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

**ACTS-032. PHILIP THE EVANGELIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea."*

*Acts 8:40*

The little that is known about Philip, the deacon and evangelist, may very soon be told. His name suggests, though by no means conclusively, that he was probably one of the so-called Hellenists, or foreign-born and Greek-speaking Jews. This is made the more probable because he was one of the seven selected by the Church, and after that selection appointed by the Apostles, to dispense relief to the poor. The purpose of the appointment being to conciliate the grumblers in the Hellenist section of the Church, the persons chosen would probably belong to it. He left Jerusalem during the persecution that arose after the death of Stephen. As we know, he was the first preacher of the Gospel in Samaria; he was next the instrument honoured to carry the Word to the first heathen ever gathered into the Church; and then, after a journey along the sea-coast to Caesarea, the then seat of government, he remained in that place in obscure toil for twenty years, dropped out of the story, and we hear no more of him but for one glimpse of his home in Caesarea.

That is all that is told about him. And I think that if we note the contrast of the office to which men called him, and the work to which God set him; and the other still more striking contrast between the brilliancy of the beginning of his course, and the obscurity of his long years of work, we may get some lessons worth the learning. I take, then, not only the words which I read for my text, but the whole of the incidents connected with Philip, as our starting-point now; and I draw from them two or three very well-worn, but none the less needful, pieces of instruction.

**I. First, then, we may gather a thought as to Christ's sovereignty in choosing His instruments.**

Did you ever notice that events exactly contradicted the intentions of the Church and of the Apostles, in the selection of Philip and his six brethren? The Apostles said, It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. Pick out seven relieving-officers; men who shall do the secular work of the Church, and look after the poor; and we will give ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. So said man. And what did facts say? That as to these twelve, who were to give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, we never hear that by far the larger proportion of them were honoured to do anything worth mentioning for the spread of the Gospel. Their function was to be witnesses, and that was all. But, on the other hand, of the men that were supposed to be fitted for secular work, two at all events had more to do in the expansion of the Church, and in the development of the universal aspects of Christ's Gospel, than the whole of the original group of Apostles. So Christ picks His instruments. The Apostles may say, These shall do so-and-so; and we will do so-and-so. Christ says, Stephen shall proclaim a wider Gospel than the Apostles at first had caught sight of, and Philip shall be the first who will go beyond the charmed circle of Judaism, and preach the Gospel.

It is always so. Christ chooses His instruments where He will; and it is not the Apostle's business, nor the business of an ecclesiastic of any sort, to settle his own work or anybody else's. The Commander-in-Chief keeps the choosing of the men for special service in His own hand. The Apostolic College said, Let them look after the poor, and leave us to look after the ministry of the Word; Christ says, Go and join thyself to that chariot, and speak there the speech that I shall bid thee.

Brethren, do you listen for that voice calling you to your tasks, and never mind what men may be saying. Wait till He bids, and you will hear Him speaking to you if you will keep yourselves quiet. Wait till He bids you, and then be sure that you do it. Christ chooses His instruments, and chooses them often in strange places.

**II. The next lesson that I would take from this story is the spontaneous speech of a believing heart.**

There came a persecution that scattered the Church. Men tried to fling down the lamp; and all that they did was to spill the oil, and it ran flaming wherever it flowed. For the scattered brethren, without any Apostle with them, with no instruction given to them to do so, wherever they went carried their faith with them; and, as a matter of course, wherever they went they spoke their faith. And so we read that, not by appointment, nor of set purpose, nor in consequence of any ecclesiastical or official sanction, nor in consequence of any supernatural and distinct commandment from heaven, but just because it was the natural thing to do, and they could not help it, they went everywhere, these scattered men of Cyprus and Cyrene, preaching the word.

And when this Philip, whom the officials had relegated to the secular work of distributing charity, found himself in Samaria, he did the like. The Samaritans were outcasts, and Peter and John had wanted to bring down fire from heaven to consume them. But Philip could not help speaking out the truth that was in his heart.

So it always will be: we can all talk about what we are interested in. The full heart cannot be condemned to silence. If there is no necessity for speech felt by a professing Christian, that professing Christian's faith is a very superficial thing. We cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard, said one of the Apostles, thereby laying down the great charter of freedom of speech for all profound convictions. Thy word was as a fire in my bones when I said, I will speak no more in Thy name, so petulant and self-willed was I, and I was weary with forbearing, and ashamed of my rash vow; and I could not stay.

Dear friends, do you carry with you the impulse for utterance of Christ's name wherever you go? And is it so sweet in your hearts that you cannot but let its sweetness have expression by your lips? Surely, surely this spontaneous instinctive utterance of Philip, by which a loving heart sought to relieve itself, puts to shame the dumb dogs that make up such an enormous proportion of professing Christians. And surely such an experience as his may well throw a very sinister light on the reality--nay! I will not say the reality, that would be too uncharitable--but upon the depth and vitality of the profession of Christianity which these silent ones make.

