**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-019. IMPOSSIBLE SILENCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."*

*Acts 4:20*

The context tells us that the Jewish Council were surprised, as they well might be, at the boldness of Peter and John, and traced it to their having been with Jesus. But do you remember that they were by no means bold when they were with Jesus, and that the bravery came after what, in ordinary circumstances, would have destroyed any of it in a man? A leader's execution is not a usual recipe for heartening his followers, but it had that effect in this case, and the Peter who was frightened out of all his heroics by a sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued servant-maid, a few weeks after bearded the Council and rejoiced that he was counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name. It was not Christ's death that did that, and it was not His life that did that. You cannot understand, to use a long word, the psychological' transformation of these cowardly deniers who fled and forsook Him, unless you bring in three things: Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost. Then it is explicable.

However the boldness came; these two men before the Council were making an epoch at that moment, and their grand words are the Magna Charta of the right of every sincere conviction to free speech. They are the direct parent of hundreds of similar sayings that flash out down the world's history. Two things Peter and John adduced as making silence impossible--a definite divine command, and an inward impulse. Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

But I wish to use these words now in a somewhat wider application. They may suggest that there are great facts which make silence and non-aggressiveness an impossibility for an individual or a Church, and that by the very law of its being, a Church must be a missionary Church, and a Christian cannot be a dumb Christian, unless he is a dead Christian. And so I turn to look at these words as suggesting to us two or three of the grounds on which Christian effort, in some form or another, is inseparable from Christian experience.

And, first, I wish you to notice that there is--

**I. An inward necessity which makes silence impossible.**

We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard, is a principle that applies far more widely than to the work of a Christian Church, or to any activity that is put in force to spread the name of Jesus Christ. For there is a universal impulse which brings it about that whatever, in the nature of profound conviction, of illuminating truth, especially as affecting moral and spiritual matters, is granted to any man, knocks at the inner side of the door of his lips, and demands an exit and free air and utterance. As surely as the tender green spikelet of the springing corn pushes its way through the hard clods, or as the bud in the fig-tree's polished stem swells and opens, so surely whatever a man, in his deepest heart, knows to be true, calls upon him to let it out and manifest itself in his words and in his life. We believe, and therefore speak, is a universal sequence. There were four leprous men long ago that, in their despair, made their way into the camp of the beleaguering enemy, found it empty; and after they feasted themselves--and small blame to them--then flashed upon them the thought, We do not well, this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; if we tarry till the morning light, some evil will befall us. Something like that is the uniform accompaniment of all profound conviction. And if so, especially imperative and urgent will this necessity be, wherever there is true Christian life. For whether we consider the greatness of the gift that is imparted to us, in the very act of our receiving that Lord, or whether we consider the soreness of the need of a world that is without Him, surely there can be nothing that so reinforces the natural necessity and impulse to impart what we possess of truth or beauty or goodness as the greatness of the unspeakable gift, and the wretchedness of a world that wants it. Brethren, there are many things that come in the way-- and perhaps never more than in our own generation--of Christian men and women making direct and specific efforts, by lip as well as by life, to speak about Jesus Christ to other people. There is the standing hindrance of love of ease and selfish absorption in our own concerns. There are the conventional hindrances of our canons of social intercourse which make it bad form to speak to men about anything beneath the surface, and God forbid that I should urge any man to a brusque, and indiscriminate, and unwise forcing of his faith upon other people. But I believe, that deep down below all these reasons, there are two main reasons why the practice of the clear utterance of their faith on the part of Christian people is so rare. The one is a deficient conception of what the Gospel is, and the other is a feeble grasp of it for ourselves. If you do not think that you have very much to say, you will not be very anxious to say it; and if your notion of Christianity, and of Christ's relation to the world, is that of the superficial professing Christian, then of course you will be smitten with no earnestness of desire to impart the truth to others. Types of Christianity which enfeeble or obscure the central thought of Christ's work for the salvation of a world that needs a Saviour, and is perishing without Him, never were, never are, never will be, missionary or aggressive. There is no driving force in them. They have little to say, and naturally they are in no hurry to say it. But there is a deeper reason than that. I said a minute ago that a dumb Christian was an impossibility unless he were a dead Christian. And there is the reason why so many of us feel so little, so very little, of that knocking at the door of our hearts, and saying, Let me out! which we should feel if we deeply believed, and felt, as well as intellectually accepted, the gospel of our salvation.

