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

**MATTHEW-089**. **THE KING'S HIGHWAY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"22.* *And straightway Jesus constrained His disciples to get into a ship, and to go before Him unto the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. 23. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. 24. But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. 25. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. 26. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. 27. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. 28. And Peter answered Him and said, Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water. 29. And He said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. 30. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. 31. And immediately Jesus stretched forth His hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt. 32. And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. 33. Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped Him, saying, Of a truth Thou art the Son of God. 34. And when they were gone over, they came into the land of Gennesaret. 35. And when the men of that place had knowledge of Him, they sent out into all that country round about, and brought unto Him all that were diseased; 36. And besought Him that they might only touch the hem of His garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole."*

*Matthew 14:22-36*

The haste and urgency with which the disciples were sent away, against their will, after the miracle of feeding the five thousand, is explained in John's account. The crowd had been excited to a dangerous enthusiasm by a miracle so level to their tastes. A prophet who could feed them was something like a prophet. So they determine to make him a king. Our Lord, fearing the outburst, resolves to withdraw into the lonely hills, that the fickle blaze may die down. If the disciples had remained with Him, He could not have so easily stolen away, and they might have caught the popular fervour. To divide would distract the crowd, and make it easier for Him to disperse them, while many of them, as really happened, would be likely to set off by land for Capernaum, when they saw the boat had gone. The main teaching of this miracle, over and above its demonstration of the Messianic power of our Lord, is symbolical. All the miracles are parables, and this eminently so. Thus regarding it, we have--

**I. The struggling toilers and the absent Christ.**

They had a short row of some five or six miles in prospect, when they started in the early evening. An hour or so might have done it, but, for some unknown reason, they lingered. Perhaps instead of pulling across, they may have kept inshore, by the head of the lake, expecting Jesus to join them at some point. Thus, night finds them but a short way on their voyage. The paschal moon would be shining down on them, and perhaps in their eager talk about the miracle they had just seen, they did not make much speed. A sudden breeze sprang up, as is common at nightfall on mountain lakes; and soon a gale, against which they could make no headway, was blowing in their teeth. This lasted for eight or nine hours. Wet and weary, they tugged at the oars through the livelong night, the seas breaking over them, and the wind howling down the glens.

They had been caught in a similar storm once before, but then He had been on board, and it was daylight. Now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them, How they would look back at the dim outline of the hills, where they knew He was, and wonder why He had sent them out into the tempest alone! Mark tells us that He saw them distressed, hours before He came to them, and that makes His desertion the stranger. It is but His method of lovingly training them to do without His personal presence, and a symbol of what is to be the life of His people till the end. He is on the mountain in prayer, and He sees the labouring boat and the distressed rowers. The contrast is the same as is given in the last verses of Mark's Gospel, where the serene composure of the Lord, sitting at the right hand of God, is sharply set over against the wandering, toiling lives of His servants, in their evangelistic mission. The commander-in-chief sits apart on the hill, directing the fight, and sending regiment after regiment to their deaths. Does that mean indifference? So it might seem but for the words which follow, the Lord working with them. He shares in all the toil; and the lifting up of His holy hands sways the current of the fight, and inclines the balance. His love appoints effort and persistent struggle as the law of our lives. Nor are we to mourn or wonder; for the purpose of the appointment, so far as we are concerned, is to make character, and to give us the wrestling thews that throw the world. Difficulties make men of us. Summer sailors, yachting in smooth water, have neither the joy of conflict nor the vigour which it gives. Better the darkness, when we cannot see our way, and the wind in our faces, if the good of things is to be estimated by their power to strengthen us with strength in our soul!

