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

**ACTS-005. THE APOSTOLIC WITNESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"21.* *Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us ... 22. must one be ordained to be a witness with us of His resurrection."*

*Acts 1:21-22*

The fact of Christ's Resurrection was the staple of the first Christian sermon recorded in this Book of the Acts of the Apostles. They did not deal so much in doctrine; they did not dwell very distinctly upon what we call, and rightly call, the atoning death of Christ; out they proclaimed what they had seen with their eyes--that He died and rose again.

And not only was the main subject of their teaching the Resurrection, but it was the Resurrection in one of its aspects and for one specific purpose. There are, speaking roughly, three main connections in which the fact of Christ's rising from the dead is viewed in Scripture, and these three successively emerge in the consciousness of the Early Church.

It was, first, a fact affecting Him, a testimony concerning Him, carrying with it necessarily some great truths with regard to Him, His character, His nature, and His work. And it was in that aspect mainly that the earliest preachers dealt with it. Then, as reflection and the guidance of God's good Spirit led them to understand more and more of the treasure which lay in the fact, it came to be to them, next, a pattern, and a pledge, and a prophecy of their own resurrection. The doctrine of man's immortality and the future life was evolved from it, and was felt to be implied in it. And then it came to be, thirdly and lastly, a symbol or figure of the spiritual resurrection and newness of life into which all they were born who participated in His death. They knew Him first by His Resurrection; they then knew the power of His Resurrection as a pledge of their own; and lastly, they knew it as being the pattern to which they were to be conformed even whilst here on earth.

The words which I have read for my text are the Apostle Peter's own description of what was the office of an Apostle--to be a witness with us of Christ's Resurrection. And the statement branches out, I think, into three considerations, to which I ask your attention now. First, we have here the witnesses; secondly, we have the sufficiency of their testimony; and thirdly, we have the importance of the fact to which they bear their witness. The Apostles are testimony-bearers. Their witness is enough to establish the fact. The fact to which they witness is all-important for the religion and the hopes of the world.

**I. First, then, the Witnesses.**

Here we have the head of the Apostolic College, the primate of the Twelve, on whose supposed primacy--which is certainly not a rock--such tremendous claims have been built, laying down the qualifications and the functions of an Apostle. How simply they present themselves to his mind! The qualification is only personal knowledge of Jesus Christ in His earthly history, because the function is only to attest His Resurrection. Their work was to bear witness to what they had seen with their eyes; and what was needed, therefore, was nothing more than such familiarity with Christ as should make them competent witnesses to the fact that He died, and to the fact that the same Jesus who had died, and whom they knew so well, rose again and went up to heaven.

The same conception of an Apostle's work lies in Christ's last solemn designation of them for their office, where their whole commission is included in the simple words, Ye shall be witnesses unto Me. It appears again and again in the earlier addresses reported in this book. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Whom God hath raised from the dead, whereof we are witnesses. With great power gave the Apostles witness of the Resurrection. We are His witnesses of these things. To Cornelius, Peter speaks of the Apostles as witnesses chosen before of God, who did eat and drink with Him after He rose from the dead'--and whose charge, received from Christ, was to testify that it is He which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. Paul at Antioch speaks of the Twelve, from whom he distinguishes himself, as being Christ's witnesses to the people'--and seems to regard them as specially commissioned to the Jewish nation, while he was sent to declare unto you'--Gentiles--the same glad tidings, in that God had raised up Jesus again. So we might go on accumulating passages, but these will suffice.

I need not spend time in elaborating or emphasising the contrast which the idea of the Apostolic office contained in these simple words presents to the portentous theories of later times. I need only remind you that, according to the Gospels, the work of the Apostles in Christ's lifetime embraced three elements, none of which were peculiar to them--to be with Christ, to preach, and to work miracles; that their characteristic work after His Ascension was this of witness-bearing; that the Church did not owe to them as a body its extension, nor Christian doctrine its form; that whilst Peter and James and John appear in the history, and Matthew perhaps wrote a Gospel, and the other James and Jude are probably the authors of the brief Epistles which bear their names--the rest of the Twelve never appear in the subsequent history. The Acts of the Apostles is a misnomer for Luke's second treatise. It tells the work of Peter alone among the Twelve. The Hellenists Stephen and Philip, the Cypriote Barnabas, and the man of Tarsus--greater than them all-- these spread the name of Christ beyond the limits of the Holy City and the chosen people. The solemn power of binding and loosing was not a prerogative of the Twelve, for we read that Jesus came where the disciples were assembled, and that the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord; and He breathed on them, and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted."

