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

**MARK-041**. **CHRIST'S LAMENT OVER OUR FAITHLESSNESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He answereth him and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?"*

*Mark 9:19*

There is a very evident, and, I think, intentional contrast between the two scenes, of the Transfiguration, and of this healing of the maniac boy. And in nothing is the contrast more marked than in the demeanour of these enfeebled and unbelieving Apostles, as contrasted with the rapture of devotion of the other three, and with the lowly submission and faith of Moses and Elias. Perhaps, too, the difference between the calm serenity of the mountain, and the hell-tortured misery of the plain--between the converse with the sainted perfected dead, and the converse with their unworthy successors--made Christ feel more sharply and poignantly than He ordinarily did His disciplesslowness of apprehension and want of faith. At any rate, it does strike one as remarkable that the only occasion on which there came from His lips anything that sounded like impatience and a momentary flash of indignation was, when in sharpest contrast with This is my beloved Son: hear Him, He had to come down from the mountain to meet the devil-possessed boy, the useless agony of the father, the sneering faces of the scribes, and the impotence of the disciples. Looking on all this, He turns to His followers--for it is to the Apostles that the text is spoken, and not to the crowd outside--with this most remarkable exclamation: O faithless generation! how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?

Now, I said that these words at first sight looked almost like a momentary flash of indignation, as if for once a spot had come on His pallid cheek--a spot of anger--but I do not think that we shall find it so if we look a little more closely.

The first thing that seems to be in the words is not anger, indeed, but a very distinct and very pathetic expression of Christ's infinite pain, because of man's faithlessness. The element of personal sorrow is most obvious here. It is not only that He is sad for their sakes that they are so unreceptive, and He can do so little for them--I shall have something to say about that presently--but that He feels for Himself, just as we do in our poor humble measure, the chilling effect of an atmosphere where there is no sympathy. All that ever the teachers and guides and leaders of the world have in this respect had to bear--all the misery of opening out their hearts in the frosty air of unbelief and rejection--Christ endured. All that men have ever felt of how hard it is to keep on working when not a soul understands them, when not a single creature believes in them, when there is no one that will accept their message, none that will give them credit for pure motives--Jesus Christ had to feel, and that in an altogether singular degree. There never was such a lonely soul on this earth as His, just because there never was one so pure and loving. The little hills rejoice together? as the Psalm says, on every side, but the great Alpine peak is alone there, away up amongst the cold and the snows. Thus lived the solitary Christ, the uncomprehended Christ, the unaccepted Christ. Let us see in this exclamation of His how humanly, and yet how divinely, He felt the loneliness to which His love and purity condemned Him.

The plain felt soul-chilling after the blessed communion of the mountain. There was such a difference between Moses and Elias and the voice that said, This is My beloved Son: hear Him, and the disbelief and slowness of spiritual apprehension of the people down below there, that no wonder that for once the pain that He generally kept absolutely down and silent, broke the bounds even of His restraint, and shaped for itself this pathetic utterance: How long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?

Dear friends, here is a little window through which we may see a great matterif we will only think of how all that solitude, and all that sorrow of uncomprehended aims, was borne lovingly and patiently, right away on to the very end, for every one of us. I know that there are many of the aspects of Christ's life in which Christ's griefs tell more on the popular apprehension; but I do not know that there is one in which the title of The Man of Sorrowsis to all deeper thinking more pathetically vindicated than in this--the solitude of the uncomprehended and the unaccepted Christ and His pain at His disciplesfaithlessness.

