

Passiontide Sermons
By Henry Parry Liddon, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D.
Late Canon and Chancellor of St. Paul's.

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SERMON X.

THE SILENCE OF JESUS.

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St. John xix. 9.

Pilate saith unto Jesus, Whence art Thou? But Jesus gave him no answer.

TO-DAY we enter on the nearer consideration of the Passion of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; and among its various and awful incidents none is more calculated to rivet our earnest attention than the silence which He observed at certain times during His trial. This silence was not by any means unbroken; but it was so deliberate—we may dare to say, so peremptory—that it has clearly a meaning that is all its own. We cannot but recall the contrast which is presented by St. Paul before the Sanhedrim, before Felix, before Agrippa. To St. Paul, a trial in which his liberty or his life is at stake is above all things a great missionary opportunity, which he improves at once, and to the utmost of his power; and we remember how, as he reasons of “righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come,” the tables are strangely turned, and Felix, the representative of earthly justice, trembles before his prisoner. To us, in our short-sightedness, it may have seemed that something else than silence might be looked for from the Divine Master; from His tender charity for the souls of men; from the deep emotion which, as we know from what passed in Gethsemane, moved the depths of His Human Soul. But no! He is silent. His judge asks Him, Whence art Thou? And instead of regarding the question as affording Him an opening for proclaiming the momentous truth, Jesus gave, him no answer.

I.

If we try to place ourselves, by an effort of sympathetic imagination, in the position of one of our fellow-creatures placed on trial for his life, and before judges at whose hands he had little to look for in the way of consideration or mercy, we can understand that the silence of a perfectly innocent man might be natural, for more reasons than one. Our English law does not allow a prisoner to be cross-questioned; but the practice of other countries is different, and the records of the French Revolutionary tribunals during the Terror of 1793-94 supply instances of what I mean. Instances, indeed, might be multiplied to almost any extent: since, both in its habit of inflicting undeserved suffering, and in its way of meeting what has to be endured, human nature remains the same from age to age.

First of all, an innocent prisoner on his trial might be unable to say anything out of sheer bewilderment. For the first time in his life he finds himself in a position unlike any he had ever distinctly pictured to himself before. He knows that he is in danger, although his conscience tells him that he is innocent of the alleged crime. He is

surrounded by officials who are practised hands at manipulating evidence, whereas he himself is only a novice. He sees danger everywhere—sees it in quarters where it does not at all exist; he loses the control of his judgment, of his common-sense, of his faculties generally; his head reels, he only perceives at intervals what is going on. He cannot remember what he would; he cannot keep his feelings from intruding themselves boisterously into matters where clear, cold thought is above all things wanted; and so his efforts to think become irregular and turbid; he cannot think consecutively, or with any approach to clearness and force; he tries to think, but all becomes blurred and confused, and he feels instinctively that should he endeavour to speak, his speech would only express and exhibit this inward confusion. So he is silent—not on principle, or anything like it—but in virtue of the instinct of bewilderment.

Akin to the silence of bewilderment is the silence of terror: and this silence, under the circumstances we are considering, is far from uncommon. Fear is a passion which has immediate and decisive effects upon the bodily frame. Even in the lower animals the sense of imminent danger will not seldom arrest all power of movement. The sacred writer tells us that, in man's case, fear is "a betrayal of the succours which reason offereth." Under an overmastering sense of terror, speech becomes impossible: the thought and feeling which prompt man to speak are directed upon a single object with concentrated intensity; in this dumb horror nothing is possible, save inarticulate expression, if indeed that is possible. Nothing is more common—in natures of a certain nervous organisation and temperament—than this silence of fear.

But when an innocent man keeps his head clear, and is so constituted that a new and alarming situation has no terrors for him, he may yet be silent, from a motive of mistaken prudence. He knows that skilful adversaries will take every possible advantage of his words: some chance expression may escape him which is capable of being twisted into aspects which had never occurred to the speaker; he may say too little, or he may say too much; he may so excuse as to accuse himself, or he may imply guilt, by saying something without saying enough. There is a safety he feels in silence; silence gives no advantage to the prosecutor which he did not possess before; silence, after all, is silence, and there is no more to be said of it. Pilate seems to have thought that this was our Lord's motive, and he tried in his blundering way to show its practical imprudence, and to reason Jesus out of it. "Speakest Thou not unto me? knowest Thou not that I have power to crucify Thee, and have power to release Thee?" It was indeed an astonishing miscalculation; but natural perhaps in a Pagan magistrate, and under the circumstances.

