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

**ACTS-022. WHOM TO OBEY,--ANNAS OR ANGEL? by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17.* *Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation, 18. And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison. 19. But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, 20. Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life. 21. And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught. But the high priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22. But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told, 23. Saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within. 24. Now when the high priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow. 25. Then came one and told them, saying. Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people. 26. Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned. 27. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, 28. Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. 29. Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. 30. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. 31. Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. 32. And we are His witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey Him.."*

*Acts 5:17-32*

The Jewish ecclesiastics had been beaten in the first round of the fight, and their attempt to put out the fire had only stirred the blaze. Popular sympathy is fickle, and if the crowd does not shout with the persecutors, it will make heroes and idols of the persecuted. So the Apostles had gained favour by the attempt to silence them, and that led to the second round, part of which is described in this passage.

The first point to note is the mean motives which influenced the high-priest and his adherents. As before, the Sadducees were at the bottom of the assault; for talk about a resurrection was gall and wormwood to them. But Luke alleges a much more contemptible emotion than zeal for supposed truth as the motive for action. The word rendered in the Authorised Version indignation, is indeed literally zeal, but it here means, as the Revised Version has it, nothing nobler than jealousy. Who are those ignorant Galileans that they should encroach on the office of us dignified teachers? and what fools the populace must be to listen to them! Our prestige is threatened. If we don't bestir ourselves, our authority will be gone. A lofty spirit in which to deal with grave movements of opinion, and likely to lead its possessors to discern truth!

The Sanhedrin, no doubt, talked solemnly about the progress of error, and the duty of firmly putting it down, and, like Jehu, said, Come, and see our zeal for the Lord; but it was zeal for greetings in the marketplace, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the other advantages of their position. So it has often been since. The instruments which zeal for truth uses are argument, Scripture, and persuasion. That zeal which betakes itself to threats and force is, at the best, much mingled with the wrath and jealousy of man.

The arrest of the Apostles and their committal to prison was simply for detention, not punishment. The rulers cast their net wider this time, and secured all the Apostles, and, having them safe under lock and key, they went home triumphant, and expecting to deal a decisive blow to-morrow. Then comes one of the great buts of Scripture. Annas and Caiaphas thought that they had scored a success, but an angel upset their calculations. To try to explain the miracle away is hopeless. It is wiser to try to understand it.

The very fact that it did not lead to the Apostles' deliverance, but that the trial and scourging followed next day, just as if it had not happened, which has been alleged as a proof of its uselessness, and inferentially of its falsehood, puts us on the right track. It was not meant for their deliverance, but for their heartening, and for the bracing of all generations of Christians, by showing, at the first conflict with the civil power, that the Lord was with His Church. His strengthening power is operative when no miracle is wrought. If His servants are not delivered, it is not that He lacks angels, but that it is better for them and the Church that they should lie in prison or die at the stake.

The miracle was a transient revelation of a perpetual truth, and has shed light on many a dark dungeon where God's servants have lain rotting. It breathed heroic constancy into the Twelve. How striking and noble was their prompt obedience to the command to resume the perilous work of preaching! As soon as the dawn began to glimmer over Olivet, and the priests were preparing for the morning sacrifice, there were these irrepressible disturbers, whom the officials thought they had shut up safely last night, lifting up their voices again as if nothing had happened. What a picture of dauntless persistence, and what a lesson for us! The moment the pressure is off, we should spring back to our work of witnessing for Christ.

The bewilderment of the Council comes in strong contrast with the unhesitating action of the Apostles. There is a half ludicrous side to it, which Luke does not try to hide. There was the pompous assembling of all the great men at early morning, and their dignified waiting till their underlings brought in the culprits. No doubt, Annas put on his severest air of majesty, and all were prepared to look their sternest for the confusion of the prisoners. The prison, the Temple, and the judgment hall, were all near each other. So there was not long to wait. But, behold! the officers come back alone, and their report shakes the assembly out of its dignity. One sees the astonished underlings coming up to the prison, and finding all in order, the sentries patrolling, the doors fast (so the angel had shut them as well as opened them), and then entering ready to drag out the prisoners, and--finding all silent. Such elaborate guard kept over an empty cage!

It was not the officers' business to offer explanations, and it does not seem that any were asked. One would have thought that the sentries would have been questioned. Herod went the natural way to work, when he had Peter's guards examined and put to death. But Annas and his fellows do not seem to have cared to inquire how the escape had been made. Possibly they suspected a miracle, or perhaps feared that inquiry might reveal sympathisers with the prisoners among their own officials. At any rate, they were bewildered, and lost their heads, wondering what was to come next, and how this thing was to end.

