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

**ACTS-015. THE SERVANT OF THE LORD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities."*

*Acts 3:26*

So ended Peter's bold address to the wondering crowd gathered in the Temple courts around him, with his companion John and the lame man whom they had healed. A glance at his words will show how extraordinarily outspoken and courageous they are. He charges home on his hearers the guilt of Christ's death, unfalteringly proclaims His Messiahship, bears witness to His Resurrection and Ascension, asserts that He is the End and Fulfilment of ancient revelation, and offers to all the great blessings that Christ brings. And this fiery, tender oration came from the same lips which, a few weeks before, had been blanched with fear before a flippant maidservant, and had quivered as they swore, I know not the man!

One or two simple observations may be made by way of introduction. Unto you first--first implies second; and so the Apostle has shaken himself clear of the Jews' narrow belief that Messias belonged to them only, and is already beginning to contemplate the possibility of a transference of the kingdom of God to the outlying Gentiles. God having raised up His Son--that expression has no reference, as it might at first seem, to the fact of the Resurrection; but is employed in the same sense as, and indeed looks back to, previous words. For he had just quoted Moses' declaration, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you from your brethren. So it is Christ's equipment and appointment for His office, and not His Resurrection, which is spoken about here. His Son Jesus--the Revised Version more accurately translates His Servant Jesus. I shall have a word or two to say about that translation presently, but in the meantime I simply note the fact.

With this slight explanation let us now turn to two or three of the aspects of the words before us.

**I. First, I note the extraordinary transformation which they indicate in the speaker.**

I have already referred to his cowardice a very short time before. That transformation from a coward to a hero he shared in common with his brethren. On one page we read, They all forsook Him and fled. We turn over half a dozen leaves and we read: They departed from the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. What did that?

Then there is another transformation no less swift, sudden, and inexplicable, except on one hypothesis. All through Christ's life the disciples had been singularly slow to apprehend the highest aspects of His teachings, and they had clung with a strange obstinacy to their narrow Pharisaic and Jewish notions of the Messiah as coming to establish a temporal dominion, in which Israel was to ride upon the necks of the subject nations. And now, all at once, this Apostle, and his fellows with him, have stepped from these puerile and narrow ideas out into this large place, that he and they recognise that the Jew had no exclusive possession of Messiah's blessings, and that these blessings consisted in no external kingdom, but lay mainly and primarily in His turning every one of you from your iniquities. At one time the Apostles stood upon a gross, low, carnal level, and in a few weeks they were, at all events, feeling their way to, and to a large extent had possession of, the most spiritual and lofty aspects of Christ's mission. What did that?

Something had come in between which wrought more, in a short space, than all the three years of Christ's teaching and companionship had done for them. What was it? Why did they not continue in the mood which two of them are reported to have been in, after the Crucifixion, when they said--It is all up! we trusted that this had been He, but the force of circumstances has shivered the confidence into fragments, and there is no such hope left for us any longer. What brought them out of that Slough of Despond?

I would put it to any fair-minded man whether the psychological facts of this sudden maturing of these childish minds, and their sudden change from slinking cowards into heroes who did not blanch before the torture and the scaffold, are accountable, if you strike out the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Pentecost? It seems to me that, for the sake of avoiding a miracle, the disbelievers in the Resurrection accept an impossibility, and tie themselves to an intellectual absurdity. And I for one would rather believe in a miracle than believe in an uncaused change, in which the Apostles take exactly the opposite course from that which they necessarily must have taken, if there had not been the facts that the New Testament asserts that there were, Christ's rising again from the dead, and Ascension.