Where in all this is there a trace of the special Apostolic powers which have been alleged to be transmitted from them? Nowhere. Who was it that came and said, Brother Saul, the Lord hath sent me that thou mightest be filled with the Holy Ghost? A simple layman! Who was it that stood by, a passive and astonished spectator of the communication of spiritual gifts to Gentile converts, and could only say, Forasmuch, then, as God gave them the like gift, as He did unto us, what was I that I could withstand God? Peter, the leader of the Twelve!

Their task was apparently a humbler, really a far more important one. Their place was apparently a lowlier, really a loftier one. They had to lay broad and deep the basis for all the growth and grace of the Church, in the facts which they witnessed. Their work abides; and when the Celestial City is revealed to our longing hearts, in its foundations will be read the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb. Their office was testimony; and their testimony was to this effect--Hearken, we eleven men knew this Jesus. Some of us knew Him when He was a boy, and lived beside that little village where He was brought up. We were with Him for three whole years in close contact day and night. We all of us, though we were cowards, stood afar off with a handful of women when He was crucified. We saw Him dead. We saw His grave. We saw Him living, and we touched Him, and handled Him, and He ate and drank with us; and we, sinners that we are that tell it you, we went out with Him to the top of Olivet, and we saw Him go up into the skies. Do you believe us or do you not? We do not come in the first place to preach doctrines. We are not thinkers or moralists. We are plain men, telling a plain story, to the truth of which we pledge our senses. We do not want compliments about our spiritual elevation, or our pure morality. We do not want reverence as possessors of mysterious and exclusive powers. We want you to believe us as honest men, relating what we have seen. There are eleven of us, and there are five hundred at our back, and we have all got the one simple story to tell. It is, indeed, a gospel, a philosophy, a theology, the reconciliation of earth and heaven, the revelation of God to man, and of man to himself, the unveiling of the future world, the basis of hope; but we bring it to you first as a thing that happened upon this earth of ours, which we saw with our eyes, and of which we are the witnesses.

To that work there can be no successors. Some of the Apostles were inspired to be the writers of the authoritative fountains of religious truth; but that gift did not belong to them all, and was not the distinctive possession of the Twelve. The power of working miracles, and of communicating supernatural gifts, was not confined to them, but is found exercised by other believers, as well as by a whole presbytery. And as for what was properly their task, and their qualifications, there can be no succession, for there is nothing to succeed to, but what cannot be transmitted--the sight of the risen Saviour, and the witness to His Resurrection as a fact certified by their senses.

**II. The sufficiency of the testimony.**

Peter regards (as does the whole New Testament, and as did Peter's Master, when He appointed these men) the witness which he and his fellows bore as enough to lay firm and deep the historical fact of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The first point that I would suggest here is this: if we think of Christianity as being mainly a set of truths--spiritual, moral, intellectual--then, of course, the way to prove Christianity is to show the consistency of that body of truths with one another, their consistency with other truths, their derivation from admitted principles, their reasonableness, their adaptation to men's nature, the refining and elevating effects of their adoption, and so on. If we think of Christianity, on the other hand, as being first a set of historical facts which carry the doctrines, then the way to prove Christianity is not to show how reasonable it is, not to show how it has been anticipated and expected and desired, not to show how it corresponds with men's needs and men's longings, not to show what large and blessed results follow from its acceptance. All these are legitimate ways of establishing principles; but the way to establish a fact is only one--that is, to find somebody that can say, I know it, for I saw it.

And my belief is that the course of modern apologetics, as they are called--methods of defending Christianity--has followed too slavishly the devious course of modern antagonism, and has departed from its real stronghold when it has consented to argue the question on these (as I take them to be) lower and less sufficing grounds. I am thankful to adopt all that wise Christian apologists may have said in regard to the reasonableness of Christianity; its correspondence with men's wants, the blessings that follow from it, and so forth; but the Gospel is first and foremost a history, and you cannot prove that a thing has happened by showing how very desirable it is that it should happen, how reasonable it is to expect that it should happen, what good results would follow from believing that it has happened--all that is irrelevant. Think of it as first a history, and then you are shut up to the old-fashioned line of evidence, irrefragable as I take it to be, to which all these others may afterwards be appended as confirmatory. It is true, because sufficient eye-witnesses assert it. It did happen, because it is commended to us by the ordinary canons of evidence which we accept in regard to all other matters of fact.

