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

**2 KINGS-011. SILENT CHRISTIANS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then they said one to another, We do not well; this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us; now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king's household."*

*2 Kings 7:9*

The city of Samaria was closely besieged, and suffering all the horrors of famine. Women were boiling and eating their children, and the most revolting garbage was worth its weight in silver. Four starving lepers, sitting by the gate, plucked up courage from the extremity of their distress, and looking in each other's bloodshot eyes, whispered one to another, with their hoarse voices: If we say we will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; and if we sit still here we die also. Now therefore come, and let us fall unto the host of the Syrians; if they save us alive we shall live; and if they kill us we shall but die. So in the twilight they stole away. As they come near the camp there is a strange silence; no guards, no stir. They creep to the first tent and find it empty; and then another, and another, and another, till at last it admits of no doubt that certainly the enemy has gone, leaving all his baggage behind him, So for awhile they feast and plunder--small blame to them! And then conscience wakes, and the same thought occurs to each of them: This is not patriotic; this is scarcely human; it is a shame for us to be sitting here gorging ourselves whilst a city is starving within a stone's-throw. So they say one to another in the words of my text.

Now these men's consciousness of the obligation imposed upon them by the knowledge of glad news, their self-reproach for their silence, their conviction that retribution would fall on them if it continued, and their resolve therefore to clear themselves, may all be transferred to higher regions, and may fairly illustrate Christian responsibilities and duties.

I wish to say one or two very homely, plain things about Christian men's obligation to speech, and the sin of their silence. My remarks will have no special reference to any particular forms of Christian activity, but if I succeed in impressing on any a deeper sense of duty in reference to declaring the Gospel than they possess, then all forms of it will be prosecuted with greater vigour and consecration.

**I. I wish first to dwell for a moment on that--I was going to use a plain word and say--hideous; I will substitute a milder term, and say--remarkable, fact of Christian silence.**

I take this congregation as a fair average representative of the ordinary habitudes of professing Christians of this generation. How many men and women there are sitting in these pews, who, if I asked them the question, would say that they were Christians? and what proportion of these, if I asked them the further question, Did you ever tell anybody anything about Jesus Christ? would say, No, never! I know this, that in regard to all the recognised and associated forms of Christian work which cluster round a Christian congregation, it is the same handful of people that do them all. It is just like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope, there are not many of them though you can shake them up into a great number of patterns, but they are always the very same bits. So I could go through pew after pew, if it would not be very personal, and find men and women, one after another--rows of them --that, so far as any of the united work of a church goes, are absolutely idle. They are worthy kind of people, too, with some real religion in them; but yet, partly from shyness, partly from indolence, partly because (as they think) they have so much else to do, and for a number of other reasons that I do not need to dwell upon, they fall into the great army of idlers, and are just so much dead weight and surplusage, as far as the work of the Church is concerned.

Now I do not mean to say that, because professing Christian people do not work in any recognised forms of Christian service which are attached to a congregation, therefore they are not doing anything. God forbid! There are many of you, for instance, mothers of families, whose best service is to speak about Jesus Christ to your children, and to live according as you speak, and that is work enough for you. There are many more of us, who, for various legitimate reasons, are precluded from taking part in organised forms of Christian service. Do not so fatally misunderstand me as to suppose that I am merely beating a drum to get recruits for societies. What I want to impress upon every Christian person listening to me now is simply this, the anomaly of the fact, if it be a fact, that you are a dumb Christian. You can all speak, if you will; you all have people with whom your speech is weighty and powerful. There are doors open before each of you. Ask yourselves, have you gone in at the open doors? or is it true about you that you have never felt the obligation to make your Master known to others, or, at all events, have never felt it so strongly that it compelled you to obey? The strange fact of Christian silence is one that I emphasise to begin with.

**II. Let me say a word next about the sin of this silence.**

These four poor lepers had not had much kindness dealt out to them in their lives, and they might have been pardoned if in their moment of joy they had remained in the isolation to which they had been condemned by reason of their disease. But they think to themselves of the hollow eyes in Samaria there, and the hideous meals, that might stay hunger but brought no nourishment, and of the king with sackcloth beneath his royal robes, and, forgetting everything but their abundance and these people's empty stomachs, they say, Not thus must we do, as the Hebrew might be translated, this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; and that is a sin. And if we continue dumb, then before morning some kind of punishment will come down upon us.

Now, let me put what I have to say on this matter into two sentences.

First of all, I say that such silence is inhuman. You would all recognise that in the case of an actual, literal, instead of a metaphorical, famine. What would you say about a man who contented himself with sitting in his own back room, where nobody could see his abundance, and feasting to the full, whilst his fellow-citizens were dying of starvation? Why! you would say he was a brute. And if Christian people believed as thoroughly that men and women without the Bread of God which comes down from Heaven were starving and dying of hunger, as they believe that men without literal bread must die, there would not be so many dumb ones amongst them; and they would feel more distinctly than any of us feel now, the responsibility that is laid upon them, and the inhumanity of the sin.

Dear brethren! God has made this strange brotherhood of humanity in which we live, all intertwined and intertangled together, mainly in order that there may be scope for brotherly impartation to the needy, of the gifts that each possesses. And He has given to each of us something or other which, by the very terms of the gift and the purpose of the bestowment, we are bound to impart to others. The meaning of our being born into the brotherhood of humanity is that God's grace, in some shape or other, may fructify through us to all; and I say that the man who possesses any kind of gift, and, especially, God's highest gifts of wisdom and of knowledge, and most of all, the highest gift of spiritual knowledge and moral and religious truth, and keeps them to himself, in his idleness is sinfully active, and in his selfishness is inhuman and cruel. The very constitution of humanity says to us that we do not well, if in the day of good tidings of any sort we hold our peace. The possession of mere physical or abstract truth does not turn its possessors into its apostles, but the possession of moral and spiritual truth does. We are, every one of us, responsible for all the eyes which we could have opened and which are still dark, and for every soul that gropes in ignorance, if we possess something that would enlighten its darkness.

But then, further, let me say that this sin of silence is in sheer contradiction of every principle of Christianity. Why has God given you His grace, do you suppose? For what purpose comes it that you are Christians? Were you converted that you might go by yourselves into a solitary heaven, do you think? Are you important enough to be an ultimate end of God's mercy? Or are you indeed an end, but only that in your turn you might be a means of transmitting? Does the electric influence terminate when it reaches you, or is it turned on to you that from you it may be passed to others? The very purpose of the existence of a Christian Church is counterworked and thwarted by dumb Christians. We Nonconformists can talk abundantly when ecclesiastical assumptions have to be fought against, about the priesthood of all believers. Very well, if that principle is a true one--and it is a true one--it has other applications than simply controversial, and is meant for other uses than simply that you should brandish it in the face of sacerdotal claims and priest-ridden churches. Ye are all priests, that is to say, the meaning of the existence of a Christian Church is to raise up a cloud of witnesses, and make every lip vocal with the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. And you, dear brethren, you, the idlers of a church and congregation, are doing all that you can to thwart the divine purpose, and to destroy the very meaning of the existence of the church to which you belong.

And let me remind you, too, that such silence is clearly contrary to all Christian principle, inasmuch as one main purpose of the Gospel being given us is to shift our centre from ourselves, first to Christ, and then, if I may so say, to others. The very thing from which Christianity is meant to deliver us is the very thing that these idle, silent believers are indulging in, namely, the possession of God's gifts for their own profit and enjoyment. What is the use of your saying that you are Christian people if, in your very religion, you are practising the very vice that Jesus Christ has come to destroy? Selfishness is the opposite, the formal contradiction, of Christianity, and in the measure in which your religion is self-regarding, it is no religion at all. You are doing your best to counterwork the very main purpose of the Gospel upon yourselves, when in silence you possess, or fancy that you possess, the gift of His love.

And then, still further, let me remind you that this absolutely un-Christian character of silence is manifested, if you consider that the end of the Gospel for each of us is to bring us into full and happy sympathy with Christ, and likeness to Him. And how is that purpose being effected in His professed followers, if they know nothing of the experience of looking on the world with Christ's eyes, or of the thrill of pity caught from Him, and have no sympathy with, in the sense of any reflected experience of, the sense of obligation to help the helpless which nailed Him to the Cross? We say that we are followers of One who so loved the world that He died for it; we say that we long to be transformed into His likeness, and yet we put away from ourselves the spirit that regards our brethren as He regarded us all; and never dream of copying, howsoever feebly in our lives and efforts, the pattern that was set before us in His death.

O dear brethren! if a man see his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion against him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? And if a Christian looks upon a world without Christ, and has only a tepid sympathy and a faint realisation of the misery, and never does anything to lighten it by a grain, how can he pretend that he takes Jesus Christ for his Pattern and Example? Silence is manifestly a sin by reason of its inhumanity, and its contrariety to every principle of the Gospel.

**III. Now, still further, let me point you to the retribution on silence.**

These four men, no doubt, had some superstitious idea that mischief might come to them in the darkness. But they expressed a truth when they said, If we be silent, some evil--or, as the word might be translated, some punishment will find us. I desire to lay this on your hearts, dear brethren, that like all other selfish things, the silence of the Christian does him harm instead of good.

For instance, if you want to learn anything, set yourself to teach it. In trying to spread the name of Jesus Christ by your own personal effort, you will get a firmer hold of the truths that you attempt to impress upon others. I do not know any better cure for a great deal of unwholesome and superfluous speculation than to go into the slums and see what it is that tells there. That is a test of what is central and what is surface, in Christianity. I do not know any better discipline for a man whose religion is suffering from too much leisure and curiosity than to take a course of evangelistic work. He will find out then where the power is, and a great many cobwebs will be blown away. Be sure of this, that convictions unspoken, like plants grown in a cellar, will get very white in the stems, and will bear no fruit. Be sure of this, that a religion which is dumb will very soon tend to lose its possession of the truth, and that if you carry that great gift hid away in your heart it will be like locking up some singing-bird in a box. When you come to open it, the bird will be dead. There are, I have no doubt, many whom I am now addressing whose religion has all but, if not entirely, ebbed away from them, mainly because they have all their days been dumb Christians. That is one part of the punishment.

And another part is that silence is avenged by the dying out of the sympathies which inspire speech. It is the punishment of the selfish man that he becomes more selfish. It is the punishment of the heart, which never expands in sympathy, that its walls shrivel and contract, until there is scarcely blood enough between them to be impelled through the veins. Feelings which it is joy and nobleness to possess are nurtured and strengthened by expression; and the silent Christian is punished by becoming at last utterly indifferent to the woes of the world and to the spread of the Gospel. I think I could lay my finger, if I dared, on some of my audience who have got perilously near to that point.

And then again let me remind you that there is another form of the punishment, and that is the loss of all the blessed experience of the reaper's joy; and let me point you in a sentence to the final time of retribution. There shall stand in that last day, as Scripture teaches us, humble workers before the Throne who will say, Behold! I, and the children whom Thou hast given me. And there will stand some before the Throne, solitary; and I wonder if they will not feel lonely when they go into heaven, and find not a soul there to look them in the eyes and say, Thou didst lead me to the Christ, and I am here to welcome thee. He that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together. Do you not think that then there will steal a shadow of shame across the spirit of the servant who stood idle in the market-place all the day with the wretched excuse, No man hath hired me, when the Master had hired him beforehand, and given him such wages in advance?

O dear brethren! the cure for silence is to keep near that Master, and to drink in His Spirit; and then, as I beseech you to do, think, think, think of your obligations in the light of the Cross until you can say, Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, not this burden imposed, that I, even I, should preach the Name that is above every name. Open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall shew forth Thy praise.