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

**ACTS-002. THE THEME OF ACTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach. 2. Until the day in which He was taken up."*

*Acts 1:1-2.*

*"30. And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, 31. Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him."*

*Acts 28:30-31*

So begins and so ends this Book. I connect the commencement and the close, because I think that the juxtaposition throws great light upon the purpose of the writer, and suggests some very important lessons. The reference to the former treatise (which is, of course, the Gospel according to Luke) implies that this Book is to be regarded as its sequel, and the terms of the reference show the writer's own conception of what he was going to do in his second volume. The former treatise have I made . . . of all that Jesus began both to do and teach until the day in which He was taken up. Is not the natural inference that the latter treatise will tell us what Jesus continued to do and teach after He was taken up? I think so. And thus the writer sets forth at once, for those that have eyes to see, what he means to do, and what he thinks his book is going to be about.

So, then, the name The Acts of the Apostles, which is not coeval with the book itself, is somewhat of a misnomer. Most of the Apostles are never heard of in it. There are, at the most, only three or four of them concerning whom anything in the book is recorded. But our first text supplies a deeper reason for regarding that title as inadequate, and even misleading. For, if the theme of the story be what Christ did, then the book is, not the Acts of the Apostles, but the Acts of Jesus Christ through His servants. He, and He alone, is the Actor; and the men who appear in it are but instruments in His hands, He alone being the mover of the pawns on the board.

That conception of the purpose of the book seems to me to have light cast upon it by, and to explain, the singular abruptness of its conclusion, which must strike every reader. No doubt it is quite possible that the reason why the book ends in such a singular fashion, planting Paul in Rome, and leaving him there, may be that the date of its composition was that imprisonment of Paul in the Imperial City, in a part of which, at all events, we know that Luke was his companion. But, whilst that consideration may explain the point at which the book stops, it does not explain the way in which it stops. The historian lays down his pen, possibly because he had brought his narrative up to date. But a word of conclusion explaining that it was so would have been very natural, and its absence must have had some reason. It is also possible that the arrival of the Apostle in the Imperial City, and his unhindered liberty of preaching there, in the very centre of power, the focus of intellectual life, and the hot-bed of corruption for the known world, may have seemed to the writer an epoch which rounded off his story. But I think that the reason for the abruptness of the record's close is to be found in the continuity of the work of which it tells a part. It is the unfinished record of an incomplete work. The theme is the work of Christ through the ages, of which each successive depository of His energies can do but a small portion, and must leave that portion unfinished; the book does not so much end as stop. It is a fragment, because the work of which it tells is not yet a whole.

If, then, we put these two things--the beginning and the ending of the Acts--together, I think we get some thoughts about what Christ began to do and teach on earth; what He continues to do and teach in heaven; and how small and fragmentary a share in that work each individual servant of His has. Let us look at these points briefly.

**I.** First, then, we have here the suggestion of what Christ began to do and teach on earth.

Now, at first sight, the words of our text seem to be in strange and startling contradiction to the solemn cry which rang out of the darkness upon Calvary. Jesus said, It is finished! and gave up the ghost. Luke says He began to do and teach. Is there any contradiction between the two? Certainly not. It is one thing to lay a foundation; it is another thing to build a house. And the work of laying the foundation must be finished before the work of building the structure upon it can be begun. It is one thing to create a force; it is another thing to apply it. It is one thing to compound a medicine; it is another thing to administer it. It is one thing to unveil a truth; it is another to unfold its successive applications, and to work it into a belief and practice in the world. The former is the work of Christ which was finished on earth; the latter is the work which is continuous throughout the ages.

He began to do and teach, not in the sense that any should come after Him and do, as the disciples of most great discoverers and thinkers have had to do: namely, systematise, rectify, and complete the first glimpses of truth which the master had given. He began to do and teach, not in the sense that after He had passed into the heavens any new truth or force can for evermore be imparted to humanity in regard of the subjects which He taught and the energies which He brought. But whilst thus His work is complete, His earthly work is also initial. And we must remember that whatever distinction my text may mean to draw between the work of Christ in the past and that in the present and the future, it does not mean to imply that when He ascended up on high He had not completed the task for which He came, or that the world had to wait for anything more, either from Him or from others, to eke out the imperfections of His doctrine or the insufficiencies of His work.

Let us ever remember that the initial work of Christ on earth is complete in so far as the revelation of God to men is concerned. There will be no other. There is needed no other. Nothing more is possible than what He, by His words and by His life, by His gentleness and His grace, by His patience and His Passion, has unveiled to all men, of the heart and character of God. The revelation is complete, and he that professes to add anything to, or to substitute anything for, the finished teaching of Jesus Christ concerning God, and man's relation to God, and man's duty, destiny, and hopes, is a false teacher, and to follow him is fatal. All that ever come after Him and say, Here is something that Christ has not told you, are thieves and robbers, and the sheep will not hear them.

In like manner that work of Christ, which in some sense is initial, is complete as Redemption. This Man has offered up one sacrifice for sins for ever. And nothing more can He do than He has done; and nothing more can any man or all men do than was accomplished on the Cross of Calvary as giving a revelation, as effecting a redemption, as lodging in the heart of humanity, and in the midst of the stream of human history, a purifying energy, sufficient to cleanse the whole black stream. The past work which culminated on the Cross, and was sealed as adequate and accepted of God in the Resurrection and Ascension, needs no supplement, and can have no continuation, world without end. And so, whatever may be the meaning of that singular phrase, began to do and teach, it does not, in the smallest degree, conflict with the assurance that He hath ascended up on high, having obtained eternal redemption for us, and having finished the work which the Father gave Him to do.

**II.** But then, secondly, we have to notice what Christ continues to do and to teach after His Ascension.

I have already suggested that the phraseology of the first of my texts naturally leads to the conclusion that the theme of this Book of the Acts is the continuous work of the ascended Saviour, and that the language is not forced by being thus interpreted is very plain to any one who will glance even cursorily over the contents of the book itself. For there is nothing in it more obvious and remarkable than the way in which, at every turn in the narrative, all is referred to Jesus Christ Himself.

For instance, to cull one or two cases in order to bring the matter more plainly before you--When the Apostles determined to select another Apostle to fill Judas' place, they asked Jesus Christ to show which of these two Thou hast chosen. When Peter is called upon to explain the tongues at Pentecost he says, Jesus hath shed forth this which ye now see and hear. When the writer would tell the reason of the large first increase to the Church, he says, The Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved. Peter and John go into the Temple to heal the lame man, and their words to him are, Do not think that our power or holiness is any factor in your cure. The Name hath made this man whole. It is the Lord that appears to Paul and to Ananias, to the one on the road to Damascus and to the other in the city. It is the Lord to whom Peter refers Aeneas when he says, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole. It was the Lord that opened the heart of Lydia. It was the Lord that appeared to Paul in Corinth, and said to him, I have much people in this city; and again, when in the prison at Jerusalem, He assured the Apostle that he would be carried to Rome. And so, at every turn in the narrative, we find that Christ is presented as influencing men's hearts, operating upon outward events, working miracles, confirming His word, leading His servants, and prescribing for them their paths, and all which they do is done by the hand of the Lord with them confirming the word which they spoke. Jesus Christ is the Actor, and He only is the Actor; men are His implements and instruments.

The same point of view is suggested by another of the characteristics of this book, which it shares in common with all Scripture narratives, and that is the stolid indifference with which it picks up and drops men, according to the degree in which, for the moment, they are the instruments of Christ's power. Supposing a man had been writing Acts of the Apostles, do you think it would have been possible that of the greater number of them he should not say a word, that concerning those of whom he does speak he should deal with them as this book does, barely mentioning the martyrdom of James, one of the four chief Apostles; allowing Peter to slip out of the narrative after the great meeting of the Church at Jerusalem; letting Philip disappear without a hint of what he did thereafter; lodging Paul in Rome and leaving him there, with no account of his subsequent work or martyrdom? Such phenomena--and they might be largely multiplied--are only explicable upon one hypothesis. As long as electricity streams on the carbon point it glows and is visible, but when the current is turned to another lamp we see no more of the bit of carbon. As long as God uses a man the man is of interest to the writers of the Scriptures. When God uses another one, they drop the first, and have no more care about him, because their theme is not men and their doings, but God's doings through men.

On us, and in us, and by us, and for us, if we are His servants, Jesus Christ is working all through the ages. He is the Lord of Providence, He is the King of history, in His hand is the book with the seven seals; He sends His Spirit, and where His Spirit is He is; and what His Spirit does He does. And thus He continues to teach and to work from His throne in the heavens.

He continues to teach, not by the communication of new truth. That is finished. The volume of Revelation is complete. The last word of the divine utterances hath been spoken until that final word which shall end Time and crumble the earth. But the application of the completed Revelation, the unfolding of all that is wrapped in germ in it; the growing of the seed into a tree, the realisation more completely by individuals and communities of the principles and truths which Jesus Christ has brought us by His life and His death--that is the work that is going on to-day, and that will go on till the end of the world. For the old Puritan belief is true, though the modern rationalistic mutilations of it are false, God hath more light yet to break forth--and our modern men stop there. But what the sturdy old Puritan said was, more light yet to break forth from His holy Word. Jesus Christ teaches the ages--through the lessons of providence and the communication of His Spirit to His Church--to understand what He gave the world when He was here.

In like manner He works. The foundation is laid, the healing medicine is prepared, the cleansing element is cast into the mass of humanity; what remains is the application and appropriation, and incorporation in conduct, of the redeeming powers that Jesus Christ has brought. And that work is going on, and will go on, till the end.

Now these truths of our Lord's continuous activity in teaching and working from heaven may yield us some not unimportant lessons. What a depth and warmth and reality the thoughts give to the Christian's relation to Jesus Christ! We have to look back to that Cross as the foundation of all our hope. Yes! But we have to think, not only of a Christ who did something for us long ago in the past, and there an end, but of a Christ who to-day lives and reigns, to do and to teach according to our necessities. What a sweetness and sacredness such thoughts impart to all external events, which we may regard as being the operation of His love, and as moved by the hands that were nailed to the Cross for us, and now hold the sceptre of the universe for the blessing of mankind! What a fountain of hope they open in estimating future probabilities of victory for truth and goodness! The forces of good and evil in the world seem very disproportionate, but we forget too often to take Christ into account. It is not we that have to fight against evil; at the best we are but the sword which Christ wields, and all the power is in the hand that wields it. Great men die, good men die; Jesus Christ is not dead. Paul was martyred: Jesus lives; He is the anchor of our hope. We see miseries and mysteries enough, God knows. The prospects of all good causes seem often clouded and dark. The world has an awful power of putting drags upon all chariots that bear blessings, and of turning to evil every good. You cannot diffuse education, but you diffuse the taste for rubbish and something worse, in the shape of books. No good thing but has its shadow of evil attendant upon it. And if we had only to estimate by visible or human forces, we might well sit down and wrap ourselves in the sackcloth of pessimism. We see not yet all things put under Him; but we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour, and the vision that cheered the first martyr--of Christ standing at the right hand of God'--is the rebuke of every fear and every gloomy anticipation for ourselves or for the world.

What a lesson of lowliness and of diligence it gives us! The jangling church at Corinth fought about whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas was the man to lead the Church, and the experience has been repeated over and over again. Who is Paul? Who is Apollos? but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man. Be not puffed up one against another. Be not wise in your own conceits. You are only a tool, only a pawn in the hand of the Great Player. If you have anything, it is because you get it from Him. See that you use it, and do not boast about it. Jesus Christ is the Worker, the only Worker; the Teacher, the only Teacher. All our wisdom is derived, all our light is enkindled. We are but the reeds through which His breath makes music. And shall the axe boast itself, either against or apart from Him that heweth therewith?

**III.** Lastly, we note the incompleteness of each man's share in the great work.

As I said, the book which is to tell the story of Christ's continuous unfinished work must stop abruptly. There is no help for it. If it was a history of Paul it would need to be wound up to an end and a selvage put to it, but as it is the history of Christ's working, the web is not half finished, and the shuttle stops in the middle of a cast. The book must be incomplete, because the work of which it is the record does not end until He shall have delivered up the Kingdom to the Father, and God shall be all in all.

So the work of each man is but a fragment of that great work. Every man inherits unfinished tasks from his predecessors, and leaves unfinished tasks to his successors. It is, as it used to be in the Middle Ages, when the hands that dug the foundations, or laid the first courses, of some great cathedral, were dead long generations before the gilded cross was set on the apex of the needlespire, and the glowing glass filled in to the painted windows. Enough for us, if we lay a stone, though it be but one stone in one of the courses of the great building.

Luke has left plenty of blank paper at the end of his second treatise, on which he meant that succeeding generations should write their partial contributions to the completed work. Dear friends, let us see that we write our little line, as monks in their monasteries used to keep the chronicle of the house, on which scribe after scribe toiled at its illuminated letters with loving patience for a little while, and then handed the pen from his dying hand to another. What does it matter though we drop, having done but a fragment? He gathers up the fragments into His completed work, and the imperfect services which He enabled any of us to do will all be represented in the perfect circle of His finished work. The Lord help us to be faithful to the power that works in us, and to leave Him to incorporate our fragments in His mighty whole!