And then do not let us forget that in this short sharp cry of anguish--for it is that--there may be detected by the listening ear not only the tone of personal hurt, but the tone of disappointed and thwarted love. Because of their unbelief He knew that they could not receive what He desired to give them. We find Him more than once in His life, hemmed in, hindered, baulked of His purpose, thwarted, as I may say, in His design, simply because there was no one with a heart open to receive the rich treasure that He was ready to pour out. He had to keep it locked up in His own spirit, else it would have been wasted and spilled upon the ground. He could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief; and here He is standing in the midst of the men that knew Him best, that understood Him most, that were nearest to Him in sympathy; but even they were not ready for all this wealth of affection, all this infinitude of blessing, with which His heart is charged. They offered no place to put it. They shut up the narrow cranny through which it might have come, and so He has to turn from them, bearing it away unbestowed, like some man who goes out in the morning with his seed-basket full, and finds the whole field where he would fain have sown covered already with springing weeds or encumbered with hard rock, and has to bring back the germs of possible life to bless and fertilise some other soil. He that goeth forth weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with joy; but He that comes back weeping, bearing the precious seed that He found no field to sow in, knows a deeper sadness, which has in it no prophecy of joy. It is wonderfully pathetic and beautiful, I think, to see how Jesus Christ knew the pains of wounded love that cannot get expressed because there is not heart to receive it.

Here I would remark, too, before I go to another point, that these two elements--that of personal sorrow and that of disappointed love and baulked purposes--continue still, and are represented as in some measure felt by Him now. It was to disciples that He said, O faithless generation!He did not mean to charge them with the entire absence of all confidence, but He did mean to declare that their poor, feeble faith, such as it was, was not worth naming in comparison with the abounding mass of their unbelief. There was one spark of light in them, and there was also a great heap of green wood that had not caught the flame and only smoked instead of blazing. And so He said to them, O faithless generation!

Ay, and if He came down here amongst us now, and went through the professing Christians in this land, to how many of us--regard being had to the feebleness of our confidence and the strength of our unbelief--He would have to say the same thing, O faithless generation!

The version of that clause in Matthew and Luke adds a significant word,--faithless and perverse generation. The addition carries a grave lesson, as teaching us that the two characteristics are inseparably united; that the want of faith is morally a crime and sin; that unbelief is at once the most tragic manifestation of man's perverse will, and also in its turn the source of still more obstinate and wide-spreading evil. Blindness to His light and rejection of His love, He treats as the very head and crown of sin. Like intertwining snakes, the loathly heads are separate; but the slimy convolutions are twisted indistinguishably together, and all unbelief has in it the nature of perversity, as all perversity has in it the nature of unbelief. He will convince the world of sin, because they believe not on Me.

May we venture to say, as we have already hinted, that all this pain is in some mysterious way still inflicted on His loving heart? Can it be that every time we are guilty of unbelieving, unsympathetic rejection of His love, we send a pang of real pain and sorrow into the heart of Christ? It is a strange, solemn thought. There are many difficulties which start up, if we at all accept it. But still it does appear as if we could scarcely believe in His perpetual manhood, or think of His love as being in any real sense a human love, without believing that He sorrows when we sin; and that we can grieve, and wound, and cause to recoil upon itself, as it were, and close up that loving and gracious Spirit that delights in being met with answering love. If we may venture to take our love as in any measure analogous to His--and unless we do, His love is to us a word without meaning--we may believe that it is so. Do not we know that the purer our love, and the more it has purified us, the more sensitive it becomes, even while the less suspicious it becomes? Is not the purest, most unselfish, highest love, that by which the least failure in response is felt most painfully? Though there be no anger, and no change in the love, still there is a pang where there is an inadequate perception, or an unworthy reception, of it. And Scripture seems to countenance the belief that Divine Love, too, may know something, in some mysterious fashion, like that feeling, when it warns us, Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. So we may venture to say, Grieve not the Christ of God, who redeems us; and remember that we grieve Him most when we will not let Him pour His love upon us, but turn a sullen, unresponsive unbelief towards His pleading grace, as some glacier shuts out the sunshine from the mountain-side with its thick-ribbed ice.

