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

**ACTS-040. THE FIRST PREACHING AT ANTIOCH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"20. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they ware come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord."*

*Acts 11:20-21*

Thus simply does the historian tell one of the greatest events in the history of the Church. How great it was will appear if we observe that the weight of authority among critics and commentators sees here an extension of the message of salvation to Greeks, that is, to pure heathens, and not a mere preaching to Hellenists, that is, to Greek-speaking Jews born outside Palestine.

If that be correct, this was a great stride forward in the development of the Church. It needed a vision to overcome the scruples of Peter, and impel him to the bold innovation of preaching to Cornelius and his household, and, as we know, his doing so gave grave offence to some of his brethren in Jerusalem. But in the case before us, some Cypriote and African Jews--men of no note in the Church, whose very names have perished, with no official among them, with no vision nor command to impel them, with no precedent to encourage them, with nothing but the truth in their minds and the impulses of Christ's love in their hearts--solve the problem of the extension of Christ's message to the heathen, and, quite unconscious of the greatness of their act, do the thing about the propriety of which there had been such serious question in Jerusalem.

This boldness becomes even more remarkable if we notice that the incident of our text may have taken place before Peter's visit to Cornelius. The verse before our text, They which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled, ... preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only, is almost a verbatim repetition of words in an earlier chapter, and evidently suggests that the writer is returning to that point of time, in order to take up another thread of his narrative contemporaneous with those already pursued. If so, three distinct lines of expansion appear to have started from the dispersion of the Jerusalem church in the persecution--namely, Philip's mission to Samaria, Peter's to Cornelius, and this work in Antioch. Whether prior in time or no, the preaching in the latter city was plainly quite independent of the other two. It is further noteworthy that this, the effort of a handful of unnamed men, was the true leader--the shoot that grew. Philip's work, and Peter's so far as we know, were side branches, which came to little; this led on to a church at Antioch, and so to Paul's missionary work, and all that came of that.

The incident naturally suggests some thoughts bearing on the general subject of Christian work, which we now briefly present.

**I. Notice the spontaneous impulse which these men obeyed.**

Persecution drove the members of the Church apart, and, as a matter of course, wherever they went they took their faith with them, and, as a matter of course, spoke about it. The coals were scattered from the hearth in Jerusalem by the armed heel of violence. That did not put the fire out, but only spread it, for wherever they were flung they kindled a blaze. These men had no special injunction to preach the Lord Jesus. They do not seem to have adopted this line of action deliberately, or of set purpose. They believed, and therefore spoke. A spontaneous impulse, and nothing more, leads them on. They find themselves rejoicing in a great Saviour-Friend. They see all around them men who need Him, and that is enough. They obey the promptings of the voice within, and lay the foundations of the first Gentile Church.

Such a spontaneous impulse is ever the natural result of our own personal possession of Christ. In regard to worldly good the instinct, except when overcome by higher motives, is to keep the treasure to oneself. But even in the natural sphere there are possessions which to have is to long to impart, such as truth and knowledge. And in the spiritual sphere, it is emphatically the case that real possession is always accompanied by a longing to impart. The old prophet spoke a universal truth when he said: Thy word was as a fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay. If we have found Christ for ourselves, we shall undoubtedly wish to speak forth our knowledge of His love. Convictions which are deep demand expression. Emotion which is strong needs utterance. If our hearts have any fervour of love to Christ in them, it will be as natural to tell it forth, as tears are to sorrow or smiles to happiness. True, there is a reticence in profound feeling, and sometimes the deepest love can only love and be silent, and there is a just suspicion of loud or vehement protestations of Christian emotion, as of any emotion. But for all that, it remains true that a heart warmed with the love of Christ needs to express its love, and will give it forth, as certainly as light must radiate from its centre, or heat from a fire.

Then, true kindliness of heart creates the same impulse. We cannot truly possess the treasure for ourselves without pity for those who have it not. Surely there is no stranger contradiction than that Christian men and women can be content to keep Christ as if He were their special property, and have their spirits untouched into any likeness of His divine pity for the multitudes who were as sheep having no shepherd. What kind of Christians must they be who think of Christ as a Saviour for me, and take no care to set Him forth as a Saviour for you? What should we think of men in a shipwreck who were content to get into the lifeboat, and let everybody else drown? What should we think of people in a famine feasting sumptuously on their private stores, whilst women were boiling their children for a meal and men fighting with dogs for garbage on the dunghills? He that withholdeth bread, the people shall curse him. What of him who withholds the Bread of Life, and all the while claims to be a follower of the Christ, who gave His flesh for the life of the world?

Further, loyalty to Christ creates the same impulse. If we are true to our Lord, we shall feel that we cannot but speak up and out for Him, and that all the more where His name is unloved and unhonoured. He has left His good fame very much in our hands, and the very same impulse which hurries words to our lips when we hear the name of an absent friend calumniated should make us speak for Him. He is a doubtfully loyal subject who, if he lives among rebels, is afraid to show his colours. He is already a coward, and is on the way to be a traitor. Our Master has made us His witnesses. He has placed in our hands, as a sacred deposit, the honour of His name. He has entrusted to us, as His selectest sign of confidence, the carrying out of the purposes for which on earth His blood was shed, on which in heaven His heart is set. How can we be loyal to Him if we are not forced by a mighty constraint to respond to His great tokens of trust in us, and if we know nothing of that spirit which said: Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! I do not say that a man cannot be a Christian unless he knows and obeys this impulse. But, at least, we may safely say that he is a very weak and imperfect Christian who does not.