**III. Another lesson that seems to me strikingly illustrated by the story with which we are concerned, is the guidance of a divine hand in common life, and when there are no visible nor supernatural signs.**

Philip goes down to Samaria because he must, and speaks because he cannot help it. He is next bidden to take a long journey, from the centre of the land, away down to the southern desert; and at a certain point there the Spirit says to him, Go! join thyself to this chariot. And when his work with the Ethiopian statesman is done, then he is swept away by the power of the Spirit of God, as Ezekiel had been long before by the banks of the river Chebar, and is set down, no doubt all bewildered and breathless, at Azotus--the ancient Ashdod--the Philistine city on the low-lying coast. Was Philip less under Christ's guidance when miracle ceased and he was left to ordinary powers? Did he feel as if deserted by Christ, because, instead of being swept by the strong wind of heaven, he had to tramp wearily along the flat shore with the flashing Mediterranean on his left hand reflecting the hot sunshine? Did it seem to him as if his task in preaching the Gospel in these villages through which he passed on his way to Caesarea was less distinctly obedience to the divine command than when he heard the utterance of the Spirit, Go down to the road which leads to Gaza, which is desert? By no means. To this man, as to every faithful soul, the guidance that came through his own judgment and common sense, through the instincts and impulses of his sanctified nature, by the circumstances which he devoutly believed to be God's providence, was as truly direct divine guidance as if all the angels of heaven had blown commandment with their trumpets into his waiting and stunned ears.

And so you and I have to go upon our paths without angel voices, or chariots of storm, and to be contented with divine commandments less audible or perceptible to our senses than this man had at one point in his career. But if we are wise we shall hear Him speaking the word. We shall not be left without His voice if we wait for it, stilling our own inclinations until His solemn commandment is made plain to us, and then stirring up our inclinations that they may sway us to swift obedience. There is no gulf, for the devout heart, between what is called miraculous and what is called ordinary and common. Equally in both does God manifest His will to His servants, and equally in both is His presence perceived by faith. We do not need to envy Philip's brilliant beginning. Let us see that we imitate his quiet close of life.

**IV. The last lesson that I would draw is this--the nobility of persistence in unnoticed work.**

What a contrast to the triumphs in Samaria, and the other great expansion of the field for the Gospel effected by the God-commanded preaching to the eunuch, is presented by the succeeding twenty years of altogether unrecorded but faithful toil! Persistence in such unnoticed work is made all the more difficult, and to any but a very true man would have been all but impossible, by reason of the contrast which such work offered to the glories of the earlier days. Some of us may have been tried in a similar fashion, all of us have more or less the same kind of difficulty to face. Some of us perhaps may have had gleams, at the beginning of our career, that seemed to give hope of fields of activity more brilliant and of work far better than we have ever had or done again in the long weary toil of daily life. There may have been abortive promises, at the commencement of your careers, that seemed to say that you would occupy a more conspicuous position than life has had really in reserve for you. At any rate, we have all had our dreams, for

If Nature put not forth her power

About the opening of the flower,

Who is there that could live an hour?

and no life is all that the liver of it meant it to be when he began. We dream of building palaces or temples, and we have to content ourselves if we can put up some little shed in which we may shelter.

Philip, who began so conspicuously, and so suddenly ceased to be the special instrument in the hands of the Spirit, kept plod, plod, plodding on, with no bitterness of heart. For twenty years he had no share in the development of Gentile Christianity, of which he had sowed the first seed, but had to do much less conspicuous work. He toiled away there in Caesarea patient, persevering, and contented, because he loved the work, and he loved the work because he loved Him that had set it. He seemed to be passed over by his Lord in His choice of instruments. It was he who was selected to be the first man that should preach to the heathen. But did you ever notice that although he was probably in Caesarea at the time, Cornelius was not bid to apply to Philip, who was at his elbow, but to send to Joppa for the Apostle Peter? Philip might have sulked and said: Why was I not chosen to do this work? I will speak no more in this Name.

It did not fall to his lot to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. One who came after him was preferred before him, and the Hellenist Saul was set to the task which might have seemed naturally to belong to the Hellenist Philip. He too might have said, He must increase, but I must decrease. No doubt he did say it in spirit, with noble self-abnegation and freedom from jealousy. He cordially welcomed Paul to his house in Caesarea twenty years afterwards, and rejoiced that one sows and another reaps; and that so the division of labour is the multiplication of gladness.

A beautiful superiority to all the low thoughts that are apt to mar our persistency in unobtrusive and unrecognised work is set before us in this story. There are many temptations to-day, dear brethren, what with gossiping newspapers and other means of publicity for everything that is done, for men to say, Well, if I cannot get any notice for my work I shall not do it.

Boys in the street will refuse to join in games, saying, I shall not play unless I am captain or have the big drum. And there are not wanting Christian men who lay down like conditions. Play well thy part wherever it is. Never mind the honour. Do the duty God appoints, and He that has the two mites of the widow in His treasury will never forget any of our works, and at the right time will tell them out before His Father, and before the holy angels.