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

**ACTS-016. THE FIRST BLAST OF THE TEMPEST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, 2. Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3. And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now even-tide. 4. Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand. 5. And it came to pass on the morrow, that their rulers, and elders, and scribes, 6. And Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the kindred of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. 7. And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, By what power, or by what name, have ye done this? 8. Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, 9. If we this day be examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole; 10. Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by Him doth this man stand here before you whole. 11. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. 12. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. 13. Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. 14. And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it."*

*Acts 4:1-14*

Hitherto the Jewish authorities had let the disciples alone, either because their attention had not been drawn even by Pentecost and the consequent growth of the Church, or because they thought that to ignore the new sect was the best way to end it. But when its leaders took to vehement preaching in Solomon's porch, and crowds eagerly listened, it was time to strike in.

Our passage describes the first collision of hostile authority with Christian faith, and shows, as in a glass, the constant result of that collision in all ages.

The motives actuating the assailants are significantly analysed, and may be distributed among the three classes enumerated. The priests and the captain of the Temple would be annoyed by the very fact that Peter and John taught the people: the former, because they were jealous of their official prerogative: the latter, because he was responsible for public order, and a riot in the Temple court would have been a scandal. The Saddueees were indignant at the substance of the teaching, which affirmed the resurrection of the dead, which they denied, and alleged it as having occurred in Jesus.

The position of Sadducees and Pharisees is inverted in Acts as compared with the Gospels. While Christ lived, the Pharisees were the soul of the opposition to Him, and His most solemn warnings fell on them; after the Resurrection, the Sadducees head the opposition, and among the Pharisees are some, like Gamaliel and afterwards Paul, who incline to the new faith. It was the Resurrection that made the difference, and the difference is an incidental testimony to the fact that Christ's Resurrection was proclaimed from the first. To ask whether Jesus had risen, and to examine the evidence, were the last things of which the combined assailants thought. This public activity of the Apostles threatened their influence or their pet beliefs, and so, like persecutors in all ages, they shut their eyes to the important question, Is this preaching true or false? and took the easier course of laying hands on the preachers.

So the night fell on Peter and John in prison, the first of the thousands who have suffered bonds and imprisonment for Christ, and have therein found liberty. What lofty faith, and what subordination of the fate of the messengers to the progress of the message, are expressed in that abrupt introduction, in verse 4, of the statistics of the increase of the Church from that day's work! It mattered little that it ended with the two Apostles in custody, since it ended too with five thousand rejoicing in Christ.

The arrest seems to have been due to a sudden thought on the part of the priests, captain, and Sadducees, without commands from the Sanhedrin or the high priest. But when these inferior authorities had got hold of their prisoners, they probably did not quite know what to do with them, and so moved the proper persons to summon the Sanhedrin. In all haste, then, a session was called for next morning. Rulers, elders, and scribes made up the constituent members of the court, and the same two high priests who had tried Jesus are there, attended by a strong contingent of dependants, who could be trusted to vote as they were bidden. Annas was an emeritus high priest, whose age and relationship to Caiaphas, the actual holder of the post and Annas's son-in-law, gave him an influential position. He retained the title, though he had ceased to hold the office, as a cleric without a charge is usually called Reverend.

It was substantially the same court which had condemned Jesus, and probably now sat in the same hall as then. So that Peter and John would remember the last time when they had together been in that room, and Who had stood in the criminal's place where they now were set.

The court seems to have been somewhat at a loss how to proceed. The Apostles had been arrested for their words, but they are questioned about the miracle. It was no crime to teach in the Temple, but a crime might be twisted out of working a miracle in the name of any but Jehovah. To do that would come near blasphemy or worshipping strange gods. The Sanhedrin knew what the answer to their question would be, and probably they intended, as soon as the anticipated answer was given, to rend their clothes, and say, as they had done once before, What need we further witnesses? They have spoken blasphemy. But things did not go as was expected. The crafty question was put. It does not attempt to throw doubt on the reality of the miracle, but there is a world of arrogant contempt in it, both in speaking of the cure as this, and in the scornful emphasis with which, in the Greek, ye stands last in the sentence, and implies, ye poor, ignorant fishermen.

The last time that Peter had been in the judgment-hall his courage had oozed out of him at the prick of a maid-servant's sharp tongue, but now he fronts all the ecclesiastical authorities without a tremor. Whence came the transformation of the cowardly denier into the heroic confessor, who turns the tables on his judges and accuses them? The narrative answers. He was filled with the Holy Ghost. That abiding possession of the Spirit, begun on Pentecost, did not prevent special inspiration for special needs, and the Greek indicates that there was granted such a temporary influx in this critical hour.