The cause of a silent Church is a defective conception of the Gospel entrusted to it, or a feeble grasp of the same. And as our silence or indifference is the symptom, so by reaction it is in its turn the cause of a greater enfeeblement of our faith, and of a weaker grasp of the Gospel. Of course I know that it is perfectly possible for a man to talk away his convictions, and I am afraid that that temptation which besets all men of my profession, is not always resisted by us as it ought to be. But, on the other hand, sure am I that no better way can be devised of deepening my own hold of the truths of Christianity than an honest, right attempt to make another share my morsel with me. Convictions bottled, like other things bottled up, are apt to evaporate and to spoil. They say that sometimes wine-growers, when they go down into their cellars, find in a puncheon no wine, but a huge fungus. That is what befalls the Christianity of people that never let air in, and never speak their faith out. We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard; and if we do not speak, the vision fades and the sound becomes faint.

Now there is another side to this same inward necessity of which I have been speaking, on which I must just touch. I have referred to the impulse which flows from the possession of the Gospel. There is an impulse which flows from that which is but another way of putting the same thing, the union with Jesus Christ, which is the result of our faith in the Gospel. If I am a Christian I am, in a very profound and real sense, one with Jesus Christ, and have His Spirit for the life of my spirit. And in the measure in which I am thus one with Him, I shall look at things as He looks at them, and do such things as He did. If the mind of Jesus Christ is in us Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, who counted not equality with God a thing to be desired, but made Himself of no reputation, and was found in fashion as a man, then we too shall feel that our work in the world is not done, and our obligations to Him are not discharged, unless to the very last particle of our power we spread His name. Brethren, if there were no commandment at all from Christ's lips laying upon His followers the specific duty of making His gospel known, still this inward impulse of which I am speaking would have created all the forms of Christian aggressiveness which we see round about us, because, if we have Christ and His Gospel in our hearts, we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

And now turn to another aspect of this matter. There is--

**II. A command which makes silence criminal.**

I do not need to do more than remind you of the fact that the very last words which our Lord has left us according to the two versions of them which are given in the Gospel of Matthew, and the beginning of this Book of the Acts, coincide in this. You are to be My witnesses to the ends of the earth. Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Did you ever think what an extraordinary thing it is that that confident anticipation of a worldwide dominion, and of being Himself adapted to all mankind, in every climate and in every age, and at every stage of culture, should have been the conviction which the departing Christ sought to stamp upon the minds of those eleven poor men? What audacity! What tremendous confidence! What a task to which to set them! What an unexampled belief in Himself and His work! And it is all coming true; for the world is finding out, more and more, that Jesus Christ is its Saviour and its King.

This commandment which is laid upon us Christian men submerges all distinctions of race, and speech, and nationality, and culture. There are high walls parting men off from one another. This great message and commission, like some rising tide, rolls over them all, and obliterates them, and flows boundless, having drowned the differences, from horizon to horizon, east and west and south and north.

Now let me press the thought that this commandment makes indifference and silence criminal. We hear people talk, people whose Christianity it is not for me to question, though I may question two things about it, its clearness and its depth--we hear them talk as if to help or not to help, in the various forms of Christian activity, missionary or otherwise, was a matter left to their own inclination. No! it is not. Let us distinctly understand that to help or not to help is not the choice open to any man who would obey Jesus Christ. Let us distinctly understand--and God grant that we may all feel it more-- that we dare not stand aside, be negligent, do nothing, leave other people to give and to toil, and say, Oh! my sympathies do not go in that direction. Jesus Christ told you that they were to go in that direction, and if they do not, so much the worse for the sympathies for one thing, and so much the worse for you, the rebel, the disobedient in heart. I do not want to bring down this great gift and token of love which Jesus Christ has given to His servants, in entrusting them with the spread of the Gospel, to the low level of a mere commandment, but I do sometimes think that the tone of feeling, ay! and of speech, and still more the manner of action, among professing Christian people, in regard to the whole subject of the missionary work of God's Church, shows that they need to be reminded; as the Duke of Wellington said, There are your marching orders! and the soldier who does not obey his marching orders is a mutineer. There is a definite commandment which makes indifference criminal.