Another thought, which seems to me to be expressed in this wonderful exclamation of our Lord's, is--that this faithlessness bound Christ to earth, and kept Him here. As there is not anger, but only pain, so there is also, I think, not exactly impatience, but a desire to depart, coupled with the feeling that He cannot leave them till they have grown stronger in faith. And that feeling is increased by the experience of their utter helplessness and shameful discomfiture during His brief absence They had shown that they were not fit to be trusted alone. He had been away for a day up in the mountain there, and though they did not build an altar to any golden calf, like their ancestors, when their leader was absent, still when He comes back He finds things all gone wrong because of the few hours of His absence. What would they do if He were to go away from them altogether? They would never be able to stand it at all. It is impossible that He should leave them thus--raw, immature. The plant has not yet grown sufficiently strong to take away the prop round which it climbed. How long must I be with you?says the loving Teacher, who is prepared ungrudgingly to give His slow scholars as much time as they need to learn their lesson. He is not impatient, but He desires to finish the task; and yet He is ready to let the scholarsdulness determine the duration of His stay. Surely that is wondrous and heart-touching love, that Christ should let their slowness measure the time during which He should linger here, and refrain from the glory which He desired. We do not know all the reasons which determined the length of our Lord's life upon earth, but this was one of them,--that He could not go away until He had left these men strong enough to stand by themselves, and to lay the foundations of the Church. Therefore He yielded to the plea of their very faithlessness and backwardness, and with this wonderful word of condescension and appeal bade them say for how many more days He must abide in the plain, and turn His back on the glories that had gleamed for a moment on the mountain of transfiguration.

In this connection, too, is it not striking to notice how long His short life and ministry appeared to our Lord Himself? There is to me something very pathetic in that question He addressed to one of His Apostles near the end of His pilgrimage: Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me?It was not so very long--three years, perhaps, at the outside--and much less, if we take the shortest computation; and yet to Him it had been long. The days had seemed to go tardily. He longed that the firewhich He came to fling on earth were already kindled, and the moments seemed to drop so slowly from the urn of time. But neither the holy longing to consummate His work by the mystery of His passion, to which more than one of His words bear witness, nor the not less holy longing to be glorified with the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, which we may reverently venture to suppose in Him, could be satisfied till his slow scholars were wiser, and His feeble followers stronger.

And then again, here we get a glimpse into the depth of Christ's patient forbearance. We might read these other words of our text, How long shall I suffer you?with such an intonation as to make them almost a threat that the limits of forbearance would soon be reached, and that lie was not going to suffer themmuch longer. Some commentators speak of them as expressing holy indignation, and I quite believe that there is such a thing, and that on other occasions it was plainly spoken in Christ's words. But I fail to catch the tone of it here. To me this plaintive question has the very opposite of indignation in its ring. It sounds rather like a pledge that as long as they need forbearance they will get it; but, at the same time, a question of how longthat is to be. It implies the inexhaustible riches and resources of His patient mercy. And Oh, dear brethren! that endless forbearance is the only refuge and ground of hope we have. His perfect charity is not soon angry; beareth all things, and never faileth. To it we have all to make the appeal--

Though I have most unthankful been

Of all that e'er Thy grace received;

Ten thousand times Thy goodness seen,

Ten thousand times Thy goodness grieved;

Yet, Lord, the chief of sinners spare.

And, thank God! we do not make our appeal in vain.

There is rebuke in His question, but how tender a rebuke it is! He rebukes without anger. He names the fault plainly. He shows distinctly His sorrow, and does not hide the strain on His forbearance. That is His way of cure for His servantsfaithlessness. It was His way on earth; it is His way in heaven. To us, too, comes the loving rebuke of this question, How long shall I suffer you?

Thank God that our answer may be cast into the words of His own promise: I say not unto thee, until seven times; but until seventy times seven. Bear with me till Thou hast perfected me; and then bear me to Thyself, that I may be with Thee for ever, and grieve Thy love no more. So may it be, for with Him is plenteous redemption, and His forbearing mercy endureth for ever.