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

**ACTS-017. WITH AND LIKE CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"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."*

*Acts 4:13*

Two young Galilean fishermen, before the same formidable tribunal which a few weeks before had condemned their Master, might well have quailed. And evidently Annas, the high priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the kindred of the high priest, were very much astonished that their united wisdom and dignity did not produce a greater impression on these two contumacious prisoners. They were unlearned, knowing nothing about Rabbinical wisdom; they were ignorant, or, as the word ought rather to be rendered, persons in a private station, without any kind of official dignity. And yet there they stood, perfectly unembarrassed and at their ease, and said what they wanted to say, all of it, right out. So, as great astonishment crept over the dignified ecclesiastics who were sitting in judgment upon them, their astonishment led them to remember what, of course, they knew before, only that it had not struck them so forcibly, as explaining the Apostles' demeanour-- viz., that they had been with Jesus. So they said to themselves: Ah, that explains it all! There is the root of it. The company that they have kept accounts for their unembarrassed boldness.

Now, I need not notice by more than a word in passing, what a testimony it is to the impression that that meek and gracious Sufferer had made upon His judges, that when they saw these two men standing there unfaltering, they began to remember how that other Prisoner had stood. And perhaps some of them began to think that they had made a mistake in that last trial. It is a testimony to the impression that Christ had made that the strange demeanour of His two servants recalled the Master to the mind of the judges.

**I. The first thing that strikes us here is the companionship that transforms.**

The rulers were partly right, and they were partly wrong. The source from which these men had drawn their boldness was their being with Christ; but it was not such companionship with Christ, as Annas and Caiaphas had in view, that had given them courage. For as long as the Apostles had His personal presence with them, there was no perceptible transforming or elevating process going on in them; and it was not until after they had lost that corporeal presence that there came upon them the change which even the prejudiced eyes of these judges could not help seeing.

The writer of Acts gives a truer explanation with which we may fill out the incomplete explanation of the rulers, when he says, Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them. Ah, that is it! They had been with Jesus all the days that He went in and out amongst them. They had companioned with Him, and they had gained but little from it. But when He went away, and they were relegated to the same kind of companionship with Him that you and I have or may have, then a change began to take place on them. And so the companionship that transforms is not what the Apostle calls knowing Christ after the flesh, but inward communion with Him, the companionship and familiarity which are as possible for us as for any Peter or John of them all, and without which our Christianity is nothing but sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.

They were with Jesus, as each of us may be. Their communion was in no respect different from the communion that is open and indispensable to any real Christian. To be with Him is possible for us all. When we go to our daily work, when we are compassed about by distracting and trivial cares, when men come buzzing round us, and the ordinary secularities of life seem to close in upon us like the walls of a prison, and to shut out the blue and the light--oh! it is hard, but it is possible, for every one of us to think these all away, and to carry with us into everything that blessed thought of a Presence that is not to be put aside, that sits beside me at my study table, that stands beside you at your tasks, that goes with you in shop and mart, that is always near, with its tender encircling, with its mighty protection, with its all-sufficing sweetness and power. To be with Christ is no prerogative, either of Apostles and teachers of the primitive age, or of saints that have passed into the higher vision; but it is possible for us all. No doubt there are as yet unknown forms and degrees of companionship with Christ in the future state, in comparison with which to be present in the body is to be absent from the Lord; but in the inmost depth of reality, the soul that loves is where it loves, and has whom it loves ever with it. Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also, and we may be with Christ if only we will honestly try hour by hour to keep ourselves in touch with Him, and to make Him the motive as well as the end of the work that other men do along with us, and do from altogether secular and low motives.

Another phase of being with Christ lies in frank, full, and familiar conversation with Him. I do not understand a dumb companionship. When we are with those that we love, and with whom we are at ease, speech comes instinctively. If we are co-denizens of the Father's house with the Elder Brother, we shall talk to Him. We shall not need to be reminded of the duty of prayer, but shall rather instinctively and as a matter of course, without thinking of what we are doing, speak to Him our momentary wants, our passing discomforts, our little troubles. There may be a great deal more virtue in monosyllabic prayers than in long liturgies. Little jets of speech or even of unspoken speech that go up to Him are likely to be heart-felt and to be heard. It is said of Israel's army on one occasion, they cried unto God in the battle, and He was entreated of them. Do you think that theirs would be very elaborate prayers? Was there any time to make a long petition when the sword of a Philistine was whizzing about the suppliant's ears? It was only a cry, but it was a cry; and so He was entreated of them. If we are with Christ we shall talk to Him; and if we are with Christ He will talk to us. It is for us to keep in the attitude of listening and, so far as may be, to hush other voices, in order that His may be heard, If we do so, even here shall we ever be with the Lord.

**II. Now, note next the character that this companionship produces.**

Annas and Caiaphas said to each other: Ah, these two have been with that Jesus! That is where they have got their boldness. They are like Him.