**II. This incident suggests the universal obligation on all Christians to make known Christ.**

These men were not officials. In these early days the Church had a very loose organisation. But the fugitives in our narrative seem to have had among them none even of the humble office-bearers of primitive times. Neither had they any command or commission from Jerusalem. No one there had given them authority, or, as would appear, knew anything of their proceedings. Could there be a more striking illustration of the great truth that whatever varieties of function may be committed to various officers in the Church, the work of telling Christ's love to men belongs to every one who has found it for himself or herself? This honour have all the saints.

Whatever may be our differences of opinion as to Church order and offices, they need not interfere with our firm grasp of this truth. Preaching Christ, in the sense in which that expression is used in the New Testament, implies no one special method of proclaiming the glad tidings. A word written in a letter to a friend, a sentence dropped in casual conversation, a lesson to a child on a mother's lap, or any other way by which, to any listeners, the great story of the Cross is told, is as truly--often more truly--preaching Christ as the set discourse which has usurped the name.

We profess to believe in the priesthood of all believers, we are ready enough to assert it in opposition to sacerdotal assumptions. Are we as ready to recognise it as laying a very real responsibility upon us, and involving a very practical inference as to our own conduct? We all have the power, therefore we all have the duty. For what purpose did God give us the blessing of knowing Christ ourselves? Not for our own well-being alone, but that through us the blessing might be still further diffused.

Heaven doth with us as men with torches do,

Not light them for themselves.

God hath shined into our hearts that we might give to others the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Every Christian is solemnly bound to fulfil this divine intention, and to take heed to the imperative command, Freely ye have received, freely give.

**III. Observe, further, the simple message which they proclaimed.**

Preaching the Lord Jesus, says the text--or more accurately perhaps--preaching Jesus as Lord. The substance, then, of their message was just this--proclamation of the person and dignity of their Master, the story of the human life of the Man, the story of the divine sacrifice and self-bestowment by which He had bought the right of supreme rule over every heart; and the urging of His claims on all who heard of His love. And this, their message, was but the proclamation of their own personal experience. They had found Jesus to be for themselves Lover and Lord, Friend and Saviour of their souls, and the joy they had received they sought to share with these Greeks, worshippers of gods and lords many.

Surely anybody can deliver that message who has had that experience. All have not the gifts which would fit for public speech, but all who have tasted that the Lord is gracious can somehow tell how gracious He is. The first Christian sermon was very short, and it was very efficacious, for it brought to Jesus the whole congregation. Here it is: He first findeth his brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias. Surely we can all say that, if we have found Him. Surely we shall all long to say it, if we are glad that we have found Him, and if we love our brother.

Notice, too, how simple the form as well as the substance of the message. They spake. It was no set address, no formal utterance, but familiar, natural talk to ones and twos, as opportunity offered. The form was so simple that we may say that there was none. What we want is that Christian people should speak anyhow. What does the shape of the cup matter? What does it matter whether it be gold or clay? The main thing is that it shall bear the water of life to some thirsty lip. All Christians have to preach, as the word is used here, that is, to tell the good news. Their task is to carry a message--no refinement of words is needed for that--arguments are not needed. They have to tell it simply and faithfully, as one who only cares to repeat what he has had given to him. They have to tell it confidently, as having proved it true. They have to tell it beseechingly, as loving the souls to whom they bring it. Surely we can all do that, if we ourselves are living on Christ and have drunk into His Spirit. Let His mighty salvation, experienced by yourselves, be the substance of your message, and let the form of it be guided by the old words, It shall be, when the Spirit of the Lord is come upon thee, that thou shalt do as occasion shall serve thee.

**IV. Notice, lastly, the mighty Helper who prospered their work.**

The hand of the Lord was with them. The very keynote of this Book of the Acts is the work of the ascended Christ in and for His Church. At every turning-point in the history, and throughout the whole narratives, forms of speech like this occur, bearing witness to the profound conviction of the writer that Christ's active energy was with His servants, and Christ's Hand the origin of all their security and of all their success.

So this is a statement of a permanent and universal fact. We do not labour alone; however feeble our hands, that mighty Hand is laid on them to direct their movements and to lend strength to their weakness. It is not our speech which will secure results, but His presence with our words which will bring it about that even through them a great number shall believe and turn to the Lord. There is our encouragement when we are despondent. There is our rebuke when we are self-confident. There is our stimulus when we are indolent. There is our quietness when we are impatient. If ever we are tempted to think our task heavy, let us not forget that He who set it helps us to do it, and from His throne shares in all our toils, the Lord still, as of old, working with us. If ever we feel that our strength is nothing, and that we stand solitary against many foes, let us fall back upon the peace-giving thought that one man against the world, with Christ to help him, is always in the majority, and let us leave issues of our work in His hands, whose hand will guard the seed sown in weakness, whose smile will bless the springing thereof.

How little any of us know what will become of our poor work, under His fostering care! How little these men knew that they were laying the foundations of the great change which was to transform the Christian community from a Jewish sect into a world-embracing Church! So is it ever. We know not what we do when simply and humbly we speak His name. The far-reaching results escape our eyes. Then, sow the seed, and He will give it a body as it pleaseth Him. On earth we may never know the fruits of our labours. They will be among the surprises of heaven, where many a solitary worker shall exclaim with wonder, as he looks on the hitherto unknown children whom God hath given him, Behold, I was left alone; these, where had they been? Then, though our names may have perished from earthly memories, like those of the simple fugitives of Cyprus and Cyrene, who were the first that ever burst into the night of heathendom with the torch of the Gospel in their hands, they will be written in the Lamb's book of life, and He will confess them in the presence of His Father in heaven.