There is another thing I should like to say, viz. that this definite commandment overrides everything else. We hear a great deal from unsympathetic critics, which is but a reproduction of an old grumble that did not come from a very creditable source. To what purpose is this waste? Why do you not spend your money upon technical schools, soup-kitchens, housing of the poor, and the like? Well, our answer is, He told us. We hear, too, especially just in these days, a great deal about the necessity for increased caution in pursuing missionary operations in heathen lands. And some people that do not know anything about the subject have ventured to say, for instance, that the missionaries are responsible for Chinese antagonism to Europeans, and for similar phenomena. Well, we are ready to be as wise and prudent as you like. We do not ask any consuls to help us. Our brethren are men who have hazarded their lives; and I never heard of a Baptist missionary running under the skirts of an ambassador, or praying the government to come and protect him. We do not ask for cathedrals to be built, or territory to be ceded, as compensation for the loss of precious lives. But if these advisers of caution mean no more than they say, Caution! we agree. But if they mean, what some of them mean, that we are to be silent for fear of consequences, then, whether it be prime ministers, or magistrates, or mobs that say it, our answer is, Whether it be right to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye! We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

So, lastly, there is--

**III. The bond of brotherhood which makes silence unnatural.**

I have spoken of an inward impulse. That thought turns our attention to our own hearts. I have spoken of a definite command; that turns our eyes to the Throne. I speak now of a bond of brotherhood. That sends our thoughts out over the whole world. There is such a bond. Jesus Christ by His Incarnation has taken the nature of every man upon Himself, and has brought all men into one. Jesus Christ by the grace of God, has tasted death for every man, and has brought all men into unity. And so the much-abused and vulgarised conception of fraternity, and even the very word humanity, are the creation of Christianity, and flow from these two facts--the Cradle of Bethlehem and the Cross of Calvary, besides that prior one that God hath made of one blood all nations of men. If that be so, then what flows from that unity, from that brotherhood thus sacredly founded upon the facts of the life and death of Jesus Christ, the world's Redeemer? This to begin with, that Christian men are bound to look out over humanity with Christ's eyes, and not--as is largely the case to-day-- to regard other nations as enemies and rivals, and the lower races as existing to be exploited for our wealth, to be coerced for our glory, to be conquered for our Empire. We have to think of them as Jesus Christ thought. I cannot but remember days in England when the humanitarian sentiment in regard to the inferior races was far more vigorous, and far more operative in national life than it is to-day. I can go back in boyhood's memory to the emancipation of the West Indian slaves, and that was but the type of the general tendency of thought amongst the better minds of England in those days. Would that it were so now!

But further, brethren, we as Christian people have laid upon us this responsibility by that very bond of brotherhood, that we should carry whithersoever our influence may go the great message of the Elder Brother who makes us all one. We give much to the heathen populations within our Empire or the reach of our trade. We give them English laws, English science, English literature, English outlooks on life, the English tongue, English vices--opium, profligacy, and the like. Are these all the gifts that we are bound to carry to heathen lands? Dynamos and encyclopaedias, gin and rifles, shirtings and castings? Have we not to carry Christ? And all the more because we are so closely knit with so many of them. I wonder how many of you get the greater part of your living out of India and China?

Surely, if there is a place in England where the missionary appeal should be responded to, it is Manchester. As a nest hast thou gathered the riches of the nations. What have you given? Make up the balance-sheet, brethren. We are debtors, let us put down the items:--

Debtors by a common brotherhood.

Debtors by the possession of Christ for ourselves.

Debtors by benefits received.

Debtors by injuries inflicted.

The debit side of the account is heavy. Let us try to discharge some portion of the debt, in the fashion in which the Apostle from whom I have been quoting thought that he would best discharge it when, after declaring himself debtor to many kinds of men, he added, So as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the Gospel. May we all say, more truly than we have ever said before, We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard!