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

**1 CORINTHIANS-027**. **THE CERTAINTY AND JOY OF THE RESURRECTION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"But now is Christ risen from the dead ... the first fruits of them that slept."*

*1 Corinthians 15:20*

The Apostle has been contemplating the long train of dismal consequences which he sees would arise if we only had a dead Christ. He thinks that he, the Apostle, would have nothing to preach, and we, nothing to believe. He thinks that all hope of deliverance from sin would fade away. He thinks that the one fact which gives assurance of immortality having vanished, the dead who had nurtured the assurance have perished. And he thinks that if things were so, then Christian men, who had believed a false gospel, and nourished an empty faith, and died clinging to a baseless hope, were far more to be pitied than men who had had less splendid dreams and less utter illusions.

Then, with a swift revulsion of feeling, he turns away from that dreary picture, and with a change of key, which the dullest ear can appreciate, from the wailing minors of the preceding verses, he breaks into this burst of triumph. Now--things being as they are, for it is the logical now, and not the temporal one--things being as they are, Christ is risen from the dead, and that as the first fruits of them that slept.

Part of the ceremonial of the Passover was the presentation in the Temple of a barley sheaf, the first of the harvest, waved before the Lord in dedication to Him, and in sign of thankful confidence that all the fields would be reaped and their blessing gathered. There may be some allusion to that ceremony, which coincided in time with the Resurrection of our Lord, in the words here, which regard that one solitary Resurrection as the early ripe and early reaped sheaf, the pledge and the prophecy of the whole ingathering.

Now there seem to me, in these words, to ring out mainly two things--an expression of absolute certainty in the fact, and an expression of unbounded triumph in the certainty of the fact.

And if we look at these two things, I think we shall get the main thoughts that the Apostle would impress upon our minds.

**I. The certainty of Christ's Resurrection.**

Now is Christ risen, says he, defying, as it were, doubt and negation, and basing himself upon the firm assurance which he possesses of that historical fact. Ah! you say, seeing is believing; and he had evidence such as we can never have. Well! let us see. Is it possible for us, nineteen centuries nearly after that day, to catch some echo of this assured confidence, and in the face of modern doubts and disbeliefs, to reiterate with as unfaltering assurance as that with which they came from his glowing lips, the great words of my text? Can we, logically and reasonably, as men who are guided by evidence and not by feeling, stand up before the world, and take for ours the ancient confession: I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. The third day He rose again from the dead? I think we can.

The way to prove a fact is by the evidence of witnesses. You cannot argue that it would be very convenient, if such and such a thing should be true; that great moral effects would follow if we believed it was true, and so on. The way to do is to put people who have seen it into the witness-box, and to make sure that their evidence is worth accepting.

And at the beginning of my remarks I wish to protest, in a sentence, against confusing the issues about this question of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ in that fashion which is popular nowadays, when we are told that miracle is impossible, and therefore there has been no Resurrection, or that death is the end of human existence, and that therefore there has been no Resurrection. That is not the way to go about ascertaining the truth as to asserted facts. Let us hear the evidence. The men who brush aside the testimony of the New Testament writers, in obedience to a theory, either about the impossibility of the supernatural, or about the fatal and final issues of human death, are victims of prejudice, in the strictest meaning of the word; and are no more logical than the well-known and proverbial reasoner who, when told that facts were against him, with sublime confidence in his own infallibility, is reported to have said, So much the worse for the facts. Let us deal with evidence, and not with theory, when we are talking about alleged facts of history.

So then, let me remind you that, in this chapter from which my text is taken, we have a record of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, older than, and altogether independent of, the records contained in the gospels, which are all subsequent in date to it; that this Epistle to the Corinthians is one of the four undisputed Epistles of the Apostle, which not the most advanced school of modern criticism has a word to say against; that, therefore, this chapter, written, at the latest, some seven and twenty years after the date of the Crucifixion, carries us up very close to that event; that it shows that the Resurrection was universally believed all over the Church, and therefore must have then been long believed; that it enables us to trace the same belief as universal, and in undisputed possession of the field among the churches, at the time of Paul's conversion, which cannot be put down at much more than five or six years after the Crucifixion, and that so we are standing in the presence of absolutely contemporaneous testimony. This is not a case in which a belief slowly and gradually grew up. Whether we accept the evidence or not, we are bound to admit that it is strictly contemporaneous testimony to the fact of Christ's Resurrection.

And the witnesses are reliable and competent, as well as contemporaneous. The old belief that their testimony was imposture is dead long ago; as, indeed, how could it live? It would be an anomaly, far greater than the Resurrection, to believe that these people, Mary, Peter, John, Paul, and all the rest of them, were conspirators in a lie, and that the fairest system of morality and the noblest consecration that the world has ever seen, grew up out of a fraud, like flowers upon a dunghill. That theory will not hold water; and even those who will not accept the testimony have long since confessed that it will not. But the Apostle, in my context, seems to think that that is the only tenable alternative to the other theory that the witnesses were veracious, and I am disposed to believe that he is right. He says, If Christ be not risen, then, are we the utterly impossible thing of false witnesses to God, devout perjurers, as the phrase might be paraphrased: men who are lying to please God. If Christ be not risen, they have sworn to a thing that they know to be untrue, in order to advance His cause and His kingdom. If that theory be not accepted, there is no other about these men and their message that will hold water for a minute, except the admission of its truth.