One cannot but note the calmness of the Apostle, so unlike his old tumultuous self. He begins with acknowledging the lawful authority of the court, and goes on, with just a tinge of sarcasm, to put the vague this of the question in its true light. It was a good deed done to an impotent man, for which John and he stood there. Singular sort of crime that! Was there not a presumption that the power which had wrought so good a deed was good? Do men gather grapes of thorns? Many a time since then Christianity has been treated as criminal, because of its beneficence to bodies and souls.

But Peter rises to the full height of the occasion, when he answers the Sanhedrin's question with the pealing forth of his Lord's name. He repeats in substance his former contrast of Israel's treatment of Jesus and God's; but, in speaking to the rulers, his tone is more severe than it was to the people. The latter had been charged, at Pentecost and in the Temple, with crucifying Jesus; the former are here charged with crucifying the Christ. It was their business to have tested his claims, and to have welcomed the Messiah. The guilt was shared by both, but the heavier part lay on the shoulders of the Sanhedrin.

Mark, too, the bold proclamation of the Resurrection, the stone of offence to the Sadducees. How easy it would have been for them to silence the Apostle, if they could have pointed to the undisturbed and occupied grave! That would have finished the new sect at once. Is there any reason why it was not done but the one reason that it could not be done?

Thus far Peter has been answering the interrogation legally put, and has done as was anticipated. Now was the time for Annas and the rest to strike in; but they could not carry out their programme, for the fiery stream of Peter's words does not stop when they expected, and instead of a timid answer followed by silence, they get an almost defiant proclamation of the Name, followed by a charge against them, which turns the accused into the accuser, and puts them at the bar. Peter learned to apply the passage in the Psalm (v. 11) to the rulers, from his Master's use of it (Matt. xxi. 42); and there is no quaver in his voice nor fear in his heart when, in the face of all these learned Rabbis and high and mighty dignitaries, he brands them as foolish builders, blind to the worth of the Stone chosen of God, and precious, and tells them that the course of divine Providence will run counter to their rejection of Jesus, and make him the very Head of the corner,--the crown, as well as the foundation, of God's building.

But not even this bold indictment ends the stream of his speech. The proclamation of the power of the Name was fitly followed by pressing home the guilt and madness of rejecting Jesus, and that again by the glad tidings of salvation for all, even the rejecters. Is not the sequence in Peter's defence substantially that which all Christian preaching should exhibit? First, strong, plain proclamation of the truth; then pungent pressing home of the sin of turning away from Jesus; and then earnest setting forth of the salvation in His name,-- a salvation wide as the world, and deep as our misery and need, but narrow, inasmuch as it is in none other. The Apostle will not end with charging his hearers with guilt, but with offering them salvation. He will end with lifting up the Name high above all other, and setting it in solitary clearness before, not these rulers only, but the whole world. The salvation which it had wrought on the lame man was but a parable and picture of the salvation from all ills of body and spirit, which was stored in that Name, and in it alone.

The rulers' contempt had been expressed by their emphatic ending of their question with that ye. Peter expresses his brotherhood and longing for the good of his judges by ending his impassioned, or, rather, inspired address with a loving, pleading we. He puts himself on the same level with them as needing salvation, and would fain have them on the same level with himself and John as receiving it. That is the right way to preach.

Little need be said as to the effect of this address. Whether it went any deeper in any susceptible souls or not, it upset the schemes of the leaders. Something in the manner and matter of it awed them into wonder, and paralysed them for the time. Here was the first instance of the fulfilment of that promise, which has been fulfilled again and again since, of a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist. Unlearned, as ignorant of Rabbinical traditions, and ignorant, or, rather, private, as holding no official position, these two wielded a power over hearts and consciences which not even official indifference and arrogance could shake off. Thank God, that day's experience is repeated still, and any of us may have the same Spirit to clothe us with the same armour of light!

The Sanhedrin knew well enough that the Apostles had been with Jesus, and the statement that they took knowledge of them cannot mean that that fact dawned on the rulers for the first time. Rather it means that their wonder at the boldness of the two drove home the fact of their association with Him to their minds. That association explained the marvel; for the Sanhedrin remembered how He had stood, meek but unawed, at the same bar. They said to themselves, We know where these men get this brave freedom of speech,--from that Nazarene. Happy shall we be if our demeanour recalls to spectators the ways of our Lord!

How came the lame man there? He had not been arrested with the Apostles. Had he voluntarily and bravely joined them? We do not know, but evidently he was not there as accused, and probably had come as a witness of the reality of the miracle. Notice the emphatic standing, as in verse 10,--a thing that he had never done all his life. No wonder that the Sanhedrin were puzzled, and settled down to the lame and impotent conclusion which follows. So, in the first round of the world-long battle between the persecutors and the persecuted, the victory is all on the side of the latter. So it has been ever since, though often the victors have died in the conflict. The Church is an anvil which has worn out many hammers, and the story of the first collision is, in essentials, the story of all.