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

**ACTS-013. THE PRINCE OF LIFE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"14.* *But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; 15. And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses."*

*Acts 3:14*

This early sermon of Peter's, to the people, is marked by a comparative absence of the highest view of Christ's person and work. It is open to us to take one of two explanations of that fact. We may either say that the Apostle was but learning the full significance of the marvellous events that had passed so recently, or we may say that he suited his words to his audience, and did not declare all that he knew.

At the same time, we should not overlook the significance of the Christology which it does contain. His child Jesus is really a translation of Isaiah's Servant of the Lord. The Holy One and the Just is a distinct assertion of Jesus' perfect, sinless manhood, and the Prince of Life plainly asserts Jesus to be the Lord and Source of it.

Notice, too, the pathetic denied: was Peter thinking of the shameful hour in his own experience? It is a glimpse into the depth of his penitence, and the tenderness with others' sins which it had given him, that he twice uses the word here, as if he had said You have done no more than I did myself. It is not for me to heap reproaches on you. We have been alike in sin--and I can preach forgiveness to you sinners, because I have received it for myself.

Notice, too, the manifold antitheses of the words. Barabbas is set against Christ; the Holy One and the Just against a robber, the Prince of Life against a murderer. You killed--the Prince of Life. You killed--God raised.

There are here three paradoxes, three strange and contradictory things: the paradoxes of man's perverted and fatal choice, of man's hate bringing death to the Lord of life, and of God's love and power causing life to come by death.

**I. The paradox of man's fatal choice.**

There occurs often in history a kind of irony in which the whole tendency of a time or of a conflict is summed up in a single act, and certainly the fact which is referred to here is one of these. Let us put it as it would have seemed to an onlooker then, leaving out for the moment any loftier meaning which may attach to it.

Peter's words here, thus boldly addressed to the people, are a strong testimony to the impression which the character of Christ had made on His contemporaries. The Holy One and the Just implies moral perfection. The whole narrative of the Crucifixion brings out that impression. Pilate's wife speaks with awe of that just person. Which of you convinceth me of sin? If I have done evil, bear witness of the evil. I find no fault in Him. We may take it for granted that the impression Jesus made among His contemporaries was, at the lowest, that He was a pure and good man.

The nation had to choose one of two. Jesus was the one; who was the other? A man half brigand, half rebel, who had raised some petty revolt against Rome, more as a pretext for robbery and crime than from patriotism, and whose hands reeked with blood. And this was the nation's hero!

The juxtaposition throws a strong light on the people's motive for rejecting Jesus. The rulers may have condemned Him for blasphemy, but the people had a more practical reason, and in it no doubt the rulers shared. It was not because He claimed to be the Messiah that they gave Him up to Pilate, but because He would not meet their notions of what the Messiah should be and do. If He had called them to arms, not a man of them would have betrayed Him to Pilate, but all, or the more daring of them, would have rallied to His standard. Their hate was the measure of their deep disappointment with His course. If instead of showing love and meekness, He had blown up the coals of religious hatred; if instead of going about doing good, He had mustered the men of lawless Galilee for a revolt, would these fawning hypocrites have dragged him to Pilate on the charge of forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, and of claiming to be a King? Why, there was not one of them but would have been glad to murder every tax-gatherer in Palestine, not one of them but bore inextinguishable in his inmost heart the faith in one Christ a King. And if that meek and silent martyr had only lifted His finger, He might have had legions of His accusers at His back, ready to sweep Pilate and his soldiers out of Jerusalem. They saw Christ's goodness and holiness. It did not attract them. They wanted a Messiah who would bring them outward freedom by the use of outward weapons, and so they all shouted Not this man but Barabbas! The whole history of the nation was condensed in that one cry--their untamable obstinacy, their blindness to the light of God, their fierce grasp of the promises which they did not understand, their hard worldliness, their cruel patriotism, their unquenchable hatred of their oppressors, which was only equalled by their unquenchable hatred of those who showed them the only true way for deliverance.

And this strange paradox is not confined to these Jews. It is repeated wherever Christ is presented to men. We are told that all men naturally admire goodness, and so on. Men mostly know it when they see it, but I doubt whether they all either admire or like it. People generally had rather have something more outward and tangible. It is not spiritualising this incident, but only referring it to the principle of which it is an illustration, to ask you to see in it the fatal choice of multitudes. Christ is set before us all, and His beauty is partially seen but is dimmed by externals. Men's desires are fixed on gross sensuous delights, or on success in business, or on intellectual eminence, or on some of the thousand other visible and temporal objects that outshine, to vulgar eyes, the less dazzling lustre of the things unseen. They appreciate these, and make heroes of the men who have won them. These are their ideals, but of Jesus they have little care.

