to handle if offended than men were. John tells us Pilate made further efforts to save Jesus’ life. What sealed the process, however, was when the Jews challenged Pilate’s maneuvering by point out, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.’ So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement. . .”*

The Scriptures tell us that the fear of God is beginning of wisdom. Pilate did not fear God. He feared men and the gods which men had made for themselves. He feared the Emperor and the wrath of the Emperor if he should be seen as a traitor giving comfort to a rebel and a pretender to the throne. Pilate did not fear God and he put no store by truth. For Pilate life was a constant interplay of powers and principalities and victory went to the one clever enough to put oneself on the winning side. Pilate was a worldly wise, but he was eternally foolish.

Neither Pilate nor Judas wanted Jesus to die. But for both of them neither the principle of justice nor matters of truth were sufficient to hold their desire for personal gain in check. In this respect Judas was actually somewhat better than Pilate for his moral sense did finally rebel against the grievous injustice that was the result of his self-serving. Pilate moved the other way. For Pilate in worldly terms the stakes were higher. Judas was willing to lose the thirty pieces of silver. Pilate was not willing to lose his career and possibly his life. Of course in the end they both lost everything.

Most likely we see ourselves at a far distance from men of such compromised moral character, but we live in a society that is not. We live in a society that like Pilate has lost sight of moral truth and has replaced it with an idolatry of choice. This does not alter the reality that we are moral creatures, for we are made in the image and likeness of God, and God distinguishes between what is good and evil, what is right and wrong. However by replacing the rule of God over all with the rule of each over themselves, we have effected a disaster in ordering our lives with each other. Neither justice nor truth will determine the order of society nor regulate our relations with one another. Instead this will be done by power, for if right does not control the use of might, then might will determine what is right.

It was that fount of moral wisdom, Nike, which popularized the slogan “If it feels right, do it.” Their presumed first application was sports and intended to release people from the constraints and hesitations rooted in the false notions of how the professionals said things should be done. Every man is his own best critic and coach they seemed to say, when it comes to sports. It is not so, of course, but this is a relatively harmless form of self-deceit and seems to have brought the benefit of encouraging many people to do things they hadn’t tried before, and it brought the additional benefit to Nike of selling many people things that they never would have bought if they hadn’t tried.

Expectably what works in one place is likely to bleed over into other aspects of life, especially in a culture bent on deconstructing virtually all of its foundational institutions and controlling values. It was a short journey in thought and time from “If it feels good, do it” to “If it feels right to you, it is.” Every man defines what is right and true and good for themselves alone. This too is a lie, but it is a very convenient lie, and it is convenient for some more than others. This kind of moral reasoning is, by the way, called emotivism. It is based on our personal emotions

alone, what we feel good about and what we don't. Alasdair MacIntyre writes the following in “After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory”:

“...the difference between a human relationship uninformed by morality and one so informed is precisely the difference between one in which each person treats the other primarily as a means to his ends and one in which he treats the other as an [end]. To treat someone as an end is to offer them what I take to be good reasons for acting in one way or another but to leave it to them to evaluate those reasons. It is to be unwilling to influence another except by reasons which the other...judges to be good. It is to appeal to impersonal criteria the validity of which each rational agent must be his or her own judge. By contrast, to treat someone else as a means is to seek to make him or her an instrument of my purposes...the generalizations of sociology and psychology [of persuasion] are what I need to have guide me, not the standards of [normative] morality...the sole reality of [emotive] moral discourse is the attempt of one will to align the attitudes, feelings, preferences and choices of another with its own.”

To help you grasp what MacIntyre just said, let me give you an example: what does a beautiful woman have to do with buying a car? Nothing! But we buy!

We may find MacIntyre a bit difficult to grasp but the point he is making is worth striving for. To strip away all the politeness of academic etiquette, he is saying that when there is no shared reference point for establishing principles of right, wrong and justice in a community, it is unavoidable that differences of opinion and disputes ultimately will be decided by the strong, those able to get others to do their bidding by whatever means, and those means will not be morally sound, for they cannot be, for there is no agreed upon moral standard or set of rules by which they can be evaluated or judged as morally right. The boast of the secular liberal state is supposedly the defense of the rights of the minority against a tyranny of the majority, or as is the case today, a tyranny by the minority which has secured the power of the state for its side. The rights protected were those which preserved the dignity of the individual, whether of the majority or the minority. The origin of these rights was once considered to be sacred, for each individual is made in the image and likeness of God. But if not, if we are not made in His image and likeness, if we are nothing more than evolved material entities with no inherent value, then our neighbor is as expendable as any other obstacle in the way of my pursuits. For Judas Jesus was an opportunity for gain. For Pilate Jesus was expendable. Today increasingly it is the same for all men. The aborted baby and the no longer productive are given a “good death”. Beloved, there is no distance between us and them at all.

For the governor's soldiers, Jesus was an occasion for mockery and cruel sport. We should not forget these soldiers, for we can be sure they were not forgotten by God. Jesus died for these soldiers. His blood potentially covered their sins as much as anyone else. Of course they didn't know and wouldn't have believed if they had been told, unless perhaps one of them was the centurion who later stood at the foot of Jesus' cross and saw Jesus die. At least for a moment he seems to have known, “Truly this was the Son of God!” We wonder what he meant by those words. Surely he did not grasp the divinity of Christ in perfect equality with and as an exact representation of the Father and the Spirit. Surely he did not leap suddenly from the chaos of polytheistic idolatry to faith in the three person-ed God of the Trinity. We don't know what he meant; we don't know what he understood. What we do know is this: that there at the foot of the cross in the very hour of His death a human voice spoke the great and shattering truth: this one on the cross whose blood runs down to the ground and whose body is wracked with pain and yet dies with bitterness or rancor, but with compassion, this One is the Son of God. Therein, beloved, is our hope.

Please pray with me: Father it would be a fool to deny that we have in this time gone into a great age of darkness. And we would be foolish to think that we who live in this age are untouched by the night that has closed around us, for we are. Therefore it is all the more precious to us that You have given to us the eternal and unquenchable life of Your Son and the truth that He speaks through the Spirit into our hearts and minds. Oh Father, may we prize that truth above all others things, may we cling to it, may it fill us and flood us and by Your grace, Father,

may we be light bearers, radiant with Your joy and the triumph of Your grace in a world falling ever deeper into the night. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen