

## O Dearest Jesus

### Luke 23:4, 15, 22

Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, “I find no basis for a charge against this man.”

“Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.”

For the third time he spoke to them: “... What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him.”

During this lenten season we have been taking an in depth look at some familiar lenten hymns. The hymn before us this evening is *O Dearest Jesus* written by Johann Heermann.

Heermann was one of the great German hymnists. He was born October 11, 1585 at Raudten, near Wohlau, in Silesia. He was the fifth and only surviving child of Johannes Heermann, a poor furrier. During a severe illness when he was a child, his mother vowed that if he recovered she would send him away to become a Lutheran minister. Following his attendance at Raudten and Wohlau, he studied at Fraustadt in Poland in 1602. In the Spring of 1603 he enrolled at St. Elizabeth Gymnasium in Breslau, and from 1604 to 1609 he was at the gymnasium in Brieg. (Gymnasium, by the way was a six year course of study including a wide variety of subjects. It was a pre-seminary program in Germany and a model for our own synod’s Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin which trained nearly all Wisconsin Synod pastors from 1865 to 1995.)

In recognition of his extraordinary oratory and poetical achievements at a very young age, he was crowned poet laureate by Rudolph II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1608. He went to Strassburg University in 1609 with two sons of nobleman Baron Wenzel von Rothkirch, but trouble with his eyes forced him to return to Raudten in 1610. He became an assistant pastor in Silesia in 1611 and he served as a Lutheran minister for 28 years. For the last four years of his ministry, throat trouble forced him to give up preaching. He wrote out his sermons and had an assistant pastor preach them.

He spent a happy early life, but suffered the death of his first wife in 1617. There was also the failure of his own health; we already heard about trouble with his eyes and his speaking voice. The town where he was pastor was destroyed by fire in 1616. Pestilence struck in 1631 and 550 people died. He also endured the horrors of the Thirty Years War. His town was plundered four times; several times Heermann lost all his won personal effects. On one occasion he was shot at and almost captured. He was almost sabred twice. And once he had to remain a fugitive in hiding for 17 weeks. He remarried in 1618 and had three children.

His 400 or so hymn texts often speak from a first person perspective with deep tenderness, a firm faith in Christ, and a humble submission to God’s will. Six of his hymns are in our current hymnal including:

Jesus, Grant that Balm and Healing  
O God, My Faithful God  
Feed Your Children God Most Holy  
O Dearest Jesus

The first verse of the hymn asks the question,  
O Dearest Jesus, what law have you broken, that such sharp sentence should on you be spoken?  
Of what great crime have you to make confession, what dark transgression?

Good question. In fact the Scriptures are full of the conundrum faced by the Jewish ruling council, and by Pontius Pilate and King Herod.

When the Sanhedrin put Jesus on trial, they could find no testimony or charge that would stick. Even when they coached witnesses, and trumped up charges, they could not agree. But what's a little legal problem to stand in the way of sinners intent on destroying Jesus? They knew what the verdict and sentence would be before the trial began! They wanted Jesus found guilty and sentenced to death. Recall that the high priest Caiaphas had counseled the Sanhedrin that it would be better that one man die for the people. Yes, Jesus had done nothing to deserve the death penalty, but in the end he was put to death — for us.

The same trouble of having a charge that sticks, arises when the leaders of the people bring Jesus to Pontius Pilate. In our text from Luke 23 it says,

Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." And also ...

"Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death." And again ...

For the third time he spoke to them: "... What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him."

Three times Pilate pronounced Jesus not guilty! What law have you broken that such sharp sentence should on you be spoken?

Jesus offered himself to receive the punishment that we deserved. Johann Heermann captures this sentiment in verse 4. Please look at it with me.

What punishment so strange is suffered yonder!  
The Shepherd dies for sheep that love to wander;  
The Master pays the debt his servants owe him,  
Who would not know him.

The irony of the cross, Jesus' punishment and our salvation is not lost on our hymn writer. Look at verse 5.

The sinless Son of God must die in sadness;  
The sinful child of man may live in gladness;  
We forfeited our lives, yet are acquitted  
God is committed.

Yet that irony of the cross is not just some strange twist in the history of the world – that the innocent Jesus died for guilty sinners. This is God's grace in action. This is God's mercy demonstrated in the actions of our Savior. This is God's plan of salvation playing out before our very eyes. Our response to God's incredible love is found in verses 6 and 7. We live here for Jesus, and forever after praise him in heaven. Praise God for his mercy on us sinners! Thank O Dearest Jesus, that he went in our place to the cross. Amen.