The fashionable modern one, that it was hallucination, is preposterous. Hallucinations that five hundred people at once shared! Hallucinations that lasted all through long talks, spread at intervals over more than a month! Hallucinations that included eating and drinking, speech and answer; the clasp of the hand and the feeling of the breath! Hallucinations that brought instruction! Hallucinations that culminated in the fancy that a gathered multitude of them saw Him going up into heaven! The hallucination is on the other side, I think. They have got the saddle on the wrong horse when they talk about the Apostolic witnesses being the victims of hallucination. It is the people who believe it possible that they should be who are so. The old argument against miracles used to say that it is more consonant with experience that testimony should be false, than that a miracle should be true. I venture to say it is a much greater strain on a man's credulity, to believe that such evidence is false than that such a miracle, so attested, is true. And I, for my part, venture to think that the reasonable men are the men who listen to these eye-witnesses when they say, We saw Him rise; and echo back in answer the triumphant certitude, Christ is risen indeed!

There is another consideration that I might put briefly. A very valuable way of establishing facts is to point to the existence of other facts, which indispensably require the previous ones for their explanation. Let me give you an illustration of what I mean. I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, amongst other reasons, because I do not understand how it was possible for the Church to exist for a week after the Crucifixion, unless Jesus Christ rose again. Why was it that they did not all scatter? Why was it that the spirit of despondency and the tendency to separation, which were beginning to creep over them when they were saying: Ah! it is all up! We trusted that this had been He, did not go on to their natural issue? How came it that these people, with their Master taken away from the midst of them, and the bond of union between them removed, and all their hopes crushed did not say: We have made a mistake, let us go back to Gennesareth and take to our fishing again, and try and forget our bright illusions? That is what John the Baptist's followers did when he died. Why did not Christ's do the same? Because Christ rose again and re-knit them together. When the Shepherd was smitten, the flock would have been scattered, and never drawn together any more, unless there had been just such a thing as the Resurrection asserts there was, to reunite the dispersed and to encourage the depressed. And so I say, Christianity with a dead Christ, and a Church gathered round a grave from which the stone has not been rolled away, is more unbelievable than the miracle, for it is an absurdity.

Then there is another thing that I would say in a word. Let me put an illustration to explain what I mean. Suppose, after the execution of King Charles I., in some corner of the country a Pretender had sprung up and said, I am the King! the way to end that would have been for the Puritan leaders to have taken people to St. George's Chapel, and said, Look! there is the coffin, there is the body, is that the king, or is it not? Jesus Christ was said to have risen again, within a week of the time of His death. The rulers of the nation had the grave, the watch, the stone, the seal. They could have put an end to the pestilent nonsense in two minutes, if it had been nonsense, by the simple process of saying, Go and look at the tomb, and you will see Him there. But this question has never been answered, and never will be--What became of that sacred corpse if Jesus Christ did not rise again from the dead? The clumsy lie that the rulers told, that the disciples had stolen away the body, was only their acknowledgment that the grave was empty. If the grave were empty, either His servants were impostors, which we have seen it is incredible that they were, or the Christ was risen again.

And so, dear brethren, for many other reasons besides this handful that I have ventured to gather and put before you, and in spite of the prejudices of modern theories, I lift up here once more, with unfaltering certitude, the glad message which I beseech you to accept: Christ is risen, the first fruits of them that slept.

**II. So much, then, for the first point in this passage. A word or two about the second--the triumph in the certitude of that Resurrection.**

As I remarked at a previous point of this discourse, the Apostle has been speaking about the consequences which would follow from the fact that Christ was not raised. If we take all these consequences and reverse them, we get the glad issues of His Resurrection, and understand why it was that this great burst of triumph comes from the Apostle's lips. And though I must necessarily treat this part of my subject very inadequately, let me try to gather together the various points on which, as I think, our Easter gladness ought to be built.

First, then, I say, the risen Christ gives us a complete Gospel. A dead Christ annihilates the Gospel. If Christ be not risen, says the Apostle, our preaching, by which he means not the act but the substance of his preaching, is vain. Or, as the word might be more accurately rendered, empty. There is nothing in it; no contents. It is a blown bladder; nothing in it but wind.

What was Paul's preaching? It all turned upon these points--that Jesus Christ was the Son of God; that He was Incarnate in the flesh for us men; that He died on the Cross for our offences; that He was raised again, and had ascended into Heaven, ruling the world and breathing His presence into believing hearts; and that He would come again to be our Judge. These were the elements of what Paul called his Gospel. He faces the supposition of a dead Christ, and he says, It is all gone! It is all vanished into thin air. I have nothing to preach if I have not a Cross to preach which is man's deliverance from sin, because on it the Son of God hath died, and I only know that Jesus Christ's sacrifice is accepted and sufficient, because I have it attested to me in His rising again from the dead.

Dear brethren, on the fact of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is suspended everything which makes the Gospel a gospel. Strike that out, and what have you left? Some beautiful bits of moral teaching, a lovely life, marred by tremendous mistakes about Himself and His own importance and His relation to men and to God; but you have got nothing left that is worth calling a gospel. You have the cross rising there, gaunt, black, solitary; but, unless on the other side of the river you have the Resurrection, no bridge will ever be thrown across the black gulf, and the Cross remains dead, being alone. You must have a Resurrection to explain the Cross, and then the Life and the Death tower up into the manifestation of God in the flesh and the propitiation for our sins. Without it we have nothing to preach which is worth calling a gospel.

Again, a living Christ gives faith something to lay hold of. The Apostle here in the context twice says, according to the Authorised Version, that a dead Christ makes our faith vain. But he really uses two different words, the former of which is applied to preaching, and means literally empty, while the latter means of none effect or powerless. So there are two ideas suggested here which I can only touch with the lightest hand.

The risen Christ puts some contents, so to speak, into my faith; He gives me something for it to lay hold of.

Who can trust a dead Christ, or who can trust a human Christ? That would be as much a blasphemy as trusting any other man. It is only when we recognise Him as declared to be the Son of God, and that by the Resurrection from the dead, that our faith has anything round which it can twine, and to which it can cleave. That living Saviour will stretch out His hand to us if we look to Him, and if I put my poor, trembling little hand up towards Him, He will bend to me and clasp it. You cannot exercise faith unless you have a risen Saviour, and unless you exercise faith in Him your lives are marred and sad.

Again, if Christ be dead, our faith, if it could exist, would be as devoid of effect as it would be empty of substance. For such a faith would be like an infant seeking nourishment at a dead mother's breast, or men trying to kindle their torches at an extinguished lamp. And chiefly would it fail to bring the first blessing which the believing soul receives through and from a risen Christ, namely, deliverance from sin. If He whom we believed to be our sacrifice by His death and our sanctification by His life has not risen, then, as we have seen, all which makes His death other than a martyr's vanishes, and with it vanish forgiveness and purifying. Only when we recognise that in His Cross explained by His Resurrection, we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins, and by the communication of the risen life from the risen Lord possess that new nature which sets us free from the dominion of our evil, is faith operative in setting us free from our sins.

So, dear friends, the risen Christ gives us something for faith to lay hold of, and will make it the hand by which we grasp His strong hand, which lifts us out of the horrible pit and the miry clay, and sets our feet upon a rock. But if He lie dead in the grave your faith is vain, because it grasps nothing but a shadow; and it is vain as being purposeless; you are yet in your sins.

The last thought is that the risen Christ gives us the certitude of our Resurrection. I do not for a moment mean to say that, apart from the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the thought, be it a wish or a dread, of immortality, has not been found in men, but there is all the difference in the world between forebodings, aspirations, wishes it were so, fears that it might be so, and the calm certitude that it is so. Many men talked about a western continent, but Columbus went there and came back again, and that ended doubt. Many men before, and apart from Jesus, have cherished thoughts of an immortal life beyond the grave, but He has been there and returned. And that, and, as I believe, that only puts the doctrine of immortality upon an irrefragable foundation; and we can say, Now, I know that there is that land beyond. They tell us that death ends everything. Modern materialism, in all its forms, asserts that it is the extinction of the personality. Jesus Christ died, and went through it, and came out of it the same, and I will trust Him. Brethren, the set of opinion amongst the educated and cultured classes in England, and all over Europe, at this moment, proves to anybody who has eyes to see, that for this generation, rejection of immortality will follow certainly on the rejection of Jesus Christ. And for England to-day, as for Greece when Paul sent his letter to Corinth, the one light of certitude in the great darkness is the fact that Jesus Christ hath died, and is risen again.

If you will let Him, He will make you partakers of His own immortal life. The first fruits of them that slept is the pledge and the prophecy of all the waving abundance of golden grain that shall be gathered into the great husbandman's barns. The Apostle goes on to represent the resurrection of them that are Christ's as a consequence of their union to Jesus. He has conquered for us all. He has entered the prison-house and come forth bearing its iron gates on His shoulders, and henceforth it is not possible that we should be holden of it. There are two resurrections--one, that of Christ's servants, one that of others. They are not the same in principle--and, alas, they are awfully different in issue. Some shall wake to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Let me beseech you to make Jesus Christ the life of your dead souls, by humble, penitent trust in Him. And then, in due time, He will be the life of your transformed bodies, changing these into the likeness of the body of His glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.