**II. We have the approaching Christ.**

Not till the last watch of the night does He come, when they have long struggled, and the boat is out in the very middle of the lake, and the storm is fiercest. We may learn from this the delays of His love. Because He loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus, He stayed still, in strange inaction, for two days, after their message. Because He loved Peter and the praying band, He let him lie in prison till the last hour of the last watch of the last night before his intended execution, and then delivered him with a leisureliness (making him put on article after article of dress) which tells of conscious omnipotence. Heaven's clock goes at a different rate from our little timepieces. God's day is a thousand years, and the longest tarrying is but a little while. When He has come, we find that it is right early, though before He came He seemed to us to delay. He comes across the waves. Their restless and yielding crests are smoothed and made solid by the touch of His foot. He walketh on the sea as on a pavement(Septuagint version of Job ix. 8). It is a revelation of divine power. It is one of the very few miracles affecting Christ's own person, and may perhaps be regarded as being, like the Transfiguration, a casual gleam of latent glory breaking through the body of His humiliation, and so, in some sense, prophetic. But it is also symbolic. He ever uses tumults and unrest as a means of advancing His purposes. The stormy sea is the recognised Old Testament emblem of antagonism to the divine rule; and just as He walked on the billows, so does He reach His end by the very opposition to it, girding Himselfwith the wrath of men, and making it to praise Him. In this sense, too, His paths are in the great waters. In another aspect, we have here the symbol of Christ's using our difficulties and trials as the means of His loving approach to us. He comes, giving a deeper and more blessed sense of His presence by means of our sorrows, than in calm sunny weather. It is generally over a stormy sea that He comes to us, and golden treasures are thrown on our shores after a tempest.

**III. We have the terror and the recognition.**

The disciples were as yet little lifted above their fellows; they had no expectation of His coming, and thought just what any rude minds would have thought, that this mysterious Thing stalking towards them across the waters came from the unseen world, and probably that it was the herald of their drowning. Terror froze their blood, and brought out a shriek (as the word might be rendered) which was heard above the dash of waves and the raving wind. They had gallantly fought the tempest, but this unmanned them. We too often mistake Christ, when He comes to us. We do not recognise His working in the storm, nor His presence giving power to battle with it. We are so absorbed in the circumstances that we fail to see Him through them. Our tears weave a veil which hides Him, or the darkness obscures His face, and we see nothing but the threatening crests of the waves, curling high above our little boat. We mistake our best friend, and we are afraid of Him as we dimly see Him; and sometimes we think that the tokens of His presence are only phantasms of our own imagination.

They who were deceived by His appearance knew Him by His voice, as Mary did at the sepulchre. How blessed must have been the moment when that astounding certitude thrilled through their souls! That low voice is audible through all the tumult. He speaks to us by His word, and by the silent speech in our spirits, which makes us conscious that He is there. He does speak to us in the deepest of our sorrows, in the darkest of our nights; and when we hear of His voice, and with wonder and joy cry out, It is the Lord, our sorrow is soothed, and the darkness is light about us.

The consciousness of His presence banishes all fear. Be not afraid, follows It is I. It is of no use to preach courage unless we preach Christ first. If we have not Him with us, we do well to fear: His presence is the only rational foundation for calm fearlessness. Only when the Lord of Hosts is with us, ought we not to fear, though the waters roar ... and be troubled. Through the dear might of Him that walked the wavescan we feeble creatures face all terrors, and feel no terror.

**IV. We have the end of the storm and of the voyage.**

The storm ceases as soon as Jesus is on board. John does not mention the cessation of the tempest, but tells us that they were immediately at the shore. It does not seem necessary to suppose another miracle, but only that the voyage ended very speedily. It is not always true that His presence is the end of dangers and difficulties, but the consciousness of His presence does hush the storm. The worst of trouble is gone when we know that He shares it; and though the long swell after the gale may last, it no longer threatens. Nor is it always true that His coming, and our consciousness that He has come, bring a speedy close to toils. We have to labour on, but in how different a mood these men would bend to their oars after they had Him on board! With Him beside us toil is sweet, burdens are lighter, and the road is shortened. Even with Him on board, life is a stormy voyage; but without Him, it ends in shipwreck. With Him, it may be long, but it will look all the shorter while it lasts, and when we land the rough weather will be remembered but as a transient squall. These wearied rowers, who had toiled all night, stepped on shore as the morning broke on the eastern bank. So we, if we have had Him for our shipmate, shall land on the eternal shore, and dry our wet garments in the sunshine, and all the stormy years that seemed so long shall be remembered but as a watch in the night.