With regard to the sufficiency of the specific evidence here, I wish to make only one or two observations.

Suppose you yield up everything that the most craving and unreasonable modern scepticism can demand as to the date and authorship of these tracts that make the New Testament, we have still left four letters of the Apostle Paul, which no one has ever denied, which the very extremest professors of the higher criticism themselves accept. These four are the Epistles to the Romans, the first and second to the Corinthians, and that to the Galatians. The dates which are assigned to these four letters by any one, believer or unbeliever, bring them within five-and-twenty years of the alleged date of Christ's resurrection.

Then what do we find in these undeniably and admittedly genuine letters, written a quarter of a century after the supposed fact? We find in all of them reference to it--the distinct allegation of it. We find in one of them that the Apostle states it as being the substance of his preaching and of his brethren's preaching, that Christ died and rose again according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by individuals, by multitudes, by a whole five hundred, the greater portion of whom were living and available as witnesses when he wrote.

And we find that side by side with this statement, there is the reference to his own vision of the risen Saviour, which carries us up within ten years of the alleged fact. So, then, by the evidence of admittedly genuine documents, which are dealing with a state of things ten years after the supposed resurrection, there was a unanimous concurrence of belief on the part of the whole primitive Church, so that even the heretics who said that there was no resurrection of the dead could be argued with on the ground of their belief in Christ's Resurrection. The whole Church with one voice asserted it. And there were hundreds of living men ready to attest it. It was not a handful of women who fancied they had seen Him once, very early in the dim twilight of a spring morning--but it was half a thousand that had beheld Him. He had been seen by them not once, but often; not far off, but close at hand; not in one place, but in Galilee and Jerusalem; not under one set of circumstances, but at all hours of the day, abroad and in the house, walking and sitting, speaking and eating, by them singly and in numbers. He had not been seen only by excited expectants of His appearance, but by incredulous eyes and surprised hearts, who doubted ere they worshipped, and paused before they said, My Lord and my God! They neither hoped that He would rise, nor believed that He had risen; and the world may be thankful that they were slow of heart to believe.

Would not the testimony which can be alleged for Christ's Resurrection be enough to guarantee any event but this? And if so, why is it not enough to guarantee this too? If, as nobody denies, the Early Church, within ten years of Christ's Resurrection, believed in His Resurrection, and were ready to go, and did, many of them, go to the death in assertion of their veracity in declaring it, then one of two things--Either they were right or they were wrong; and if the latter, one of two things--If the Resurrection be not a fact, then that belief was either a delusion or a deceit.

It was not a delusion, for such an illusion is altogether unexampled; and it is absurd to think of it as being shared by a multitude like the Early Church. Nations have said, Our King is not dead--he is gone away and he will come back. Loving disciples have said, Our Teacher lives in solitude and will return to us. But this is no parallel to these. This is not a fond imagination giving an apparent substance to its own creation, but sense recognising first the fact, He is dead, and then, in opposition to expectation, and when hope had sickened to despair, recognising the astounding fact, He liveth that was dead; and to suppose that that should have been the rooted conviction of hundreds of men who were not idiots, finds no parallel in the history of human illusions, and no analogy in such legends as those to which I have referred.

It was not a myth, for a myth does not grow in ten years. And there was no motive to frame one, if Christ was dead and all was over. It was not a deceit, for the character of the men, and the character of the associated morality, and the obvious absence of all self-interest, and the persecutions and sorrows which they endured, make it inconceivable that the fairest building that ever hath been reared in the world, and which is cemented by men's blood, should be built upon the mud and slime of a conscious deceit!

And all this we are asked to put aside at the bidding of a glaring begging of the whole question, and an outrageous assertion which no man that believes in a God at all can logically maintain, viz. that no testimony can reach to the miraculous, or that miracles are impossible.

No testimony reach to the miraculous! Well, put it into a concrete form. Can testimony not reach to this: I know, because I saw, that a man was dead; I know, because I saw, a dead man live again? If testimony can do that, I think we may safely leave the verbal sophism that it cannot reach to the miraculous to take care of itself.

And, then, with regard to the other assumption--miracle is impossible. That is an illogical begging of the whole question in dispute. It cannot avail to brush aside testimony. You cannot smother facts by theories in that fashion. Again, one would like to know how it comes that our modern men of science, who protest so much against science being corrupted by metaphysics, should commit themselves to an assertion like that? Surely that is stark, staring metaphysics. It seems as if they thought that the metaphysics which said that there was anything behind the physical universe was unscientific; but that the metaphysics which said that there was nothing behind physics was quite legitimate, and ought to be allowed to pass muster. What have the votaries of pure physical science, who hold the barren word-contests of theology and the proud pretensions of philosophy in such contempt, to do out-Heroding Herod in that fashion, and venturing on metaphysical assertions of such a sort? Let them keep to their own line, and tell us all that crucibles and scalpels can reveal, and we will listen as becomes us. But when they contradict their own principles in order to deny the possibility of miracle, we need only give them back their own words, and ask that the investigation of facts shall not be hampered and clogged with metaphysical prejudices. No! no! Christ made no mistake when He built His Church upon that rock--the historical evidence of a resurrection from the dead, though all the wise men of Areopagus hill may make its cliffs ring with mocking laughter when we say, upon Easter morning, The Lord is risen indeed!

**III. There is a final consideration connected with these words, which I must deal with very briefly--the importance of the fact which is thus borne witness to.**

I have already pointed out that the Resurrection of Christ is viewed in Scripture in three aspects: in its bearing upon His nature and work, as a pattern for our future, and as a symbol of our present newness of life. The importance to which I refer now applies only to that first aspect.

With the Resurrection of Jesus Christ stands or falls the Divinity of Christ. As Paul said, in that letter to which I have referred, Declared to be the Son of God, with power by the resurrection from the dead. As Peter said in the sermon that follows this one of our text, God hath made this same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. As Paul said, on Mars Hill, He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained, whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead.

The case is this. Jesus lived as we know, and in the course of that life claimed to be the Son of God. He made such broad and strange assertions as these--I and My Father are One. I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. I am the Resurrection and the Life. He that believeth on Me shall never die. The Son of Man must suffer many things, and the third day He shall rise again. Thus speaking He dies, and rises again and passes into the heavens. That is the last mightiest utterance of the same testimony, which spake from heaven at His baptism, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased! If He be risen from the dead, then His loftiest claims are confirmed from the throne, and we can see in Him, the Son of God. But if death holds Him still, and the Syrian stars look down upon His grave, as a modern poet tells us in his dainty English that they do, then what becomes of these words of His, and of our estimate of the character of Him, the speaker? Let us hear no more about the pure morality of Jesus Christ, and the beauty of His calm and lofty teaching, and the rest of it. Take away His resurrection from the dead, and we have left beautiful precepts, and fair wisdom, deformed with a monstrous self-assertion and the constant reiteration of claims which the event proves to have been baseless. Either He has risen from the dead or His words were blasphemy. Men nowadays talk very lightly of throwing aside the supernatural portions of the Gospel history, and retaining reverence for the great Teacher, the pure moralist of Nazareth. The Pharisees put the issue more coarsely and truly when they said, That deceiver said, while He was yet alive, after three days I will rise again. Yes! one or the other. Declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, or--that which our lips refuse to say even as a hypothesis!

Still further, with the Resurrection stands or falls Christ's whole work for our redemption. If He died, like other men--if that awful bony hand has got its grip upon Him too, then we have no proof that the cross was anything but a martyr's cross. His Resurrection is the proof of His completed work of redemption. It is the proof--followed as it is by His Ascension--that His death was not the tribute which for Himself He had to pay, but the ransom for us. His Resurrection is the condition of His present activity. If He has not risen, He has not put away sin; and if He has not put it away by the sacrifice of Himself, none has, and it remains. We come back to the old dreary alternative: if Christ be not risen, your faith is vain, and our preaching is vain. Ye are yet in your sins, and they which have fallen asleep in Christ with unfulfilled hopes fixed upon a baseless vision--they of whom we hoped, through our tears, that they live with Him--they are perished. For, if He be not risen, there is no resurrection; and, if He be not risen, there is no forgiveness; and, if He be not risen, there is no Son of God; and the world is desolate, and the heaven is empty, and the grave is dark, and sin abides, and death is eternal. If Christ be dead, then that awful vision is true, As I looked up into the immeasurable heavens for the Divine Eye, it froze me with an empty, bottomless eye-socket.

There is nothing between us and darkness, despair, death, but that ancient message, I declare unto you the Gospel which I preach, by which ye are saved if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was raised the third day according to the Scriptures.

Well, then, may we take up the ancient glad salutation, The Lord is risen! and, turning from these thoughts of the disaster and despair that that awful supposition drags after it, fall back upon sober certainty, and with the Apostle break forth in triumph, Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept!