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

**ACTS-093. FAITH IN CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Faith that is in Me."*

*Acts 26:18*

It is commonly said, and so far as the fact is concerned, said truly, that what are called the distinguishing doctrines of Christianity are rather found in the Epistles than in the Gospels. If we wish the clearest statements of the nature and person of Christ, we turn to Paul's Epistle to the Colossians. If we wish the fullest dissertation upon Christ's work as a sacrifice, we go to the Epistle to the Hebrews. If we seek to prove that men are justified by faith, and not by works, it is to the Epistles to Romans and Galatians that we betake ourselves,--to the writings of the servant rather than the words of the Master. Now this fuller development of Christian doctrine contained in the teaching of the Apostles cannot be denied, and need not be wondered at. The reasons for it I am not going to enter upon at present; they are not far to seek. Christ came not to speak the Gospel, but to be the Gospel. But then, this truth of a fuller development is often over-strained, as if Christ spake nothing concerning priesthood, sacrifices, faith. He did so speak when on earth. It is often misused by being made the foundation of an inference unfavourable to the authority of the Apostolic teaching, when we are told, as we sometimes are, that not Paul but Jesus speaks the words which we are to receive.

Here we have Christ Himself speaking from the heavens to Paul at the very beginning of the Apostle's course, and if any one asks us where did Paul get the doctrines which he preached, the answer is, Here, on the road to Damascus, when blind, bleeding, stunned, with all his self-confidence driven out of him--with all that he had been crushed into shivers--he saw his Lord, and heard Him speak. These words spoken then are the germ of all Paul's Epistles, the keynote to which all his writings are but the melody that follows, the mighty voice of which all his teaching is but the prolonged echo. Delivering thee, says Christ to him, from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God; that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith that is in Me. Now, I ask you, what of Paul's Gospel is not here? Man's ruin, man's depravity and state of darkness, the power of Satan, the sole redemptive work of Christ, justification by belief in that, sanctification coming with justification, and glory and rest and heaven at last--there they all are in the very first words that sounded upon the quickened ear of the blinded man when he turned from darkness to light.

It would be foolish, of course, to try to exhaust such a passage as this in a sermon. But notice, what a complete summary of Christian truth there lies in that one last clause of the verse, Inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me. Translate that into distinct propositions, and they are these: Faith refers to Christ; that is the first thing. Holiness depends on faith; that is the next: sanctified by faith. Heaven depends on holiness: that is the last: inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me. So there we have the whole gospel!

To the one part of this comprehensive summary which is contained in my text I desire to turn now, in hope of gathering from it some truths as to that familiar word faith which may be of use to us all. The expression is so often on our lips that it has come to be almost meaningless in many minds. These keywords of Scripture meet the same fate as do coins that have been long in circulation. They pass through so many fingers that the inscriptions get worn off them. We can all talk about faith and forgiveness and justifying and sanctifying, but how few of us have definite notions as to what these words that come so easily from our lips mean! There is a vast deal of cloudy haze in the minds of average church and chapel goers as to what this wonder-working faith may really be. Perhaps we may then be able to see large and needful truths gleaming in these weighty syllables which Christ Jesus spoke from heaven to Paul, faith that is in Me.

**I. In the first place, then, the object of faith is Christ.**

Faith that is in Me is that which is directed towards Christ as its object. Christianity is not merely a system of truths about God, nor a code of morality deducible from these. In its character of a revelation, it is the revelation of God in the person of His Son. Christianity in the soul is not the belief of these truths about God, still less the acceptance and practice of these pure ethics, but the affiance and the confidence of the whole spirit fixed upon the redeeming, revealing Christ,

True, the object of our faith is Christ as made known to us in the facts of His recorded life and the teaching of His Apostles. True, our only means of knowing Him as of any other person whom we have never seen, are the descriptions of Him, His character and work, which are given. True, the empty name Christ has to be filled with the doctrinal and biographical statements of Scripture before the Person on whom faith is to fix can be apprehended or beheld. True, it is Christ as He is made known to us in the word of God, the Incarnate Son, the perfect Man, the atoning Sacrifice, the risen Lord, the ascended Intercessor in whom we have to trust. The characteristics and attributes of Christ are known to us only by biographical statements and by doctrinal propositions. These must be understood in some measure and accepted, ere there can be faith in Him. Apart from them, the image of Christ must stand a pale, colourless phantom before the mind, and the faith which is directed towards such a nebula will be an unintelligent emotion, as nebulous and impotent as the vagueness towards which it turns.

Thus far, then, the attempt which is sometimes made to establish a Christianity without doctrines on the plea that the object of faith is not a proposition, but a person, must be regarded as nugatory; for how can the person be an object of thought at all, but through the despised propositions?