The further news that these obstinate fanatics were at their old work in the Temple again, must have greatly added to the rulers' perplexity, and they must have waited the return of the officers sent off for the second time to fetch the prisoners, with somewhat less dignity than before. The officers felt the pulse of the crowd, and did not venture on force, from wholesome fear for their own skins. An excited mob in the Temple court was not to be trifled with, so persuasion was adopted. The brave Twelve went willingly, for the Sanhedrin had no terrors for them, and by going they secured another opportunity of ringing out their Lord's salvation. Wherever a Christian can witness for Christ, he should be ready to go.

The high-priest discreetly said nothing about the escape. Possibly he had no suspicion of a miracle, but, even if he had, chapter 4:16 shows that that would not have led to any modification of his hostility. Persecutors, clothed with a little brief authority, are strangely blind to the plainest indications of the truth spoken by their victims. Annas did not know what a question about the escape might bring out, so he took the safer course of charging the Twelve with disobedience to the Sanhedrin's prohibition. How characteristic of all his kind that is! Never mind whether what the martyr says is true or not. He has broken our law, and defied our authority; that is enough. Are we to be chopping logic, and arguing with every ignorant upstart who chooses to vent his heresies? Gag him,--that is easier and more dignified.

A world of self-consequence peeps out in that we straitly charged you, and a world of contempt peeps out in the avoidance of naming Jesus. This name and this man is the nearest that the proud priest will come to soiling his lips by mentioning Him. He bears unconscious testimony to the Apostles' diligence, and to the popular inclination to them, by charging them with having filled the city with what he contemptuously calls your teaching, as if it had no other source than their own ignorant notions.

Then the deepest reason for the Sanhedrin's bitterness leaks out in the charge of inciting the mob to take vengeance on them for the death of Jesus. It was true that the Apostles had charged that guilt home on them, but not on them only, but on the whole nation, so that no incitement to revenge lay in the charge. It was true that they had brought this man's blood on the rulers, but only to draw them to repentance, not to hound at them their sharers in the guilt. Had Annas forgot His blood be on us, and on our children? But, when an evil deed is complete, the doers try to shuffle off the responsibility which they were ready to take in the excitement of hurrying to do it. Annas did not trouble himself about divine vengeance; it was the populace whom he feared.

So, in its attempt to browbeat the accused, in its empty airs of authority, in its utter indifference to the truth involved, in its contempt for the preachers and their message, in its brazen denial of responsibility, its dread of the mob, and its disregard of the far-off divine judgment, his bullying speech is a type of how persecutors, from Roman governors down, have hectored their victims.

And Peter's brave answer is, thank God! the type of what thousands of trembling women and meek men have answered. His tone is severer now than on his former appearance. Now he has no courteous recognition of the court's authority. Now he brushes aside all Annas's attempts to impose on him the sanctity of its decrees, and flatly denies that the Council has any more right to command than any other men. They claimed to be depositaries of God's judgments. This revolutionary fisherman sees nothing in them but men, whose commands point one way, while God's point the other. The angel bade them speak; the Council had bid them be dumb. To state the opposition was to determine their duty. Formerly Peter had said judge ye which command it is right to obey. Now, he wraps his refusal in no folds of courtesy, but thrusts the naked We must obey God in the Council's face. That was a great moment in the history of the world and the Church. How much lay in it, as in a seed,--Luther's Here I stand, I can do none other. God help me! Amen; Plymouth Rock, and many a glorious and blood-stained page in the records of martyrdom.

Peter goes on to vindicate his assumption that in disobeying Annas they are obeying God, by reiterating the facts which since Pentecost he had pressed on the national conscience. Israel had slain, and God had exalted, Jesus to His right hand. That was God's verdict on Israel's action. But it was also the ground of hope for Israel; for the exaltation of Jesus was that He might be Prince [or Leader] and Saviour, and from His exalted hand were shed the gifts of repentance and remission of sins, even of the great sin of slaying Him. These things being so, how could the Apostles be silent? Had not God bid them speak, by their very knowledge of these? They were Christ's witnesses, constituted as such by their personal acquaintance with Him and their having seen Him raised and ascending, and appointed to be such by His own lips, and inspired for their witnessing by the Holy Spirit shed on them at Pentecost. Peter all but reproduces the never-to-be-forgotten words heard by them all in the upper room, He shall bear witness of Me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning. Silence would be treason. So it is still. What were Annas and his bluster to men whom Christ had bidden to speak, and to whom He had given the Spirit of the Father to speak in them?