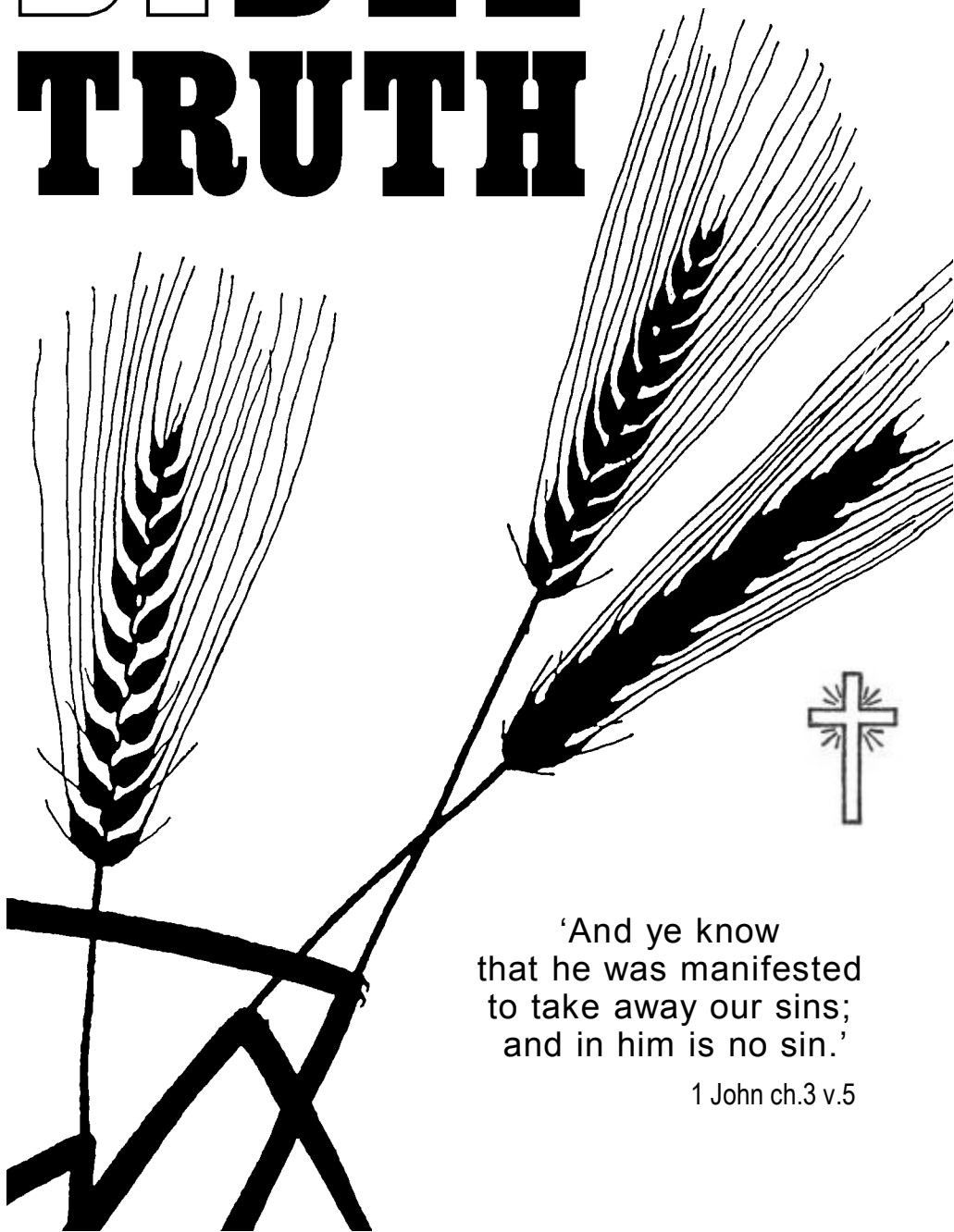


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‘And ye know
that he was manifested
to take away our sins;
and in him is no sin.’

1 John ch.3 v.5

What Happened Before Midnight on Thursday

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The consideration of time played a peculiar and decisive part in determining the events that immediately preceded the death of Christ. If we wish to get at the real truth about this matter we must study with our eyes, as it were, constantly upon the clock. Particularly the dealings the Jewish leaders had with Judas and later with Pontius Pilate.

