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

**ACTS-018. OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. 20. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. 21. So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done. 22. For the man was above forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing was shewed. 23. And being let go they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. 24. And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, Thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: 25. Who by the mouth of Thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? 26. The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ. 27. For of a truth against Thy holy child Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, 28. For to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel determined before to be done. 29. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto Thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak Thy word, 30. By stretching forth Thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of Thy holy child Jesus. 31. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness."*

*Acts 4:19-31*

The only chance for persecution to succeed is to smite hard and swiftly. If you cannot strike, do not threaten. Menacing words only give courage. The rulers betrayed their hesitation when the end of their solemn conclave was but to straitly threaten; and less heroic confessors than Peter and John would have disregarded the prohibition as mere wind. None the less the attitude of these two Galilean fishermen is noble and singular, when their previous cowardice is remembered. This first collision with civil authority gives, as has been already noticed, the main lines on which the relations of the Church to hostile powers have proceeded.

**I.** The heroic refusal of unlawful obedience. We shall probably not do injustice to John if we suppose that Peter was spokesman. If so, the contrast of the tone of his answer with all previously recorded utterances of his is remarkable. Warm-hearted impulsiveness, often wrong-headed and sometimes illogical, had been their mark; but here we have calm, fixed determination, which, as is usually its manner, wastes no words, but in its very brevity impresses the hearers as being immovable. Whence did this man get the power to lay down once for all the foundation principles of the limits of civil obedience, and of the duty of Christian confession? His words take rank with the ever-memorable sayings of thinkers and heroes, from Socrates in his prison telling the Athenians that he loved them, but that he must obey God rather than you, to Luther at Worms with his It is neither safe nor right to do anything against conscience. Here I stand; I can do nothing else. God help me! Amen. Peter's words are the first of a long series.

This first instance of persecution is made the occasion for the clear expression of the great principles which are to guide the Church. The answer falls into two parts, in the first of which the limits of obedience to civil authority are laid down in a perfectly general form to which even the Council are expected to assent, and in the second an irresistible compulsion to speak is boldly alleged as driving the two Apostles to a flat refusal to obey.

It was a daring stroke to appeal to the Council for an endorsement of the principle in verse 19, but the appeal was unanswerable; for this tribunal had no other ostensible reason for existence than to enforce obedience to the law of God, and to Peter's dilemma only one reply was possible. But it rested on a bold assumption, which was calculated to irritate the court; namely, that there was a blank contradiction between their commands and God's, so that to obey the one was to disobey the other. When that parting of the ways is reached, there remains no doubt as to which road a religious man must take.

The limits of civil obedience are clearly drawn. It is a duty, because the powers that be are ordained of God, and obedience to them is obedience to Him. But if they, transcending their sphere, claim obedience which can only be rendered by disobedience to Him who has appointed them, then they are no longer His ministers, and the duty of allegiance falls away. But there must be a plain conflict of commands, and we must take care lest we substitute whims and fancies of our own for the injunctions of God. Peter was not guided by his own conceptions of duty, but by the distinct precept of his Master, which had bid him speak. It is not true that it is the cause which makes the martyr, but it is true that many good men have made themselves martyrs needlessly. This principle is too sharp a weapon to be causelessly drawn and brandished. Only an unmistakable opposition of commandments warrants its use; and then, he has little right to be called Christ's soldier who keeps the sword in the scabbard.

The articulate refusal in verse 20 bases itself on the ground of irrepressible necessity: We cannot but speak. The immediate application was to the facts of Christ's life, death, and glory. The Apostles could not help speaking of these, both because to do so was their commission, and because the knowledge of them and of their importance forbade silence. The truth implied is of wide reach. Whoever has a real, personal experience of Christ's saving power, and has heard and seen Him, will be irresistibly impelled to impart what he has received. Speech is a relief to a full heart. The word, concealed in the prophet's heart, burned there like fire in his bones, and he was weary of forbearing. So it always is with deep conviction. If a man has never felt that he must speak of Christ, he is a very imperfect Christian. The glow of his own heart, the pity for men who know Him not, his Lord's command, all concur to compel speech. The full river cannot be dammed up.

**II.** The lame and impotent conclusion of the perplexed Council. How plain the path is when only duty is taken as a guide, and how vigorously and decisively a man marches along it! Peter had no hesitation, and his resolved answer comes crashing in a straight course, like a cannon-ball. The Council had a much more ambiguous oracle to consult in order to settle their course, and they hesitate accordingly, and at last do a something which is a nothing. They wanted to trim their sails to catch popular favour, and so they could not do anything thoroughly. To punish or acquit was the only alternative for just judges. But they were not just; and as Jesus had been crucified, not because Pilate thought Him guilty, but to please the people, so His Apostles were let off, not because they were innocent, but for the same reason. When popularity-hunters get on the judicial bench, society must be rotten, and nearing its dissolution. To decree unrighteousness by a law is among the most hideous of crimes. Judges willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike, are portents indicative of corruption. We may remark here how the physician's pen takes note of the patient's age, as making his cure more striking, and manifestly miraculous.

**III.** The Church's answer to the first assault of the world's power. How beautifully natural that is, Being let go, they went to their own, and how large a principle is expressed in the naive words! The great law of association according to spiritual affinity has much to do in determining relations here. It aggregates men, according to sorts; but its operation is thwarted by other conditions, so that companionship is often misery. But a time comes when it will work unhindered, and men will be united with their like, as the stones on some sea-beaches are laid in rows, according to their size, by the force of the sea. Judas went to his own place, and, in another world, like will draw to like, and prevailing tendencies will be increased by association with those who share them.

The prayer of the Church was probably the inspired outpouring of one voice, and all the people said Amen, and so made it theirs. Whose voice it was which thus put into words the common sentiment we should gladly have known, but need not speculate. The great fact is that the Church answered threats by prayer. It augurs healthy spiritual life when opposition and danger neither make cheeks blanch with fear nor flush with anger. No man there trembled nor thought of vengeance, or of repaying threats with threats. Every man there instinctively turned heavenwards, and flung himself, as it were, into God's arms for protection. Prayer is the strongest weapon that a persecuted Church can use. Browning makes a tyrant say, recounting how he had tried to crush a man, that his intended victim

Stood erect, caught at God's skirts, and prayed,

So I was afraid.

The contents of the prayer are equally noteworthy. Instead of minutely studying it verse by verse, we may note some of its salient points. Observe its undaunted courage. That company never quivered or wavered. They had no thought of obeying the mandate of the Council. They were a little army of heroes. What had made them so? What but the conviction that they had a living Lord at God's right hand, and a mighty Spirit in their spirits? The world has never seen a transformation like that. Unique effects demand unique causes for their explanation, and nothing but the historical truth of the facts recorded in the last pages of the Gospels and first of the Acts accounts for the demeanour of these men.

Their courage is strikingly marked by their petition. All they ask is boldness to speak a word which shall not be theirs, but God's. Fear would have prayed for protection; passion would have asked retribution on enemies. Christian courage and devotion only ask that they may not shrink from their duty, and that the word may be spoken, whatever becomes of the speakers. The world is powerless against men like that. Would the Church of to-day meet threats with like unanimity of desire for boldness in confession? If not, it must be because it has not the same firm hold of the Risen Lord which these first believers had. The truest courage is that which is conscious of its weakness, and yet has no thought of flight, but prays for its own increase.

We may observe, too, the body of belief expressed in the prayer. First it lays hold on the creative omnipotence of God, and thence passes to the recognition of His written revelation. The Church has begun to learn the inmost meaning of the Old Testament, and to find Christ there. David may not have written the second Psalm. Its attribution to him by the Church stands on a different level from Christ's attribution of authorship, as, for instance, of the hundred and tenth Psalm. The prophecy of the Psalm is plainly Messianic, however it may have had a historical occasion in some forgotten revolt against some Davidic king; and, while the particular incidents to which the prayer alludes do not exhaust its far-reaching application, they are rightly regarded as partly fulfilling it. Herod is a king of the earth, Pilate is a ruler; Roman soldiers are Gentiles; Jewish rulers are the representatives of the people. Jesus is God's Anointed. The fact that such an unnatural and daring combination of rebels was predicted in the Psalm bears witness that even that crime at Calvary was foreordained to come to pass, and that God's hand and counsel ruled. Therefore all other opposition, such as now threatened, will turn out to be swayed by that same Mighty Hand, to work out His counsel. Why, then, should the Church fear? If we can see God's hand moving all things, terror is dead for us, and threats are like the whistling of idle wind.

Mark, too, the strong expression of the Church's dependence on God. Lord here is an unusual word, and means Master, while the Church collectively is called Thy servants, or properly, slaves. It is a different word from that of servant (rather than child) applied to Jesus in verses 27 and 30. God is the Master, we are His slaves, bound to absolute obedience, unconditional submission, belonging to Him, not to ourselves, and therefore having claims on Him for such care as an owner gives to his slaves or his cattle. He will not let them be maltreated nor starved. He will defend them and feed them; but they must serve him by life, and death if need be. Unquestioning submission and unreserved dependence are our duties. Absolute ownership and unshared responsibility for our well-being belong to Him.

Further, the view of Christ's relationship to God is the same as occurs in other of the early chapters of the Acts. The title of Thy holy Servant Jesus dwells on Christ's office, rather than on His nature. Here it puts Him in contrast with David, also called Thy servant. The latter was imperfectly what Jesus was perfectly. His complete realisation of the prophetic picture of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah is emphasised by the adjective holy, implying complete devotion or separation to the service of God, and unsullied, unlimited moral purity. The uniqueness of His relation in this aspect is expressed by the definite article in the original. He is the Servant, in a sense and measure all His own. He is further the Anointed Messiah. This was the Church's message to Israel and the stay of its own courage, that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed and perfect Servant of the Lord, who was now in heaven, reigning there. All that this faith involved had not yet become clear to their consciousness, but the Spirit was guiding them step by step into all the truth; and what they saw and heard, not only in the historical facts of which they were the witnesses, but in the teaching of that Spirit, they could not but speak.

The answer came swift as the roll of thunder after lightning. They who ask for courage to do God's will and speak Christ's name have never long to wait for response. The place was shaken, symbol of the effect of faithful witness-bearing, or manifestation of the power which was given in answer to their prayer. They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, who now did not, as before, confer ability to speak with other tongues, but wrought no less worthily in heartening and fitting them to speak in their own tongue, wherein they were born, in bold defiance of unlawful commands.

The statement of the answer repeats the petition verbatim: With all boldness they spake the word. What we desire of spiritual gifts we get, and God moulds His replies so as to remind us of our petitions, and to show by the event that these have reached His ear and guided His giving hand.