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

**ACTS-039. PETER'S APOLOGIA by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. 2. And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, 3. Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them. 4. But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying, 5. I was in the city of Joppa praying: and in a trance I saw a vision, A certain vessel descend, as it had been a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came even to me: 6. Upon the which when I had fastened mine eyes, I considered, and saw fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. 7. And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay, and eat. 8. But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth. 9. But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. 10. And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven. 11. And, behold, immediately there were three men already come unto the house where I was, sent from Caesarea unto me. 12. And the Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the man's house: 13. And he shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; 14. Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved. 15. And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. 16. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that He said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. 17. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as He did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God? 18. When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life."*

*Acts 11:1-18*

Peter's action in regard to Cornelius precipitated a controversy which was bound to come if the Church was to be anything more than a Jewish sect. It brought to light the first tendency to form a party in the Church. They... of the circumcision were probably certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, and were especially zealous for all the separating prescriptions of the ceremonial law. They were scarcely a party as yet, but the little rift was destined to grow, and they became Paul's bitterest opponents through all his life, dogging him with calumnies and counterworking his toil. It is a black day for a Church when differences of opinion lead to the formation of cliques. Zeal for truth is sadly apt to enlist spite, malice, and blindness to a manifest work of God, as its allies.

Poor Peter, no doubt, expected that the brethren would rejoice with him in the extension of the Gospel to the Gentiles, but his reception in Jerusalem was very unlike his hopes. The critics did not venture to cavil at his preaching to Gentiles. Probably none of them had any objection to such being welcomed into the Church, for they can scarcely have wished to make the door into it narrower than that into the synagogue, but they insisted that there was no way in but through the synagogue. By all means, said they, let Gentiles come, but they must first become Jews, by submitting to circumcision and living as Jews do. Thus they did not attack Peter for preaching to the Roman centurion and his men, but for eating with them. That eating not only was a breach of the law, but it implied the reception of Cornelius and his company into the household of God, and so destroyed the whole fabric of Jewish exclusiveness. We condemn such narrowness, but do many of us not practise it in other forms? Wherever Christians demand adoption of external usages, over and above exercise of penitent faith, as a condition of brotherly recognition, they are walking in the steps of them of the circumcision.

Peter's answer to the critics is the true answer to all similar hedging up of the Church, for he contents himself with showing that he was only following God's action in every step of the way which he took, and that God, by the gift of the divine Spirit, had shown that He had taken these uncircumcised men into His fellowship, before Peter dared to eat with them. He points to four facts which show God's hand in the matter, and thinks that he has done enough to vindicate himself thereby. The first is his vision on the housetop. He tells that he was praying when it came, and what God shows to a praying spirit is not likely to mislead. He tells that he was in a trance,--a condition in which prophets had of old received their commands. That again was a guarantee for the divine origin of the vision in the eyes of every Jew, though nowadays it is taken by anti-supernaturalists as a demonstration of its morbidness and unreliableness. He tells of his reluctance to obey the command to kill and eat. A flash of the old brusque spirit impelled his flat refusal, Not so, Lord! and his daring to argue with his Lord still, as he had done with Him on earth. He tells of the interpreting and revolutionary word, evoked by his audacious objection, and then he tells how this was done thrice, so that there could be no mistake in his remembrance of it, and then that the whole was drawn up into heaven,--a sign that the purpose of the vision was accomplished when that word was spoken. What, then, was the meaning of it?

Clearly it swept away at once the legal distinction of clean and unclean meats, and of it, too, may be spoken what Mark, Peter's mouthpiece, writes of earthly words of Christ's: This He said, making all meats clean. But with the sweeping away of that distinction much else goes, for it necessarily involves the abrogation of the whole separating ordinances of the law, and of the distinction between clean and unclean persons. Its wider application was not seen at the moment, but it flashed on him, no doubt, when face to face with Cornelius. God had cleansed him, in that his prayers had gone up for a memorial before God, and so Peter saw that in every nation, and not among Jews only, there might be men cleansed by God. What was true of Cornelius must be true of many others. So the whole distinction between Jew and Gentile was cut up by the roots. Little did Peter know the width of the principle revealed to him then, as all of us know but little of the full application of many truths which we believe. But he obeyed so much of the command as he understood, and more of it gradually dawned on his mind, as will always be the case if we obey what we know.

The second fact was the coincident arrival of the messengers and the distinct command to accompany them. Peter could distinguish quite assuredly his own thoughts from divine instructions, as his account of the dialogue in the trance shows. How he distinguished is not told; that he distinguished is. The coincidence in time clearly pointed to one divine hand working at both ends of the line,-- Caesarea and Joppa. It interpreted the vision which had much perplexed Peter as to what it might mean. But he was not left to interpret it by his own pondering. The Spirit spoke authoritatively, and the whole force of his justification of himself depends on the fact that he knew that the impulse which made him set out to Caesarea was not his own. If the reading of the Revised Version is adopted in verse 12, making no distinction, the command plainly referred to the vision, and showed Peter that he was to make no distinction of clean and unclean in his intercourse with these Gentiles.

The third fact is the vision to Cornelius, of which he was told on arriving. The two visions fitted into each other, confirmed each other, interpreted each other. We may estimate the greatness of the step in the development of the Church which the admission of Cornelius into it made, and the obstacles on both sides, by the fact that both visions were needed to bring these two men together. Peter would never have dreamed of going with the messengers if he had not had his narrowness beaten out of him on the housetop, and Cornelius would never have dreamed of sending to Joppa if he had not seen the angel. The cleft between Jew and Gentile was so wide that God's hand had to be applied on both sides to press the separated parts together. He had plainly done it, and that was Peter's defence.

The fourth fact is the gift of the Spirit to these Gentiles. That is the crown of Peter's vindication, and his question, Who was I, that I could withstand God? might be profitably pondered and applied by those whose ecclesiastical theories oblige them to deny the orders and the validity of the sacraments and the very name of a Church, to bodies of Christians who do not conform to their polity. If God, by the gift of His Spirit manifest in its fruits, owns them, they have the true notes of the Church, and they of the circumcision who recoil from recognising them do themselves more harm thereby than they inflict on these. As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God, even though some brother may be angry that the Father welcomes them.