But while on the one hand it is true that Christ as revealed in these doctrinal statements of Scripture, the divine human Saviour, is the Object of faith, on the other hand it is to be remembered that it is He, and not the statements about Him, who is the Object.

Look at His own words. He does not merely say to us, Believe this, that, and the other thing about Me; put your credence in this and the other doctrine; accept this and the other promise; hope for this and the other future thing. All these come with but are not the central act. He says, Believe: believe in Me! "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life": He that cometh to Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth in Me shall never thirst. Do we rightly appreciate that? I think that if people firmly grasped this truth-- that Christ is the Gospel, and that the Object of faith is not simply the truths that are recorded here in the word, but He with regard to whom these truths are recorded--it would clear away rolling wreaths of fog and mist from their perceptions. The whole feeling and attitude of a man's mind is different, according as he is trusting a person, or according as he is believing something about a person. And this, therefore, is the first broad truth that lies here. Faith has reference not merely to a doctrine, not to a system; but deeper than all these, to a living Lord--faith that is in Me.

I cannot help observing, before I go on--though it may be somewhat of a digression--what a strong inference with regard to the divinity of Christ is deducible from this first thought that He is the Object to whom faith has reference. If you look into the Old Testament, you will find constantly, Trust ye in the Lord for ever; Put thy trust in Jehovah! There, too, though under the form of the Law, there, too, faith was the seed and germ of all religion. There, too, though under the hard husk of apparently external obedience and ceremonial sacrifices, the just lived by faith. Its object was the Jehovah of that ancient covenant. Religion has always been the same in every dispensation. At every time, that which made a man a devout man has been identically the same thing. It has always been true that it has been faith which has bound man to God, and given man hope. But when we come to the New Testament, the centre is shifted, as it would seem. What has become of the grand old words, Trust ye in the Lord Jehovah? Look! Christ stands there, and says, Believe upon Me! With calm, simple, profound dignity, He lays His hand upon all the ancient and consecrated words, upon all the ancient and hallowed emotions that used to set towards the unseen God between the cherubim, throned above judgment and resting upon mercy; and He says, They are Mine--give them to Me! That ancient trust, I claim the right to have it. That old obedience, it belongs to Me. I am He to whom in all time the loving hearts of them that loved God, have set. I am the Angel of the Covenant, in whom whoever trusteth shall never be confounded. And I ask you just to take that one simple fact, that Christ thus steps, in the New Testament--in so far as the direction of the religious emotions of faith and love are concerned--that Christ steps into the place filled by the Jehovah of the Old; and ask yourselves honestly what theory of Christ's nature and person and work explains that fact, and saves Him from the charge of folly and blasphemy? He that believeth upon Me shall never hunger. Ah, my brother! He was no mere man who said that. He that spake from out of the cloud to the Apostle on the road to Damascus, and said, Sanctified by faith that is in Me, was no mere man. Christ was our brother and a man, but He was the Son of God, the divine Redeemer. The Object of faith is Christ; and as Object of faith He must needs be divine.

**II. And now, secondly, closely connected with and springing from this thought as to the true object of faith, arises the consideration as to the nature and the essence of the act of faith itself.**

Whom we are to trust in we have seen: what it is to have faith may be very briefly stated. If the Object of faith were certain truths, the assent of the understanding would be enough. If the Object of faith were unseen things, the confident persuasion of them would be sufficient. If the Object of faith were promises of future good, the hope rising to certainty of the possession of these would be sufficient. But if the Object be more than truths, more than unseen realities, more than promises; if the Object be a living Person,--then there follows inevitably this, that faith is not merely the assent of the understanding, that faith is not merely the persuasion of the reality of unseen things, that faith is not merely the confident expectation of future good; but that faith is the personal relation of him who has it to the living Person its Object, --the relation which is expressed not more clearly, perhaps a little more forcibly to us, by substituting another word, and saying, Faith is trust.

And I think that there again, by laying hold of that simple principle, Because Christ is the Object of Faith, therefore Faith must be trust, we get bright and beautiful light upon the grandest truths of the Gospel of God. If we will only take that as our explanation, we have not indeed defined faith by substituting the other word for it, but we have made it a little more clear to our apprehensions, by using a non-theological word with which our daily acts teach us to connect an intelligible meaning. If we will only take that as our explanation, how simple, how grand, how familiar too it sounds,--to trust Him! It is the very same kind of feeling, though different in degree, and glorified by the majesty and glory of its Object, as that which we all know how to put forth in our relations with one another. We trust each other. That is faith. We have confidence in the love that has been around us, breathing benedictions and bringing blessings ever since we were little children. When the child looks up into the mother's face, the symbol to it of all protection, or into the father's eye, the symbol to it of all authority,--that emotion by which the little one hangs upon the loving hand and trusts the loving heart that towers above it in order to bend over it and scatter good, is the same as the one which, glorified and made divine, rises strong and immortal in its power, when fixed and fastened on Christ, and saves the soul. The Gospel rests upon a mystery, but the practical part of it is no mystery. When we come and preach to you, Trust in Christ and thou shalt be saved, we are not asking you to put into exercise some mysterious power. We are only asking you to give to Him that which you give to others, to transfer the old emotions, the blessed emotions, the exercise of which makes gladness in life here below, to transfer them to Him, and to rest safe in the Lord. Faith is trust. The living Person as its Object rises before us there, in His majesty, in His power, in His gentleness, and He says, I shall be contented if thou wilt give to Me these emotions which thou dost fix now, to thy death and loss, on the creatures of a day. Faith is mighty, divine, the gift of God; but Oh! it is the exercise of a familiar habit, only fixed upon a divine and eternal Person.

And if this be the very heart and kernel of the Christian doctrine of faith--that it is simple personal trust in Jesus Christ; it is worthy of notice, how all the subsidiary meanings and uses of the word flow out of that, whilst it cannot be explained by any of them. People are in the habit of setting up antitheses betwixt faith and reason, betwixt faith and sight, betwixt faith and possession. They say, We do not know, we must believe; they say, We do not see, we must have faith; they say, We do not possess, we must trust. Now faith--the trust in Christ--the simple personal relation of confidence in Him--that lies beneath all these other meanings of the word. For instance, faith is, in one sense, the opposite and antithesis of sight; because Christ, unseen, having gone into the unseen world, the confidence which is directed towards Him must needs pass out beyond the region of sense, and fix upon the immortal verities that are veiled by excess of light at God's right hand. Faith is the opposite of sight; inasmuch as Christ, having given us assurance of an unseen and everlasting world, we, trusting in Him, believe what He says to us, and are persuaded and know that there are things yonder which we have never seen with the eye nor handled with the hand. Similarly, faith is the completion of reason; because, trusting Christ, we believe what He says, and He has spoken to us truths which we in ourselves are unable to discover, but which, when revealed, we accept on the faith of His truthfulness, and because we rely upon Him. Similarly, faith is contrasted with present possession, because Christ has promised us future blessings and future glories; and having confidence in the Person, we believe what He says, and know that we shall possess them. But the root from which spring the power of faith as the opposite of sight, the power of faith as the telescope of reason, the power of faith as the confidence of things not possessed, is the deeper thing--faith in the Person, which leads us to believe Him whether He promises, reveals, or commands, and to take His words as verity because He is the Truth.

And then, again, if this, the personal trust in Christ as our living Redeemer--if this be faith, then there come also, closely connected with it, certain other emotions or feelings in the heart. For instance, if I am trusting to Christ, there is inseparably linked with it self-distrust. There are two sides to the emotion; where there is reliance upon another, there must needs be non-reliance upon self. Take an illustration. There is the tree: the trunk goes upward from the little seed, rises into the light, gets the sunshine upon it, and has leaves and fruit. That is the upward tendency of faith-- trust in Christ. There is the root, down deep, buried, dark, unseen. Both are springing, but springing in apposite directions, from the one seed. That is, as it were, the negative side, the downward tendency--self-distrust. The two things go together--the positive reliance upon another, the negative distrust of myself. There must be deep consciousness not only of my own impotence, but of my own sinfulness. The heart must be emptied that the seed of faith may grow; but the entrance in of faith is itself the means for the emptying of the heart. The two things co-exist; we can divide them in thought. We can wrangle and squabble, as divided sects hare done, about which comes first, the fact being, that though you can part them in thought, you cannot part them in experience, inasmuch as they are but the obverse and the reverse, the two sides of the same coin. Faith and repentance--faith and self-distrust--they are done in one and the same indissoluble act.

And again, faith, as thus conceived of, will obviously have for its certain and immediate consequence, love. Nay, the two emotions will be inseparable and practically co-existent. In thought we can separate them. Logically, faith comes first, and love next, but in life they will spring up together. The question of their order of existence is an often-trod battle-ground of theology, all strewed with the relics of former fights. But in the real history of the growth of religious emotions in the soul, the interval which separates them is impalpable, and in every act of trust, love is present, and fundamental to every emotion of love to Christ is trust in Christ.

But without further reference to such matters, here is the broad principle of our text. Trust in Christ, not mere assent to a principle, personal dependence upon Him revealed as the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world, an act of the will as well as of the understanding, and essentially an act of the will and not of the understanding--that is the thing by which a soul is saved. And much of the mist and confusion about saving faith, and non-saving faith, might be lifted and dispersed if we once fully apprehended and firmly held by the divine simplicity of the truth, that faith is trust in Jesus Christ.

**III. Once more: from this general definition there follows, in the third place, an explanation of the power of faith.**

We are justified, says the Bible, by faith. If a man believes, he is saved. Why so? Not, as some people sometimes seem to fancy, as if in faith itself there was any merit. There is a very strange and subtle resurrection of the whole doctrine of works in reference to this matter; and we often hear belief in the Gospel of Christ spoken about as if it, the work of the man believing, was, in a certain way and to some extent, that which God rewarded by giving him salvation. What is that but the whole doctrine of works come up again in a new form? What difference is there between what a man does with his hands and what a man feels in his heart? If the one merit salvation, or if the other merit salvation, equally we are shut up to this,--Men get heaven by what they do; and it does not matter a bit what they do it with, whether it be body or soul. When we say we are saved by faith, we mean accurately, through faith. It is God that saves. It is Christ's life, Christ's blood, Christ's sacrifice, Christ's intercession, that saves. Faith is simply the channel through which there flows over into my emptiness the divine fulness; or, to use the good old illustration, it is the hand which is held up to receive the benefit which Christ lays in it. A living trust in Jesus has power unto salvation, only because it is the means by which the power of God unto salvation may come into my heart. On one side is the great ocean of Christ's love, Christ's abundance, Christ's merits, Christ's righteousness; or, rather, there is the great ocean of Christ Himself, which includes them all; and on the other is the empty vessel of my soul--and the little narrow pipe that has nothing to do but to bring across the refreshing water, is the act of faith in Him. There is no merit in the dead lead, no virtue in the mere emotion. It is not faith that saves us; it is Christ that saves us, and saves us through faith.

And now, lastly, these principles likewise help us to understand wherein consists the guilt and criminality of unbelief. People are sometimes disposed to fancy that God has arbitrarily selected this one thing, believing in Jesus Christ, as the means of salvation, and do not distinctly see why and how non-belief is so desperate and criminal a thing. I think that the principles that I have been trying feebly to work out now, help us to see how faith is not arbitrarily selected as the instrument and means of our salvation. There is no other way of effecting it. God could not save us in any other way than that, salvation being provided, the condition of receiving it should be trust in His Son.

And next they show where the guilt of unbelief lies. Faith is not first and principally an act of the understanding; it is not the mere assent to certain truths. I believe, for my part, that men are responsible even for their intellectual processes, and for the beliefs at which they arrive by the working of these; and I think it is a very shallow philosophy that stands up and says--(it is almost exploded now, and perhaps not needful even to mention it)--that men are no more responsible for their belief than they are for the colour of their hair. Why, if faith were no more than an intellectual process, it would still be true that they are responsible for it; but the faith that saves a man, and unbelief that ruins a man, are not processes of the understanding alone. It is the will, the heart, the whole moral being, that is concerned. Why does any one not trust Jesus Christ? For one reason only: because he will not. Why has any one not faith in the Lamb of God? Because his whole nature is turning away from that divine and loving Face, and is setting itself in rebellion against it. Why does any one refuse to believe? Because he has confidence in himself; because he has not a sense of his sins; because he has not love in his heart to his Lord and Saviour. Men are responsible for unbelief. Unbelief is criminal, because it is a moral act--an act of the whole nature. Belief or unbelief is the test of a man's whole spiritual condition, just because it is the whole being, affections, will, conscience and all, as well as the understanding, which are concerned in it. And therefore Christ, who says, Sanctified by faith that is in Me, says likewise, He that believeth not, shall be condemned.

And now, brethren, take this one conviction into your hearts, that what makes a man a Christian--what saves my soul and yours--what brings the love of Christ into any life, and makes the sacrifice of Christ a power to pardon and purify,--that that is not merely believing this Book, not merely understanding the doctrines that are there, but a far more profound act than that. It is the casting of myself upon Himself, the bending of my willing heart to His loving Spirit; the close contact, heart to heart, soul to soul, will to will, of my emptiness with His fulness, of my sinfulness with His righteousness, of my death with His life: that I may live by Him, be sanctified by Him, be saved by Him, with an everlasting salvation. Faith is trust: Christ is the Object of faith. Faith is the condition of salvation; and unbelief is your fault, your loss--the crime which ruins men's souls!