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

**1 CORINTHIANS-003**. **THE APOSTLE'S THEME by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."*

*1 Corinthians 2:2*

Many of you are aware that to-day I close forty years of ministry in this city--I cannot say to this congregation, for there are very, very few that can go back with me in memory to the beginning of these years. You will bear me witness that I seldom intrude personal references into the pulpit, but perhaps it would be affectation not to do so now. Looking back over these long years, many thoughts arise which cannot be spoken in public. But one thing I may say, and that is, that I am grateful to God and to you, dear friends, for the unbroken harmony, confidence, affection, and forbearance which have brightened and lightened my work. Of its worth I cannot judge; its imperfections I know better than the most unfavourable critic; but I can humbly take the words of this text as expressive, not, indeed, of my attainments, but of my aims. One of my texts, on my first Sunday in Manchester, was We preach Christ and Him crucified, and I look back, and venture to say that the noble words of this text have been, however imperfectly followed, my guiding star.

Now, I wish to say a word or two, less personal perhaps, and yet, as you can well suppose, not without a personal reference in my own consciousness.

**I. Note here first, then, the Apostolic theme--Jesus Christ and Him crucified.**

Now, the Apostle, in this context, gives us a little autobiographical glimpse which is singularly and interestingly confirmed by some slight incidental notices in the Book of the Acts. He says, in the context, that he was with the Corinthians in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and, if we turn to the narrative, we find that a singular period of silence, apparent abandonment of his work and dejection, seems to have synchronised with his coming to the great city of Corinth. The reasons were very plain. He had recently come into Europe for the first time and had had to front a new condition of things, very different from what he had found in Palestine or in Asia Minor. His experience had not been encouraging. He had been imprisoned in Philippi; he had been smuggled away by night from Thessalonica; he had been hounded from Berea; he had all but wholly failed to make any impression in Athens, and in his solitude he came to Corinth, and lay quiet, and took stock of his adversaries. He came to the conclusion which he records in my text; he felt that it was not for him to argue with philosophers, or to attempt to vie with Sophists and professional orators, but that his only way to meet Greek civilisation, Greek philosophy, Greek eloquence, Greek self-conceit, was to preach Christ and Him crucified. The determination was not come to in ignorance of the conditions that were fronting him. He knew Corinth, its wealth, its wickedness, its culture, and knowing these he said, I have made up my mind that I will know nothing amongst you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

So, then, this Apostle's conception of his theme was--the biography of a Man, with especial emphasis laid on one act in His history--His death. Christianity is Christ, and Christ is Christianity. His relation to the truth that He proclaimed, and to the truths that may be deducible from the story of His life and death, is altogether different from the relation of any other founder of a religion to the truths that he has proclaimed. For in these you can accept the teaching, and ignore the teacher. But you cannot do that with Christianity; I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; and in that revealing biography, which is the preacher's theme, the palpitating heart and centre is the death upon the Cross. So, whatever else Christianity comes to be--and it comes to be a great deal else--the principle of its growth, and the germ which must vitalise the whole, lie in the personality and the death of Jesus Christ.

That is not all. The history of the life and the death want something more to make them a gospel. The fact, I was going to say, is the least part of the fact; as in some vegetable growths, there is far more underground than above. For, unless along with, involved in, and deducible from, but capable of being stated separately from, the external facts, there is a certain commentary or explanation of them: the history is a history, the biography is a biography, the story of the Cross is a touching narrative, but it is no gospel.

And what was Paul's commentary which lifted the bare facts up into the loftier region? This--as for the person, Jesus Christ declared to be the son of God with power--as for the fact of the death, died for our sins according to the Scriptures. Let in these two conceptions into the facts--and they are the necessary explanation and presupposition of the facts--the Incarnation and the Sacrifice, and then you get what Paul calls my gospel, not because it was his invention, but because it was the trust committed to him. That is the Gospel which alone answers to the facts which he deals with; and that is the Gospel which, God helping me, I have for forty years tried to preach.

We hear a great deal at present, or we did a few years ago, about this generation having recovered Jesus Christ, and about the necessity of going back to the Christ of the Gospels. By all means, I say, if in the process you do not lose the Christ of the Epistles, who is the Christ of the Gospels, too. I am free to admit that a past generation has wrapped theological cobwebs round the gracious figure of Christ with disastrous results. For it is perfectly possible to know the things that are said about Him, and not to know Him about whom these things are said. But the mistake into which the present generation is far more likely to fall than that of substituting theology for Christ, is the converse one--that of substituting an undefined Christ for the Christ of the Gospels and the Epistles, the Incarnate Son of God, who died for our salvation. And that is a more disastrous mistake than the other, for you can know nothing about Him and He can be nothing to you, except as you grasp the Apostolic explanation of the bare facts--seeing in Him the Word who became flesh, the Son who died that we might receive the adoption of sons.