And is it not true that all such competitors of His, when they lead men to prefer them to Him, are murderers, in a sadder sense than Barabbas was? Do they not slay the souls of their admirers? Is it not but too ghastly a reality that all who thus choose them draw down ruin on themselves and love death?

This fatal paradox is being repeated every day in the lives of thousands. The crowds who yelled, Not this man but Barabbas! were less guilty and less mad than those who to-day cry, Not Jesus but worldly wealth, or fleeting bodily delights, or gratified ambition!

**II. The paradox of Death's seeming conquest over the Lord of Life.**

The word rendered Prince means an originator, and hence a leader and hence a lord. Whether Peter had yet reached a conception of the divinity of Jesus or not, he had clearly reached a much higher one of Him than he had attained before His death. In some sense he was beginning to recognise that His relation to life was loftier and more mysterious than that of other men. Was it His death only that thus elevated the disciples' thoughts of Jesus? Strange that if He died and there an end, such a result should have followed. One would have expected His death to have shattered their faith in Him, but somehow it strengthened their faith. Why did they not all continue to lament, as did the two of them on the road to Emmaus: We trusted that this had been He who should have redeemed Israel--but now we trust no more, and our dreams are buried in His grave? Why did they not go back to Galilee and their nets? What raised their spirits, their courage, and increased their understanding of Him, and their faith in Him? How came His death to be the occasion of consolidating, not of shattering, their fellowship? How came Peter to be so sure that a man who had died was the Prince of Life? The answer, the only one psychologically possible, is in what Peter here proclaims to unwilling ears, Whom God raised from the dead.

The fact of the Resurrection sets the fact of the Death in another light. Meditating on these twin facts, the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, we hear Himself speaking as He did to John in Patmos: I am the Living One who became dead, and lo, I am alive for evermore!

If we try to listen with the ears of these first hearers of Peter's words, we shall better appreciate his daring paradox. Think of the tremendous audacity of the claim which they make, that Jesus should be the Prince of Life, and of the strange contradiction to it which the fact that they killed Him seems to give. How could death have power over the Prince of Life? That sounds as if, indeed, the sun were turned into darkness, or as if fire became ice. That brief clause ye killed the Prince of Life must have seemed sheer absurdity to the hearers whose hands were still red with the blood of Jesus.

But there is another paradox here. It was strange that death should be able to invade that Life, but it is no less strange that men should be able to inflict it. But we must not forget that Jesus died, not because men slew Him, but because He willed to die. The whole of the narratives of the Crucifixion in the Gospels avoid using the word death. Such expressions as He gave up the ghost, or the like, are used, implying what is elsewhere distinctly asserted, that His death was His offering of Himself, the result of His own volition, not of exhaustion or of torture. Thus, even in dying, He showed Himself the Lord of Life and the Master of Death. Men indeed fastened Jesus to the Cross, but He died, not because He was so fastened, but because He willed to make His soul an offering for sin. Bound as it were to a rock in the midst of the ocean, He, of His own will, and at His own time, bowed His head, and let the waves of the sea of death roll over it.

**III. The triumphant divine paradox of life given and death conquered through a death.**

Jesus is Prince' in the sense of being source of life to mankind, just because He died. Hie death is the death of Death. His apparent defeat is His real victory.

By His death He takes away our sins.

By His death He abolishes death.

The physical fact remains, but all else which makes the sting of death to men is gone. It is no more a solitude, for He has died, and thereby He becomes a companion in that hour to every lover of His. Its darkness changes into light to those who, by following Him, have, even there, the light of life. This Samson carried away the gates of the prison on His own strong shoulders when He came forth from it. It is His to say, O death! I will be thy plague.

By His death He diffuses life.

The Spirit was not given till Jesus was glorified, which glorification is John's profound synonym for His crucifixion. When the alabaster box of His pure body was broken, the whole house of humanity was filled with the odour of the ointment.

So the great paradox becomes a blessed truth, that man's deepest sin works out God's highest act of Love and Pardon.