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

**ACTS-028. THE DEATH OF THE MASTER AND THE DEATH OF THE SERVANT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"59. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And, when he had said this, he fell asleep."*

*Acts 7:59-60*

This is the only narrative in the New Testament of a Christian martyrdom or death. As a rule, Scripture is supremely indifferent to what becomes of the people with whom it is for a time concerned. As long as the man is the organ of the divine Spirit he is somewhat; as soon as that ceases to speak through him he drops into insignificance. So this same Acts of the Apostles--if I may so say-- kills off James the brother of John in a parenthesis; and his is the only other martyrdom that it concerns itself even so much as to mention.

Why, then, this exceptional detail about the martyrdom of Stephen? For two reasons: because it is the first of a series, and the Acts of the Apostles always dilates upon the first of each set of things which it describes, and condenses about the others. But more especially, I think, because if we come to look at the story, it is not so much an account of Stephen's death as of Christ's power in Stephen's death. And the theme of this book is not the acts of the Apostles, but the acts of the risen Lord, in and for His Church.

There is no doubt but that this narrative is modelled upon the story of our Lord's Crucifixion, and the two incidents, in their similarities and in their differences, throw a flood of light upon one another.

I shall therefore look at our subject now with constant reference to that other greater death upon which it is based. It is to be observed that the two sayings on the lips of the proto-martyr Stephen are recorded for us in their original form on the lips of Christ, in Luke's Gospel, which makes a still further link of connection between the two narratives.

So, then, my purpose now is merely to take this incident as it lies before us, to trace in it the analogies and the differences between the death of the Master and the death of the servant, and to draw from it some thoughts as to what it is possible for a Christian's death to become, when Christ's presence is felt in it.

**I. Consider, in general terms, this death as the last act of imitation to Christ.**

The resemblance between our Lord's last moments and Stephen's has been thought to have been the work of the narrator, and, consequently, to cast some suspicion upon the veracity of the narrative. I accept the correspondence, I believe it was intentional, but I shift the intention from the writer to the actor, and I ask why it should not have been that the dying martyr should consciously, and of set purpose, have made his death conformable to his Master's death? Why should not the dying martyr have sought to put himself (as the legend tells one of the other Apostles in outward form sought to do) in Christ's attitude, and to die as He died?

Remember, that in all probability Stephen died on Calvary. It was the ordinary place of execution, and, as many of you may know, recent investigations have led many to conclude that a little rounded knoll outside the city wall--not a green hill, but still outside a city wall, and which still bears a lingering tradition of connection with Him--was probably the site of that stupendous event. It was the place of stoning, or of public execution, and there in all probability, on the very ground where Christ's Cross was fixed, His first martyr saw the heavens opened and Christ standing on the right hand of God. If these were the associations of the place, what more natural, and even if they were not, what more natural, than that the martyr's death should be shaped after his Lord's?

Is it not one of the great blessings, in some sense the greatest of the blessings, which we owe to the Gospel, that in that awful solitude where no other example is of any use to us, His pattern may still gleam before us? Is it not something to feel that as life reaches its highest, most poignant and exquisite delight and beauty in the measure in which it is made an imitation of Jesus, so for each of us death may lose its most poignant and exquisite sting and sorrow, and become something almost sweet, if it be shaped after the pattern and by the power of His? We travel over a lonely waste at last. All clasped hands are unclasped; and we set out on the solitary, though it be the common, road into the great darkness. But, blessed be His Name! the Breaker is gone up before us, and across the waste there are footprints that we

Seeing, may take heart again.

The very climax and apex of the Christian imitation of Christ may be that we shall bear the image of His death, and be like Him then.

Is it not a strange thing that generations of martyrs have gone to the stake with their hearts calm and their spirits made constant by the remembrance of that Calvary where Jesus died with more of trembling reluctance, shrinking, and apparent bewildered unmanning than many of the weakest of His followers? Is it not a strange thing that the death which has thus been the source of composure, and strength, and heroism to thousands, and has lost none of its power of being so to-day, was the death of a Man who shrank from the bitter cup, and that cried in that mysterious darkness, My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?

Dear brethren, unless with one explanation of the reason for His shrinking and agony, Christ's death is less heroic than that of some other martyrs, who yet drew all their courage from Him.

How come there to be in Him, at one moment, calmness unmoved, and heroic self-oblivion, and at the next, agony, and all but despair? I know only one explanation, The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. And when He died, shrinking and trembling, and feeling bewildered and forsaken, it was your sins and mine that weighed Him down. The servant whose death was conformed to his Master's had none of these experiences because he was only a martyr.

The Lord had them, because He was the Sacrifice for the whole world.

**II. We have here, next, a Christian's death as being the voluntary entrusting of the spirit to Christ.**

They stoned Stephen. Now, our ordinary English idea of the manner of the Jewish punishment of stoning, is a very inadequate and mistaken one. It did not consist merely in a miscellaneous rabble throwing stones at the criminal, but there was a solemn and appointed method of execution which is preserved for us in detail in the Rabbinical books. And from it we gather that the modus operandi was this. The blasphemer was taken to a certain precipitous rock, the height of which was prescribed as being equal to that of two men. The witnesses by whose testimony he had been condemned had to cast him over, and if he survived the fall it was their task to roll upon him a great stone, of which the weight is prescribed in the Talmud as being as much as two men could lift. If he lived after that, then others took part in the punishment.

Now, at some point in that ghastly tragedy, probably, we may suppose as they were hurling him over the rock, the martyr lifts his voice in this prayer of our text.

As they were stoning him he called upon--not God, as our Authorised Version has supplied the wanting word, but, as is obvious from the context and from the remembrance of the vision, and from the language of the following supplication, called upon Jesus, saying, Lord Jesus! receive my spirit.

I do not dwell at any length upon the fact that here we have a distinct instance of prayer to Jesus Christ, a distinct recognition, in the early days of His Church, of the highest conceptions of His person and nature, so as that a dying man turns to Him, and commits his soul into His hands. Passing this by, I ask you to think of the resemblance, and the difference, between this intrusting of the spirit by Stephen to his Lord, and the committing of His spirit to the Father by His dying Son. Christ on the Cross speaks to God; Stephen, on Calvary, speaks, as I suppose, to Jesus Christ. Christ, on the Cross, says, I commit. Stephen says, Receive, or rather, Take. The one phrase carries in it something of the notion that our Lord died not because He must, but because He would; that He was active in His death; that He chose to summon death to do its work upon Him; that He yielded up His spirit, as one of the Evangelists has it, pregnantly and significantly. But Stephen says, Take! as knowing that it must be his Lord's power that should draw his spirit out of the coil of horror around him. So the one dying word has strangely compacted in it authority and submission; and the other dying word is the word of a simple waiting servant. The Christ says, I commit. I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again. Stephen says, Take my spirit, as longing to be away from the weariness and the sorrow and the pain and all the hell of hatred that was seething and boiling round about him, but yet knowing that he had to wait the Master's will.

So from the language I gather large truths, truths which unquestionably were not present to the mind of the dying man, but are all the more conspicuous because they were unconsciously expressed by him, as to the resemblance and the difference between the death of the martyr, done to death by cruel hands, and the death of the atoning Sacrifice who gave Himself up to die for our sins.

Here we have, in this dying cry, the recognition of Christ as the Lord of life and death. Here we have the voluntary and submissive surrender of the spirit to Him. So, in a very real sense, the martyr's death becomes a sacrifice, and he too dies not merely because he must, but he accepts the necessity, and finds blessedness in it. We need not be passive in death; we need not, when it comes to our turn to die, cling desperately to the last vanishing skirts of life. We may yield up our being, and pour it out as a libation; as the Apostle has it, If I be offered as a drink-offering upon the sacrifice of your faith, I joy and rejoice. Oh! brethren, to die like Christ, to die yielding oneself to Him!

And then in these words there is further contained the thought coming gleaming out like a flash of light into some murky landscape--of passing into perennial union with Him. Take my spirit, says the dying man; that is all I want. I see Thee standing at the right hand. For what hast Thou started to Thy feet, from the eternal repose of Thy session at the right hand of God the Father Almighty? To help and succour me. And dost Thou succour me when Thou dost let these cruel hands cast me from the rock and bruise me with heavy stones? Yes, Thou dost. For the highest form of Thy help is to take my spirit, and to let me be with Thee.

Christ delivers His servant from death when He leads the servant into and through death. Brothers, can you look forward thus, and trust yourselves, living or dying, to that Master who is near us amidst the coil of human troubles and sorrows, and sweetly draws our spirits, as a mother her child to her bosom, into His own arms when He sends us death? Is that what it will be to you?

**III. Then, still further, there are other words here which remind us of the final triumph of an all-forbearing charity.**

Stephen had been cast from the rock, had been struck with the heavy stone. Bruised and wounded by it, he strangely survives, strangely somehow or other struggles to his knees even though desperately wounded, and, gathering all his powers together at the impulse of an undying love, prays his last words and cries, Lord Jesus! Lay not this sin to their charge!

It is an echo, as I have been saying, of other words, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. An echo, and yet an independent tone! The one cries Father! the other invokes the Lord. The one says, They know not what they do; the other never thinks of reading men's motives, of apportioning their criminality, of discovering the secrets of their hearts. It was fitting that the Christ, before whom all these blind instruments of a mighty design stood patent and naked to their deepest depths, should say, They know not what they do. It would have been unfitting that the servant, who knew no more of his fellows' heart than could be guessed from their actions, should have offered such a plea in his prayer for their forgiveness.

In the very humiliation of the Cross, Christ speaks as knowing the hidden depths of men's souls, and therefore fitted to be their Judge, and now His servant's prayer is addressed to Him as actually being so.

Somehow or other, within a very few years of the time when our Lord dies, the Church has come to the distinctest recognition of His Divinity to whom the martyr prays; to the distinctest recognition of Him as the Lord of life and death whom the martyr asks to take his spirit, and to the clearest perception of the fact that He is the Judge of the whole earth by whose acquittal men shall be acquitted, and by whose condemnation they shall be condemned.

Stephen knew that Christ was the Judge. He knew that in two minutes he would be standing at Christ's judgment bar. His prayer was not, Lay not my sins to my charge, but Lay not this sin to their charge. Why did he not ask forgiveness for himself? Why was he not thinking about the judgment that he was going to meet so soon? He had done all that long ago. He had no fear about that judgment for himself, and so when the last hour struck, he was at leisure of heart and mind to pray for his persecutors, and to think of his Judge without a tremor. Are you? If you were as near the edge as Stephen was, would it be wise for you to be interceding for other people's forgiveness? The answer to that question is the answer to this other one,--have you sought your pardon already, and got it at the hands of Jesus Christ?

**IV. One word is all that I need say about the last point of analogy and contrast here--the serene passage into rest: When he had said this he fell asleep.**

The New Testament scarcely ever speaks of a Christian's death as death but as sleep, and with other similar phrases. But that expression, familiar and all but universal as it is in the Epistles, in reference to the death of believers, is never in a single instance employed in reference to the death of Jesus Christ. He did die that you and I may live. His death was death indeed--He endured not merely the physical fact, but that which is its sting, the consciousness of sin. And He died that the sting might be blunted, and all its poison exhausted upon Him. So the ugly thing is sleeked and smoothed; and the foul form changes into the sweet semblance of a sleep-bringing angel. Death is gone. The physical fact remains, but all the misery of it, the essential bitterness and the poison of it is all sucked out of it, and it is turned into he fell asleep, as a tired child on its mother's lap, as a weary man after long toil.

Thou thy worldly task hast done,

Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.

Death is but sleep now, because Christ has died, and that sleep is restful, conscious, perfect life.

Look at these two pictures, the agony of the one, the calm triumph of the other, and see that the martyr's falling asleep was possible because the Christ had died before. And do you commit the keeping of your souls to Him now, by true faith; and then, living you may have Him with you, and, dying, a vision of His presence bending down to succour and to save, and when you are dead, a life of rest conjoined with intensest activity. To sleep in Jesus is to awake in His likeness, and to be satisfied.