Why did not the Church share the fate of John's disciples, who scattered like sheep without a shepherd when Herod chopped off their master's head? Why did not the Church share the fate of that abortive rising, of which we know that when Theudas, its leader, was slain, all, as many as believed on him, came to nought. Why did these men act in exactly the opposite way? I take it that, as you cannot account for Christ except on the hypothesis that He is the Son of the Highest, you cannot account for the continuance of the Christian Church for a week after the Crucifixion, except on the hypothesis that the men who composed it were witnesses of His Resurrection, and saw Him floating upwards and received into the Shechinah cloud and lost to their sight. Peter's change, witnessed by the words of my text--these bold and clear-sighted words--seems to me to be a perfect monstrosity, and incapable of explication, unless he saw the risen Lord, beheld the ascended Christ, was touched with the fiery Spirit descending on Pentecost, and so out of weakness was made strong, and from a babe sprang to the stature of a man in Christ.

**II. Look at these words as setting forth a remarkable view of Christ.**

I have already referred to the fact that the word rendered son ought rather to be rendered servant. It literally means child or boy, and appears to have been used familiarly, just in the same fashion as we use the same expression boy, or its equivalent maid, as a more gentle designation for a servant. Thus the kindly centurion, when he would bespeak our Lord's care for his menial, calls him his boy; and our Bible there translates rightly servant.

Again, the designation is that which is continually employed in the Greek translation of the Old Testament as the equivalent for the well-known prophetic phrase the Servant of Jehovah, which, as you will remember, is characteristic of the second portion of the prophecies of Isaiah. And consequently we find that, in a quotation of Isaiah's prophecy in the Gospel of Matthew, the very phrase of our text is there employed: Behold My Servant whom I uphold!

Now, it seems as if this designation of our Lord as God's Servant was very familiar to Peter's thoughts at this stage of the development of Christian doctrine. For we find the name employed twice in this discourse--in the thirteenth verse, the God of our Fathers hath glorified His Servant Jesus, and again in my text. We also find it twice in the next chapter, where Peter, offering up a prayer amongst his brethren, speaks of Thy Holy Child Jesus, and prays that signs and wonders may be done through the name of that Holy Child. So, then, I think we may fairly take it that, at the time in question, this thought of Jesus as the Servant of the Lord had come with especial force to the primitive Church. And the fact that the designation never occurs again in the New Testament seems to show that they passed on from it into a deeper perception than even it attests of who and what this Jesus was in relation to God.

But, at all events, we have in our text the Apostle looking back to that dim, mysterious Figure which rises up with shadowy lineaments out of the great prophecy of Isaiah, and thrilling with awe and wonder, as he sees, bit by bit, in the Face painted on the prophetic canvas, the likeness of the Face into which he had looked for three blessed years, that now began to tell him more than they had done whilst their moments were passing.

The Servant of the Lord--that means, first of all, that Christ, in all which He does, meekly and obediently executes the Father's will. As He Himself said, I come not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me. But it carries us further than that, to a point about which I would like to say one word now; and that is, the clear recognition that the very centre of Jewish prophecy is the revelation of the personality of the Christ. Now, it seems to me that present tendencies, discussions about the nature and limits of inspiration, investigations which, in many directions, are to be welcomed and are fruitful as to the manner of origin of the books of the Old Testament, and as to their collection into a Canon and a whole--that all this new light has a counterbalancing disadvantage, in that it tends somewhat to obscure in men's minds the great central truth about the revelation of God in Israel--viz. that it was all progressive, and that its goal and end was Jesus Christ. The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy, and however much we may have to learn--and I have no doubt that we have a great deal to learn, about the composition, the structure, the authorship, the date of these ancient books--I take leave to say that the unlearned reader, who recognises that they all converge on Jesus Christ, has hold of the clue of the labyrinth, and has come nearer to the marrow of the books than the most learned investigators, who see all manner of things besides in them, and do not see that they that went before cried, saying, Hosanna! Blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord!

And so I venture to commend to you, brethren--not as a barrier against any reverent investigation, not as stopping any careful study--this as the central truth concerning the ancient revelation, that it had, for its chief business, to proclaim the coming of the Servant of Jehovah, Jesus the Christ.

**III. And now, lastly, look at these words as setting forth the true centre of Christ's work.**

He has sent Him to bless you in turning away every one of you from his iniquities. I have already spoken about the gross, narrow, carnal apprehensions of Messiah's work which cleaved to the disciples during all our Lord's life here, and which disturbed even the sanctity of the upper chamber at that last meal, with squabbles about precedence which had an eye to places in the court of the Messiah when He assumed His throne. But here Peter has shaken himself clear of all these, and has grasped the thought that, whatever derivative and secondary blessings of an external and visible sort may, and must, come in Messiah's train, the blessing which He brings is of a purely spiritual and inward character, and consists in turning away single souls from their love and practice of evil. That is Christ's true work.

The Apostle does not enlarge as to how it is done. We know how it is done. Jesus turns away men from sin because, by the magnetism of His love, and the attractive raying out of influence from His Cross, He turns them to Himself. He turns us from our iniquities by the expulsive power of a new affection, which, coming into our hearts like a great river into some foul Augean stable, sweeps out on its waters all the filth that no broom can ever clear out in detail. He turns men from their iniquities by His gift of a new life, kindred with that from which it is derived.

There is an old superstition that lightning turned whatever it struck towards the point from which the flash came, so that a tree with its thousand leaves had each of them pointed to that quarter in the heavens where the blaze had been.

And so Christ, when He flings out the beneficent flash that slays only our evil, and vitalises ourselves, turns us to Him, and away from our transgressions. Turn us, O Christ, and we shall be turned.

Ah, brethren! that is the blessing that we need most, for iniquities are universal; and so long as man is bound to his sin it will embitter all sweetnesses, and neutralise every blessing. It is not culture, valuable as that is in many ways, that will avail to stanch man's deepest wounds. It is not a new social order that will still the discontent and the misery of humanity. You may adopt collective economic and social arrangements, and divide property out as it pleases you. But as long as man continues selfish he will continue sinful, and as long as he continues sinful any social order will be pregnant with sorrow, and when it is finished it will bring forth death. You have to go deeper down than all that, down as deep as this Apostle goes in this sermon of his, and recognise that Christ's prime blessing is the turning of men from their iniquities, and that only after that has been done will other good come.

How shallow, by the side of that conception, do modern notions of Jesus as the great social Reformer look! These are true, but they want their basis, and their basis lies only here, that He is the Redeemer of individuals from their sins. There were people in Christ's lifetime who were all untouched by His teachings, but when they found that He gave bread miraculously they said, This is of a truth the Prophet! That's the prophet for my money; the Man that can make bread, and secure material well-being. Have not certain modern views of Christ's work and mission a good deal in common with these vulgar old Jews--views which regard Him mainly as contributing to the material good, the social and economical well-being of the world?

Now, I believe that He does that. And I believe that Christ's principles are going to revolutionise society as it exists at present. But I am sure that we are on a false scent if we attempt to preach consequences without proclaiming their antecedents, and that such preaching will end, as all such attempts have ended, in confusion and disappointment.

They used to talk about Jesus Christ, in the first French Revolution, as the Good Sansculotte. Perfectly true! But as the basis of that, and of all representations of Him, that will have power on the diseases of the community, we have to preach Him as the Saviour of the individual from his sin.

And so, brethren, has He saved you? Do you begin your notions of Jesus Christ where His work begins? Do you feel that what you want most is neither culture nor any superficial and external changes, but something that will deal with the deep, indwelling, rooted, obstinate self-regard which is the centre of all sin? And have you gone alone to Him as a sinful man? As the Apostle here suggests, Jesus Christ does not save communities. The doctor has his patients into the consulting-room one by one. There is no applying of Christ's benefits to men in batches, by platoons and regiments, as Clovis baptized his Franks; but you have to go, every one of you, through the turnstile singly, and alone to confess, and alone to be absolved, and alone to be turned, from your iniquity.

If I might venture to alter the position of words in my text, I would lay them, so modified, on the hearts of all my friends whom my words may reach now, and say, Unto you--unto thee, God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, first in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.