Once more, there is the silence of disdain. The prisoner is before judges who represent brute force, and nothing more; neither right, nor truth, nor virtue. He is conscious of his innocence; he knows that his innocence is, in their eyes, his crime. Between his ideas of truth, of honour, of excellence in all its higher forms, and the world of ideas in which they live and work, there is no common term. He could speak if he chose; he knows not what fear is; he is in complete possession of his faculties; his thought is clear, and he is prepared for the worst; he is convinced that nothing can be gained by silence. He could, if he so willed, pour forth into a torrent of burning words the indignation of an upright character, confronted with official cruelty and with regulated wrong. But to whom, or rather to what, would the expostulation be addressed? Where would be the moral intelligence to do him justice? where the living moral sense that he could hope to rouse? Why should he expend the strength of his righteous passion upon

those whom vice and time between them have rendered too stupid or too wicked to read its meaning? No; he will restrain himself: his is the lofty silence of a judicial disdain.

II.

None of these motives for silence, it is plain, will account for that of our Lord before Pilate.

His was not the silence of bewilderment or of fear. From the moment of His arrest in the garden until the last of the seven words upon the Cross, our Lord, it is plain, has His thoughts and His words entirely at command. If He speaks, it is with the tranquil decision which marks His language at the marriage feast of Cana, or at the raising of Lazarus. Every word, if we may dare thus to speak, tells; and the force of what He says lights up the high and solemn meaning of His silence. As to fear, what room for it was there in One to Whom Caiaphas and Pilate were but passing ministers of evil; and Who, as His eye rested steadily on the invisible world, would assign to what was greatest or worst in this its true meed of insignificance? How much lies in that saying, on the way to Calvary, "Know ye not that I can pray to My Father, and He shall presently send Me more than twelve legions of angels?"

Nor was the silence of our Lord dictated by a false prudence. He knew that all things that were written concerning the Son of Man must be accomplished. He foresaw His Death; He foresaw the stages through which He would pass on His way to the Cross and the Sepulchre; if, for a moment, the flesh was weak in Gethsemane, the spirit was always willing: there was no room for prudence of this kind before Caiaphas or Pilate. Nay, what our Lord did say, would have appeared to a looker-on highly imprudent. When Caiaphas asked Him if He were the Christ, the Son of God, He answered in words which at once issued in His condemnation by the Sanhedrim: "I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coining in the clouds of heaven." When Pilate told Him that he had power to adjudge Him to liberty or to death, He answered, "Thou couldest have no power at all against Me, except it were given thee from above." Silence would have been more prudent than such speech as this, if the object had been to save His life, and we must look elsewhere for the explanation.

Need it be added that, in Jesus Christ, silence could not possibly have expressed disdain? In Him such a feeling towards any human soul was impossible. Between the highest and the best, on the one hand, and Himself on the other, the distance was indeed immeasurable. But He looked out upon all with a boundless pity; had He not come to seek and to save that which was lost? In His Heart, so warmly human in its sympathy, so Divine in its comprehensive embrace, there was no less a place for Caiaphas and Pilate, if they only would take it, than for the Magdalene, or for Peter, or for St. John. No. It is profanation to suspect disdain in Jesus Christ. Scorn, whether it speaks or is silent, is the certificate of shallow-ness: and Jesus is the Eternal Wisdom. Scorn, whether it speaks or is silent, is a note of the supremacy—if only for the moment—of the pride of self: and Jesus, He is the Infinite Charity.

III.

These were not the reasons for the silence of Jesus: but that it had a reason is plain from

its deliberate character. Think over the incidents of the Passion. To the vain and mocking Herod He would say nothing whatever. Of the false witness produced before the Sanhedrim, and before Pilate, He will take no notice—not the slightest. But when Caiaphas asks Him, whether He is the Divine Messiah—Caiaphas, who as High Priest, should have at once recognised and pointed out to the people the true Messiah when He came—Jesus speaks. He repeats that ancient oracle of Daniel, which the Jewish doctors referred to Messiah as the Judge of the world: and Caiaphas knew well, only too well, what He meant. When Annas questions Him about His disciples and His doctrine, He points frankly to the public character of His work: and to Pilate himself He explains both the unworldly character of His kingdom and the prime object of His appearance among men as a witness to the truth. Only when Pilate had jestingly asked, “What is truth?” only when Pilate had prostituted his magisterial sense of justice to prejudices which he did not affect to respect, and had scourged Jesus, and brought Him forth crowned with thorns, and in a robe of purple;—only then to the question, half-anxious, half-insolent, “Whence art Thou?” Jesus returned no answer. He was silent.

What is silence?

Silence in a man, in full possession of his faculties, and in his waking hours, is much more than the absence or failure of speech; it has a positive meaning. It is the deliberate suspension of speech; it is the substitution of that which in human life is the exception for that which is the rule. Surely, brethren, in us men silence is less a foil to speech than speech to silence.

What is speech?

It is the display, in a form which strikes upon one of the senses, of the whole complex activity of the soul: of its thoughts, its feelings, its resolves, its apprehensions.

Speech is the dress which the inner life of the soul takes when it would pass into another soul: and if we were not so familiar with it, we might well be astonished at this wonderful and almost uninterrupted process whereby thought and feeling are being all the world over perpetually embodied in sound, and thus projected from mind to mind, from soul to soul, so as to establish and maintain a correspondence, if not a community, of inward life. As we listen to the most ordinary conversation, we may observe all the powers and faculties of a soul pass forth before us arrayed in the dress of language. Thought and reason appear in the choice and copulation of adjectives and substantives, in the delicate manipulation of particles and adverbs, and in all the varied machinery of the sentence; and will emerges in its imperative moods; and desire in optative moods; and purely animal impulse, it may be, in interjections. Unconsciously, but most truly, does the soul reveal itself to our senses in language; and this self-revelation is an instinct rather than a deliberate effort in the immense majority of human beings. And thus we see the significance of silence. Silence is the arrest of this almost incessant activity; and its import consists in this: that the whole productive force which results in language is felt to be still there and at work, although for the moment advisedly restrained from self-expression. There is nothing in the silence of that which never spoke—the silence of a statue, or the silence of an animal; but we, most of us, know, that not the least of the solemnities of gazing on the face of the dead is the thought that those lips will never again, here in this world, give expression to the inward life of a soul. And a sudden, resolute, emphatic silence on the part of a living man has in it something of this solemnity; it means at least as much as—probably much more than—any possible

continuance of speech. And, plainly, this meaning is more and more emphatic as we ascend in the scale of minds: it means most in those men whose qualities of head and heart give them a preeminent right to speak. What then must it mean, when we pass beyond the frontiers of humanity, and find ourselves with One in Whom the Eternal Word or Reason spoke through human lips—One in Whom, as His Apostle says, dwelt all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge? How shall we dare, as some have dared, to think that we can at all fully explain His silence, still less that we can assign it to a single motive? We can at best understand it very imperfectly; but we may endeavour, without irreverence, to give some account of it, in the light of His own Teaching and His Eternal Person.

I. Our Lord's silence meant first of all a rebuke. Pilate had asked a question, which it was not for him or for such as he to ask and to expect an answer.

Most of us know what it is to have made this kind of mistake, at least once in our lives, if not more than once. We are in company of a friend whose kindness encourages us, so that we feel at our ease; we say just what comes into our head. Conversation flows on, from this topic to that, easily, listlessly, pleasingly—and at last we ask a question, when, lo! there is silence. We have, out of curiosity, or in sheer thoughtlessness and gaiety of heart, uttered words which could not be answered, at least then, and to us. We have touched the nerve of some very tender feeling; we have probed to the quick some old and nearly-forgotten wound; we have put forth the hand, which, after a long interval of years, has first essayed to lift the veil that had long shrouded some secret or some sorrow, it was hoped, until the end.

There are others, it may be, who might have asked that question without causing such sharp pain as we; others nearer, dearer, more loved and trusted, with more tact and gentleness, more recognised right to enter the precincts of deep and tender feeling, but we, alas! must feel that words have passed our lips which have created a new relation between us and the heart to which they were addressed, words which could only be met by silence.

It would, we feel, be a relief to be reproached in words that we could hear. No words, however severe and cutting, could mean all that is meant by that terrible silence; since that silence means that thought has entered upon a region of wondering pain that is beyond language, and about which, therefore, nothing can be said. This is what happens in daily and private life, and it may enable us to enter into one aspect of our Lord's silence before Pilate. In itself, Pilate's question was not necessarily a wrong one; but it was not a question for Pilate, and under the circumstances, to ask. Had the scene been the upper chamber, and St. John the questioner, and the question the same in substance, yet thrown into such a form as love and awe would dictate, it would assuredly have been answered: love always means illumination. Jesus reveals His secrets to the importunity of love. But when Pilate, in the confident temper of a highly-placed officer who was not accustomed to be crossed in his purposes, ventures, in his crass Pagan ignorance, on ground thus sacred, thus supremely awful—stands there face to face with the Infinite and the Eternal, robed and crowned with the sorrows of a world of sin, and utters his frivolous, petulant, "Whence art Thou?" just as if he was talking to a neighbour who lived in the next street—what was possible save the rebuke of silence?