I would further point out that a clear conception of what the theme is, goes a long way to determine the method in which it shall be proclaimed. The Apostle says, in the passage which is parallel to the present one, in the previous chapter, We preach Christ crucified; with strong emphasis on the word preach. The Jew required a sign; he wanted a man who would do something. The Greek sought after wisdom; he wanted a man who would perorate and argue and dissertate. Paul says, No! We have nothing to do. We do not come to philosophise and to argue. We come with a message of fact that has occurred, of a Person that has lived. And, as most of you know, the word which he uses means in its full signification, to proclaim as a herald does.

Of course, if my business were to establish a set of principles, theological or otherwise, then argumentation would be my weapon, proofs would be my means, and my success would be that I should win your credence, your intellectual consent, and conviction. If I were here to proclaim simply a morality, then the thing that I would aim to secure would be obedience, and the method of securing it would be to enforce the authority and reasonableness of the command. But, seeing that my task is to proclaim a living Person and a historical fact, then the way to do that is to do as the herald does when in the market-place he stands, trumpet in one hand and the King's message in the other--proclaim it loudly, confidently, not with bated breath and whispering humbleness, as if apologising, nor too much concerned to buttress it up with argumentation out of his own head, but to say, Thus saith the Lord, and to what the Lord saith conscience says, Amen. Brethren, we need far more, in all our pulpits, of that unhesitating confidence in the plain, simple proclamation, stripped, as far as possible, of human additions and accretions, of the great fact and the great Person on whom all our salvation depends.

**II. So let me ask you to notice the exclusiveness which this theme demands.**

Nothing but, says Paul. I might venture to say--though perhaps the tone of the personal allusions in this sermon may seem to contradict it--that this exclusiveness is to be manifested in one very difficult direction, and that that is, the herald shall efface himself. We have to hold up the picture; and if I might take such a metaphor, like a man in a gallery who is displaying some masterpiece to the eyes of the beholders, we have to keep ourselves well behind it; and it will be wise if not even a finger-tip is allowed to steal in front and come into sight. One condition, I believe, of real power in the ministration of the Gospel, is that people shall be convinced that the preacher is thinking not at all about himself, but altogether about his message. You remember that wonderfully pathetic utterance from John the Baptist's stern lips, which derives much additional pathos and tenderness from the character of the man from whom it came, when they asked him, Who art thou? and his answer was, I am a Voice. I am a Voice; that is all! Ah, that is the example! We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord. We must efface ourselves if we would proclaim Christ.

But I turn to another direction in which this theme demands exclusiveness, and I revert to the previous chapter where in the parallel portion to the words of my text, we find the Apostle very clearly conscious of the two great streams of expectation and wish which he deliberately thwarted and set at nought. The Jews require a sign--but we preach Christ crucified. The Greeks seek after wisdom, but again, we preach Christ crucified. Now, take these two. They are representations, in a very emphatic way, of two sets of desires and mental characteristics, which divide the world between them.

On the one hand, there is the sensuous tendency that wants something done for it, something to see, something that sense can grasp at; and so, as it fancies, work itself upwards into a higher region. The Jew requires a sign--that is, not merely a miracle, but something to look at. He wants a visible sacrifice; he wants a priest. He wants religion to consist largely in the doing of certain acts which may be supposed to bring, in some magical fashion, spiritual blessings. And Paul opposes to that, We preach Christ crucified. Brethren, the tendency is strong to-day, not only in those parts of the Anglican communion where sacramentarian theories are in favour, but amongst all sections of the Christian Church, in which there is obvious a drift towards more ornate ritual, and aesthetic services, as means of attracting to church or chapel, and as more important than proclaiming Christ. I am free to confess that possibly some of us, with our Puritan upbringing and tendency, too much disregard that side of human nature. Possibly it is so. But for all that I profoundly believe that if religion is to be strong it must have a very, very small infusion of these external aids to spiritual worship, and that few things more weaken the power of the Gospel that Paul preached than the lowering of the flag in conformity with desires of men of sense, and substituting for the simple glory of the preached Word the meretricious, and in time impotent, and always corrupting, attractions of a sensuous worship.

Further, The Greeks seek after wisdom. They wanted demonstration, abstract principles, systematised philosophies, and the like. Paul comes again with his We preach Christ and Him crucified. The wisdom is there, as I shall have to say in a moment, but the form that it takes is directly antagonistic to the wishes of these wisdom-seeking Greeks. The same thing in modern guise besets us to-day. We are called upon, on all sides, to bring into the pulpit what they call an ethical gospel; putting it into plain English, to preach morality, and to leave out Christ. We are called upon, on all sides, to preach an applied Christianity, a social gospel--that is to say, largely to turn the pulpit into a Sunday supplement to the daily newspaper. We are asked to deal with the intellectual difficulties which spring from the collision of science, true or false, with religion, and the like. All that is right enough. But I believe from my heart that the thing to do is to copy Paul's example, and to preach Christ and Him crucified. You may think me right or you may think me wrong, but here and now, at the end of forty years, I should like to say that I have for the most part ignored that class of subjects deliberately, and of set purpose, and with a profound conviction, be it erroneous or not, that a ministry which listens much to the cry for wisdom in its modern forms, has departed from the true perspective of Christian teaching, and will weaken the churches which depend upon it. Let who will turn the pulpit into a professor's chair, or a lecturer's platform, or a concert-room stage or a politician's rostrum, I for one determine to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

**III. Lastly, observe the all-sufficient comprehensiveness which this theme secures.**

Paul says nothing but; he might have said everything in. For Jesus Christ and Him crucified covers all the ground of men's needs. No doubt many of you will have been saying to yourselves whilst you have been listening, if you have been listening, to what I have been saying, Ah! old-fashioned narrowness; quite out of date in this generation. Brethren, there are two ways of adapting one's ministry to the times. One is falling in with the requirements of the times, and the other is going dead against them, and both of these methods have to be pursued by us.

But the exclusiveness of which I have been speaking, is no narrow exclusiveness. Paul felt that, if he was to give the Corinthians what they needed, he must refuse to give them what they wanted, and that whilst he crossed their wishes he was consulting their necessities. That is true yet, for the preaching that bases itself upon the life and death of Jesus Christ, conceived as Paul had learned from Jesus Christ to conceive them, that Gospel, whilst it brushes aside men's superficial wishes, goes straight to the heart of their deep-lying universal necessities, for what the Jew needs most is not a sign, and what the Greek needs most is not wisdom, but what they both need most is deliverance from the guilt and power of sin. And we all, scholars and fools, poets and common-place people, artists and ploughmen, all of us, in all conditions of life, in all varieties of culture, in all stages of intellectual development, in all diversities of occupation and of mental bias, what we all have in common is that human heart in which sin abides, and what we all need most to have is that evil drop squeezed out of it, and our souls delivered from the burden and the bondage. Therefore, any man that comes with a sign, and does not deal with the sin of the human heart, and any man that comes with a philosophical system of wisdom, and does not deal with sin, does not bring a Gospel that will meet the necessities even of the people to whose cravings he has been aiming to adapt his message.

But, beyond that, in this message of Christ and Him crucified, there lies in germ the satisfaction of all that is legitimate in these desires that at first sight it seems to thwart. A sign? Yes, and where is there power like the power that dwells in Him who is the Incarnate might of omnipotence? Wisdom? Yes, and where is there wisdom, except in Him in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge? Let the Jew come to the Cross, and in the weak Man hanging there, he will find a mightier revelation of the power of God than anywhere else. Let the Greek come to the Cross, and there he will find wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption. The bases of all social, economical, political reform and well-being, lie in the understanding and the application to social and national life, of the principles that are wrapped in, and are deduced from, the Incarnation and the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We have not learned them all yet. They have not all been applied to national and individual life yet. I plead for no narrow exclusiveness, but for one consistent with the widest application of Christian principles to all life. Paul determined to know nothing but Jesus, and to know everything in Jesus, and Jesus in everything. Do not begin your building at the second-floor windows. Put in your foundations first, and be sure that they are well laid. Let the Sacrifice of Christ, in its application to the individual and his sins, be ever the basis of all that you say. And then, when that foundation is laid, exhibit, to your heart's content, the applications of Christianity and its social aspects. But be sure that the beginning of them all is the work of Christ for the individual sinful soul, and the acceptance of that work by personal faith.

Dear friends, ours has been a long and happy union but it is a very solemn one. My responsibilities are great; yours are not small. Let me beseech you to ask yourselves if, with all your kindness to the messenger, you have given heed to the message. Have you passed beyond the voice that speaks, to Him of whom it speaks? Have you taken the truth--veiled and weakened as I know it has been by my words, but yet in them--for what it is, the word of the living God? My occupancy of this pulpit must in the nature of things, before long, come to a close, but the message which I have brought to you will survive all changes in the voice that speaks here. All flesh is grass ... the Word of the Lord endureth for ever. And, closing these forty years, during a long part of which some of you have listened most lovingly and most forbearingly, I leave with you this, which I venture to quote, though it is my Master's word about Himself, I judge you not; the word which I have spoken unto you, the same shall judge you in the last day.