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

**MARK-061**. **THE CREDULITY OF UNBELIEF by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Many shall come in My name, saying, I am Christ, and shall deceive many."*

*Mark 13:6*

*"When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?"*

*Luke 18:8*

It was the same generation that is represented in these two texts as void of faith in the Son of Man, and as credulously giving heed to impostors. Unbelief and superstition are closely allied. Religion is so vital a necessity, that if the true form of it be cast aside, some false form will be eagerly seized in order to fill the aching void. Men cannot permanently live without some sort of a faith in the Unseen, but they can determine whether it shall be a worthy recognition of a worthy conception of that Unseen, or a debasing superstition. An epoch of materialism in philosophic thought has always been followed by violent reaction, in which quacks and fanatics have reaped rich harvests. If the dark is not peopled with one loved Face, our busy imagination will fill it with a crowd of horrible ones.

Just as a sailor, looking out into the night over a solitary, islandless sea, sees shapes; intolerant of the islandless expanse, makes land out of fogbanks; and, sick of silence, hears airy tonguesin the moanings of the wind and the slow roll of the waves, so men shudderingly look into the dark unknown, and if they see not their Father there, will either shut their eyes or strain them in gazing it into shape. The sight of Him is religion, the closed eye is infidelity, the strained gaze is superstition. The second and the third are each so unsatisfying that they perpetually pass over into one another and destroy one another, as when I shut my eyes, I see slowly shaping itself a coloured image of my eye, which soon flickers and fluctuates into black nothingness again, and then rises once more, once more to fade. Men, if they believe not in God, then do service to them which by nature are no gods.

But let us come to more immediately Christian thoughts. Christ does what men so urgently require to be done, that if they do not believe in Him they will be forced to shape out for themselves some fancied ways of doing it. The emotions which men cherish towards Him so irrepressibly need an object to rest on, that if not He, then some far less worthy one, will be chosen to receive them.

It is just to the illustration of these thoughts that I seek to turn now, and in such alternatives as these--

**I. Reception of Christ as the Revealer is the only escape from unmanly submission to unworthy pretenders.**

That function is one which the instincts of men teach them that they need.

Christ comes to satisfy the need as the visible true embodiment of the Father's love, of the Father's wisdom.

If He be rejected--what then? Why, not that the men who reject will contentedly continue in darkness--that is never possible; but that some manner or other of satisfying the clamant need will be had recourse to, and then that to it will be transferred the submission and credence that should have been His. If we have Him for our Teacher and Guide, then all other teachers and guides will take their right places. We shall not angrily repel their power, nor talk loudly about the right of private judgment, and our independence of all men's thoughts. We are not so independent. We shall thankfully accept all help from all men wiser, better, more manly than ourselves, whether they give us uttered words of wisdom and beauty, having grace poured into their lips, or whether they give us lives ennobled by strenuous effort, or whether they give us greater treasure than all these--the sight once more of a loving heart. All is good, all is helpful, all we shall receive; but in proportion to the felt obligations we are laid under to them will be the felt authority of that saying, Call no man your master on earth, for One is your Master, even Christ. That command forbids our slavishly accepting any human domination over our faith, but it no less emphatically forbids our contemptuously rejecting any human helper of our joy, for it closes with and all ye are brethren--bound then to mutual observance, mutual helpfulness, mutual respect for each other's individuality, mutual avoidance of needless division. To have Him for his Guide makes the human guide gentle and tender among his disciples as a nurse among her children, for he remembers the gentleness of Christ, and he dare not be other than an imitator of Him. A Christian teacher's spirit will always be, not for that we have dominion over your faith, but we are helpers of your joy; his most earnest word, I beseech you, therefore, brethren; his constant desire, He must increase. I must decrease. And to have Christ for our Guide makes the taught lovingly submissive to all who by largeness of gifts and graces are set by Him above them, and yet lovingly recalcitrant at any attempt to compel adhesion or force dogmas. The one freedom from undue dependence on men and men's opinions lies in this submission to Jesus. Then we can say, when need is, I have a Master. To Him I submit; if you seek to be master, I demur: of them who seemed to be somewhat, whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me.

But the greatest danger is not that our guides shall insist on our submission, but that we shall insist on giving it. It is for all of us such a burden to have the management of our own fate, the forming of our own opinions, the fearful responsibility of our own destiny, that we are all only too ready to say to some man or other, from love or from laziness, Where thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

Few things are more strange and tragic than the eagerness with which people who are a great deal too enlightened to render allegiance to Jesus Christ will install some teacher of their own choosing as their authoritative master, will swallow his dicta, swear by him, and glory in being called by his name. What they think it derogatory to their mental independence to give to the Teacher of Nazareth, they freely give to their chosen oracle. It is not in the last timesonly that men who will not endure sound teaching heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts, and have the earswhich are fast closed to the Truthwide open to fables.

On the small scale we see this melancholy perversity of conduct exemplified in every little coterie and school of unbelievers.

On the great scale Mohammedanism and Buddhism, with their millions of adherents, write the same tragic truth large in the history of the world.

**II. Faith in the reconciling Christ is the only sure deliverance from debasing reliance on false means of reconciliation.**

In a very profound sense ignorance and sin are the same fact regarded under two different aspects. And in the depths of their natures men have the longing for some Power who shall put away sin, as they have the longing for one that will dispel ignorance. The consciousness of alienation from God lies in the human heart, dormant indeed for the most part, but like a coiled, hibernating snake, ready to wake and strike its poison into the veins. Christ by His great work, and specially by His sacrificial death, meets that universal need.

But closely as His work fits men's needs, it sharply opposes some of their wishes, and of their interpretations of their needs. The Jew demands a sign, the Greek craves a reasoned system of wisdom, and both concur in finding the Cross an offence.

But the rejection of Jesus as the Reconciler does not quiet the cravings, which make themselves heard at some time or other in most consciences, for deliverance from the dominion and from the guilt of sin. And men are driven to adopt other expedients to fill up the void which their turning away from Jesus has left. Sometimes they fall back on a vague reliance on a vague assertion that God is merciful; sometimes they reason themselves into a belief--or, at any rate, an assertion--that the conception of sin is an error, and that men are not guilty. Sometimes they manage to silence the inward voice that accuses and condemns, by dint of not listening to it or drowning it by other noises.

But these expedients fail them some time or other, and then, if they have not cast the burden of their sin and their sins on the great Reconciler, they either have to weary themselves with painful and vain efforts to be their own redeemers, or they fall under the domination of a priest.

Hence the hideous penances of heathenism; and hence, too, the power of sacramentarian and sacerdotal perversions of evangelical truth.

**III. Faith in Christ as the Regenerator is the only deliverance from baseless hopes for the world.**

The world is today full of moaning voices crying, Art thou He that should come, or do we look for another?and it is full of confident voices proclaiming other means of its regeneration than letting Christ make all things new.

The conviction that society needs to be reconstituted on other principles is spread everywhere, and is often associated with intense disbelief in Christ the Regenerator.

Has not the past proved that all schemes for the regeneration of society which do not grapple with the fact of sin, and which do not provide a means of infusing into human nature a new impulse and direction, will end in failure, and are only too likely to end in blood? These two requirements are met by Jesus, and by Him only, and whoever rejects Him and His gift of pardon and cleansing, and His inbreathing of a new life into the individual, will fail in his effort, however earnest and noble in many aspects, to redeem society and bring about a fair new world.

It is pitiable to see the waste of high aspiration and eager effort in so many quarters today. But that waste is sure to attend every scheme which does not start from the recognition of Christ's work as the basis of the world's transformation, and does not crown Him as the King, because He is the Saviour, of mankind.