As is the Master, so is the servant. That is the broad, general principle that lies in my text. To be with Christ makes men Christlike. A soul habitually in contact with Jesus will imbibe sweetness from Him, as garments laid away in a drawer with some preservative perfume absorb fragrance from that beside which they lie. Therefore the surest way for Christian people to become what God would have them to be, is to direct the greater part of their effort, not so much to the acquirement of individual characteristics and excellences, as to the keeping up of continuity of communion with the Master. Then the excellences will come. Astronomers, for instance, have found out that if they take a sensitive plate and lay it so as to receive the light from a star, and keep it in place by giving it a motion corresponding with the apparent motion of the heavens, for hours and hours, there will become visible upon it a photographic image of dim stars that no human eye or telescope can see. Persistent lying before the light stamps the image of the light upon the plate. Communion with Christ is the secret of Christlikeness. So instead of all the wearisome, painful, futile attempts at tinkering one's own character apart from Him, here is the royal road. Not that there is no effort in it. We must never forget nor undervalue the necessity for struggle in the Christian life. But that truth needs to be supplemented with the thought that comes from my text--viz. that the fruitful direction in which the struggle is to be mainly made lies in keeping ourselves in touch with Jesus Christ, and if we do that, then transformation comes by beholding. We all, reflecting as a mirror does, the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image. They have been with Jesus, and so they were like Him.

But now look at the specific kinds of excellence which seem to have come out of this communion. They beheld the boldness of Peter and John. The word that is translated boldness no doubt conveys that idea, but it also conveys another. Literally it means the act of saying everything. It means openness of unembarrassed speech, and so comes to have the secondary signification, which the text gives, of boldness.

Then, to be with Christ gives a living knowledge of Him and of truth, far in advance of the head knowledge of wise and learned people. It was a fact that these two knew nothing about what Rabbi This, or Rabbi That, or Rabbi The Other had said, and yet could speak, as they had been speaking, large religious ideas that astonished these hide-bound Pharisees, who thought that there was no way to get to the knowledge of the revelation of God made to Israel, except by the road of their own musty and profitless learning. Ay! and it always is so. An ounce of experience is worth a ton of theology. The men that have summered and wintered with Jesus Christ may not know a great many things that are supposed to be very important parts of religion, but they have got hold of the central truth of it, with a power, and in a fashion, that men of books, and ideas, and systems, and creeds, and theological learning, may know nothing about. Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, are called. Let a poor man at his plough-tail, or a poor woman in her garret, or a collier in the pit, have Jesus Christ for their Companion, and they have got the kernel; and the gentlemen that like such diet may live on the shell if they will, and can. Religious ideas are of little use unless there be heart-experiences; and heart-experiences are wonderful teachers of religious truth.

Again, to be with Christ frees from the fear of man. It was a new thing for such persons as Peter and John to stand cool and unawed before the Council. Not so very long ago one of the two had been frightened into a momentary apostasy by dread of being haled before the rulers, and now they are calmly heroic, and threats are idle words to them. I need not point to the strong presumption, raised by the contrast of the Apostles' past cowardice and present courage, of the occurrence of some such extraordinary facts as the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Descent of the Spirit. Something had happened which revolutionised these men. It was their communion with Jesus, made more real and deep by the cessation of His bodily presence, which made these unlearned and non-official Galileans front the Council with calmly beating hearts and unfaltering tongues. Doubtless, temperament has much to do with courage, but, no doubt, he who lives near Jesus is set free from undue dependence on things seen and on persons. Perfect love casts out fear, not only of the Beloved, but of all creatures. It is the bravest thing in the world.

Further, to be with Christ will open a man's lips. The fountain, if it is full, must well up. Light is light which circulates. Heat is heat which radiates. The true possession of Jesus Christ will always make it impossible for the possessor to be dumb. I pray you to test yourselves, as I would that all professing Christians should test themselves, by that simple truth, that a full heart must find utterance. The instinct that drives a man to speak of the thing in which he is interested should have full play in the Christian life. It seems to me a terribly sad fact that there are such hosts of good, kind people, with some sort of religion about them, who never feel any anxiety to say a word to any soul concerning the Master whom they profess to love. I know, of course, that deep feeling is silent, and that the secrets of Christian experience are not to be worn on the sleeve for daws to peck at. And I know that the conventionalities of this generation frown very largely upon the frank utterance of religious convictions on the part of religious people, except on Sundays, in Sunday-schools, pulpits, and the like. But for all that, what is in you will come out. If you have never felt I was weary of forbearing, and I could not stay, I do not think that there is much sign in you of a very deep or a very real being with Jesus.

**III. The last point to be noted is, the impression which such a character makes.**

It was not so much what Peter and John said that astonished the Council, as the fact of their being composed and bold enough to say anything.

A great deal more is done by character than by anything else. Most people in the world take their notions of Christianity from its concrete embodiments in professing Christians. For one man that has read his Bible, and has come to know what religion is thereby, there are a hundred that look at you and me, and therefrom draw their conclusions as to what religion is. It is not my sermons, but your life, that is the most important agency for the spread of the Gospel in this congregation. And if we, as Christian people, were to live so as to make men say, Dear me, that is strange. That is not the kind of thing that one would have expected from that man. That is of a higher strain than he is of. Where did it come from, I wonder? Ah, he learned it of that Jesus--if people were constrained to speak in that style to themselves about us, dear friends, and about all our brethren, England would be a different England from what it is t-day. It is Christians' lives, after all, that make dints in the world's conscience.

Do you remember one of the Apostle's lovely and strong metaphors? Paul says that that little Church in Thessalonica rung out clear and strong the name of Jesus Christ--resonant like the clang of a bugle, so that we need not to speak anything. The word that he employs for sounded out is a technical expression for the ringing blast of a trumpet. Very small penny whistles would be a better metaphor for the instruments which the bulk of professing Christians play on.

Adorn the doctrine of Christ. And that you may, listen to His own word, which says all I have been trying to say in this sermon: Abide in Me. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.