Our first thought is the curious fact that Caiaphas and his friends should have found it necessary to employ Judas at all. Why should even the trivial amount of the blood-money have been expended in securing his services?

To regard Judas as merely a common informer, ready (for a consideration) to lead the authorities to the secret hiding place of his erstwhile friend and leader, is absurd. Jesus was not in hiding. From the moment that He arrived, late on Friday afternoon at Bethany, no attempt seems to have been made to conceal His movements. He appears to have attended a dinner in His honour at the house of Simon the Leper, either on Saturday or Tuesday evening. On three successive days (Sunday, Monday and Tuesday) He journeyed openly to Jerusalem, returning to Bethany each evening.

It is ridiculous to suppose, when even so early as Sunday morning vast numbers of the populace knew sufficient of His movements to throng the roadside to Jerusalem, that the leaders themselves were ignorant of His whereabouts. The fact obviously is that they knew very well. On any one of the critical four evenings they could have sent swiftly and secretly to Bethany and affect His arrest. What was it for which they were waiting, and which only Judas could supply?

It is customary to meet this question by stressing what is recorded in the Gospels: fear of the people. It does not appear to have been discerned that this can be only half of the answer. It must not be forgotten that the Gospels form material gathered mainly from the

party identified with Christ. Judas died without betraying his secret, and the Jewish leaders would hardly have been likely to betray it. But to suggest that all Judas did was to take the officers of the Sanhedrin to a lonely and secluded spot where they could secretly arrest Jesus is to miss entirely the subtlety of the psychological factors that are here engaged. They could have done it on their own initiative in the early hours of any morning at Bethany when the villagers were asleep. Or at a suitable spot on the road across Olivet on any evening except Wednesday (which was a Day of Rest), or throughout Wednesday in the quiet groves of that tiny and peaceful hamlet.

It cannot be denied that fear of the people carried great weight with the Jewish leaders. The whole situation was unprecedented, and one of extreme sensitiveness and delicacy. A large section of the populace regarded Jesus as the Messiah of prophecy. Everything that these men did was done, as it were, with a furtive glance over the shoulder towards that unfathomable entity, the popular will.

But mere fear of the people does not explain some of the strangest things of the affair. Something that Judas told the priests caused them to precipitate events at the last moment; to go through with the thing at a time which presented the maximum legal and official difficulties. It caused them to keep the strangest appointment between a 'wanted' man and His persecutors of which history gives us any knowledge. It led them to send to Him, an undefended man in a lonely and deserted garden at midnight, an imposing and even ridiculous display of force, supplemented by precautions, the meaning of which no one can mistake. What does all this signify?

Morison says this,

Personally, I am convinced that beneath the ostensible and acknowledged fear of the people, there was a deeper and more potent fear, a fear that explains all their singular hesitations and vacillations, until a welcome message reached their astonished ears — **the fear of Christ Himself.**

Lest this should be a strange and unfamiliar thought, let us look at the facts. It is impossible to dissociate these men from the mental limitations and superstitions of their age. Whether we believe that the 'miracles' of Christ were really performed or merely the beliefs of an unscientific age, the fact remains that the personal ascendancy and repute of Jesus during His own lifetime was immense. The stories of His cures of the blind, the paralytic and the possessed were widespread. They came from all parts of the

country and were apparently implicitly accepted even in high quarters in Jerusalem. The fact that He possessed certain definite powers beyond the normal does not seem to have been doubted by His contemporaries. It is difficult to read the Gospels impartially, particularly the closing chapters, without realising that the cloud of mystery that encircled the person of Jesus reacted most powerfully upon the plans of the leaders. Throughout the four critical days that preceded the day of arrest, when, had He wished, Jesus could have raised the city to an unimaginable pitch of tumult and excitement, they behaved as men under the compulsion of some secret fear. There is none of that swift and decisive grappling with a dangerous situation that we might have expected from men occupying the seat of power. Hesitation and vacillation are written upon their acts. Even after the terrific and scathing denunciation by Jesus on Tuesday afternoon, they left the initiative with Christ. Indeed, it is one of the master facts of this strange narrative that the initiative remained with Christ even to the end.

These men were apprehensive of something they did not care to define. They seem to have been in some doubt whether even a considerable force would be adequate to take Him, and that in the last resort He might even prove unable to be arrested. Nothing can be clearer than that, throughout the week that preceded the arrest, there was some impediment that led to the event being postponed to the eleventh hour, when in the nature of things their difficulties were increased. The first interview with Judas seems to have promised well because we are told the following.

‘And when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. And he sought how he might conveniently betray him.’

Mark ch.14 v.11

If we are to follow the chronology of the Gospels, this happened at the very latest on Tuesday, after the dinner at the house of Simon the Leper. Yet still no overt move was made. It was not until late on Thursday night, when Judas hurried from the Supper room, that their hesitation changed into resolution and a phase of intense and feverish activity set in. It is just here that the element of time becomes so important and illuminating. If the arrest of Jesus had followed within a short time of His arrival in the garden it would be a legitimate assumption that Judas’ part of the pact was limited to informing the authorities where He could be found late on Thursday

evening and to accompanying the arrest party for the purpose of identification. The assumption presupposes that it was a deliberate part of the leaders' plans to effect the arrest on the last evening before the Feast, so as to give the minimum opportunity for a popular reaction. Plausible as this explanation appears at first sight, it will not stand examination. Suppose the understanding that the priests had with Judas was like this.

'We intend to take Him on Thursday night. Remain with Him until you are absolutely sure of His movements, and then come quickly and tell us. We will do the rest.'

It is obvious that a plot of this kind implies that all needful preparations for so important an event would have been made. The officers of the Temple Guard and the Roman soldiers detailed to accompany the expedition would have been warned, and have been in readiness. Within a few minutes of receipt of the message the arrest party would have been mobilised and ready to move off.

Did things take this course? Most assuredly they did not. First there is the delay of something approaching three hours between the departure of Judas from the supper chamber and the arrival of the arrest party in Gethsemane. It is imperative that we should know what Judas was doing all the time, and especially why, when the expedition did at last set out, Judas knew exactly where to find Jesus.

The records give the impression that the message which Judas brought found the Jewish leaders in some way unprepared. Had it been a deliberate part of the Jewish plan to postpone the arrest until the latest moment on Thursday and carry it through regardless of consequences, there would have been signs of preparedness. They might have needed to go as far as Bethany to secure the prisoner, for who could have foreseen the 'wanted' man would wait conveniently in a neighbouring garden? Instead we have a delay running into hours. In any other circumstances the expedition would have failed.

We have the impression that the visit of Judas to the priests that night, while not wholly unexpected, put their problem in a new and urgent light. Time was needed for consultation, for the taking of decisions, for the improvisation of means, and when the expedition to Gethsemane did at last move off, it did so at the earliest possible moment consistent with these hurried preparations. *Morison* says,

'I submit that the narratives, as preserved in the four Gospels, bear that interpretation and no other'.

There are two factors that are unmistakably historical and explain the delay. First, the message that Judas brought from the Supper room contained a new and surprising piece of information that completely resolved the hesitation and doubts of the rulers. The second is that Christ Himself was challenging and indeed facilitating His own arrest. Whatever may have been the actual words employed, the burden of the conversation that Judas had with the priests must have been this. 'He is thinking and talking of death. He is going to the garden at the foot of Olivet and will wait there till I come. Make your arrangements quickly and I will take you to Him.'

There seems to be no escaping this inference because it is buttressed at both ends by the silent but unimpeachable witness of the behaviour of the two principal actors in the drama. We know that Judas took the expedition unerringly to the groves of Gethsemane, despite the darkness and the extreme lateness of the hour. We know that Jesus waited in those very groves, to the exhaustion of his friends, and would apparently have gone on waiting even to the dawn. This was not a kind of pact between Jesus and His betrayer. Jesus was a master of psychology, and his irrevocable determination to deliver Himself to His accusers that night was accomplished by infinitely subtler means. Judas knew that Jesus was going to the Garden of Gethsemane, and he knew also that His spirit was already bending to the Cross. His alert brain was quick to perceive that this was better news than he had ever hoped to carry to his new masters. The impediment was gone. For this night at least Jesus would not resist arrest. The mood of surrender was upon Him. It only remained to send quickly to achieve their purpose.

What, then, would be the effect of this intelligence upon Caiaphas and the little coterie of Sadducees whose interests were so closely involved in the death of Christ? We can define this pretty accurately. First, it would have been fatal to their interests to have made an unsuccessful attempt to arrest Jesus at this juncture. That is, if, after launching their bolt it had failed through causes that could even remotely be attributed to the supernatural; the damage to their prestige would have been irreparable. Secondly, it would have been even more dangerous to have arrested Christ, and have been compelled to hold Him without trial during the seven days prescribed by the Feast. This they simply dared not do. Jerusalem at Feast times, with its huge non-resident population, was notoriously turbulent and prone to high feelings.

To men confronted with these alternatives, the news that Judas brought late on Thursday night both ameliorated their problem and increased its practical difficulties tenfold. The practical question was 'Can we carry this thing through all its inevitable legal stages in time to secure execution before sundown tomorrow? And failure to carry the whole process through, even by a hair's breadth, involved consequences of a very high order. Some considerable part of those three hours must have been occupied in hurried consultations, in swift passing to and fro between the executive sitting at the High Priest's house, and those indispensable leaders of Jewish thought upon whom they must rely for ratification in the Sanhedrin. All this is written plainly between the lines of the narrative. *Morison* believed there was something else. To him it was certain that before the fatal word was given to the arrest party to proceed to Gethsemane, some communication must have taken place between the Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate.

It is against everything we know about the character of Pilate and the nature of the Roman occupation to assume that a serious case like this could have been thrust upon Pilate early on Friday morning without his knowledge and without first ascertaining his readiness to take it. The fact that none of the four Gospel writers refers to a prior consultation is not difficult to understand. The assent of Pilate to the Jewish plans was an administrative detail in which they had little interest. There is a deeply rooted tradition in the early Christian literature (supported, of course, by St John's very detailed account of the Roman trial) that Pilate departed from the usual practice upon this occasion by coming out to the Jews, so as to meet their ceremonial objection to entering the Court of the Stranger on that day. The reason was of course that time did not permit of the necessary purification prior to the Feast. If this be an historical detail it can only mean one thing, that had it not been for the supreme and urgent case of Christ, Pilate would have held no Court upon that day. It would have been absurd, in the ordinary course of events to hold judicial proceedings on a day when, in the nature of the case, the principal officers and witnesses could not be present. The fact that Pilate did sit on that day, and that without apparent demur he proceeded to hear the case in the open space outside the Praetorium, points to an understanding of a very definite kind.

Thus if we try to get into the inner mind of the priests and look at the very complicated problem which they had to solve at short

notice, we shall see that some kind of communication with Pilate was inevitable. They were suddenly offered the opportunity of arresting Jesus under unexpectedly favourable conditions. It was night, and the populace were preoccupied with the preparations for the Feast. Moreover, the prospective Prisoner Himself was strangely willing, and in some inexplicable way seemed to be facilitating their plans. The door that they expected they would have to force, stood open. There still remained one supreme question to which a definite answer must be forthcoming. Could they secure the Roman conviction in time to guarantee crucifixion before the Feast? Would Pilate be willing to hear the case under the peculiar conditions which they were bound to impose? Would he insist on a full trial or could they count on a formal endorsement of a finding previously arrived at by their own Courts? Such questions as these would ordinarily be settled through official channels and as a matter of administrative routine. There must have been some kind of calendar for the trial of Jewish prisoners, whose cases necessitated review by the Procurator, and in the preparation of this calendar Pilate's personal convenience would invariably be consulted.

There was probably only one man in Jerusalem who could seek an audience with Pilate at an hour ordinarily devoted to his private pleasure. That man was Caiaphas, the High Priest. It may seem a small matter whether the titular chief of the Jewish nation visited Pilate at a very late hour on that memorable evening or not. But if things took the course that they did, it will be found that that unrecorded visit has profound and far-reaching significance. I mean the very curious behaviour of Pilate next day during the critical hours that decided the fate of Christ.