2. For, secondly, our Lord's silence was not merely a rebuke; it was very instructive. It was the sort of silence which, under certain circumstances, tells us much

more than we could learn from speech. Speech will sometimes fail to say what should be said, simply because it cannot be said. We are so familiar with the use and the capacities of God's great gift of speech that we perhaps find it hard to think that speech cannot say anything. Yet the world of thought and the world of fact are alike greater than speech can compass. And as the generations pass, and the languages of men continually enlarge their resources for recording fact and thought and feeling, they fail to keep pace with man's progressive discovery that beyond the utmost reach of language there are regions at whose existence human language can only hint. All that is near to us, all that is a matter of direct experience, whether to the senses or the mind, and much beyond, which belongs to the realm of abstract reason, or of pure imagination, can be compassed and described by human speech. But there are thoughts which just visit the mind now and then, and which language cannot detain and shape; thoughts at which it can only vaguely hint, if indeed it can do as much as that; truths and facts of whose existence we are only so far cognisant that we know them to be beyond the compass of language. When St. Paul was caught up into Paradise he reached a sphere in which he heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. When the Corinthian Christians spoke during their religious assemblies in mystic tongues, they were in reality touching upon the fringe of a district of spiritual truth which could not submit to the trammels and limits of the accustomed speech of man. When we try to pass these limits, language becomes confused and vague, not because there is no real object to be described, but because we have no resources at command for the work of description. Pilate asked our Lord, "Whence art Thou?" The Evangelist had replied by anticipation, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory." And the Christian Church has echoed this reply, "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, being of One Substance with the Father, by Whom all things were made, Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven." But does not even this momentous language hint at the transcendent reality rather than describe it? Does it not employ metaphors drawn from human relations, and words that have had a great place in human philosophies, to put us on the track of a truth which is really beyond the tongue of man fully to set forth? And if this be so with Christian creeds, after all these centuries of thought and worship, how was Pilate's "Whence art Thou?" to be answered in terms which would convey any such a hint of the tremendous reality as might be possibly suggested, at least upon reflection, by the silence of our Lord?

3. Once more, our Lord's silence was the silence of charity. Knowledge is not a blessing where it only adds to the responsibilities of guilt, or where it is certain to be misused. We should all of us agree that there are just now people up and down Europe who are none the better for knowing something of the properties of dynamite; and a wise and kind father would not begin the education of his little boy by showing him how to fire off a loaded pistol. It is no disloyalty to the cause of education, or to the ultimate value of knowledge to all human minds, to say that certain kinds of knowledge—even the most valuable—are not blessings to men in particular states of mind. Before food can do good, we must be sure that it can be digested: the soil must be prepared before the seed can grow. Why is it that the most precious of all books, the Bible, only furnishes to many

thousands of persons in this country materials for ribald profanity? Because it is put into their hands without any accompanying care to see that it can be appreciated; “sown broadcast,” as people say, on all soils alike, and therefore furnishing, to minds that are at once clever and godless, admirable occasions for the indulgence of purely irreligious humour.

This was not our Lord’s method. He warned His disciples against giving that which was holy to the dogs, and against casting pearls before swine. He taught upon a principle of consideration for the mental condition of His hearers, sometimes plainly, and sometimes in parables. He taught men, so says His Evangelist, as they were able to bear it.

Brethren, and especially you who have in any way to instruct others, depend on it that to withhold from men the burden of knowledge which they will certainly abuse, is the true work of charity. Pilate, though he was ruler of the land, was, for all religious purposes, a child, if, indeed, we may say so much as that about him. And just as you would keep a beautiful and delicate work of art out of the way of a child, who does not understand its value, and would certainly pick it to pieces, so would our Lord not commit a truth which is not fully comprehended even by the intelligence of Angels to the half-indolent, half-insolent curiosity of Pilate. “Whence art Thou?” What did Pilate expect to be the reply to that question? “Whence art Thou?” What would Pilate have made of the true reply to that question? Surely it was the same Charity which taught what moral beauty means in the Sermon on the Mount, and which opened the spiritual world to the Apostles in the upper chamber, which, when Pilate asked, “Whence art Thou?” was silent.

Surely, as we contemplate our Lord silent before Pilate, we cannot but feel His incomparable Majesty. He is crowned and robed in derision; crowned with thorns, and robed in purple; but these outward symbols of humiliation and shame do but set forth the more the moral splendours that shine within. Yes, assuredly, Lord Jesus, not only in the moment of Thy bright Transfiguration before the eyes of Thy Apostles, not only in the hour of Thy Resurrection triumph, not now only, when Thou sittest at the Right Hand of the Father, while all that is mightiest and wisest in the realms above bows down before Thee in utter admiration, but also when in Thy Passion Thou standest—deserted, speechless, dumb—before Thy human judge, Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ, Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father.