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

**ACTS-048. RHODA by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"A damsel ... named Rhoda."*

*Acts 12:13*

Rhoda means a rose, and this rose has kept its bloom for eighteen hundred years, and is still sweet and fragrant! What a lottery undying fame is! Men will give their lives to earn it; and this servant-girl got it by one little act, and never knew that she had it, and I suppose she does not know to-day that, everywhere throughout the whole world where the Gospel is preached, this that she hath done is spoken of as a memorial to her. Is the love of fame worthy of being called the last infirmity of noble minds? Or is it the delusion of ignoble ones? Why need we care whether anybody ever hears of us after we are dead and buried, so long as God knows about us? The damsel named Rhoda was little the better for the immortality which she had unconsciously won.

Now there is a very singular resemblance between the details of this incident and those of another case, when Peter was recognised in dim light by his voice, and the Evangelist Luke, who is the author of the Acts of the Apostles, seems to have had the resemblance between the two scenes--that in the high priest's palace and that outside Mary's door--in his mind, because he uses in this narrative a word which occurs, in the whole of the New Testament, only here and in his account of what took place on that earlier occasion. In both instances a maid-servant recognises Peter by his voice, and in both she constantly affirms that it was so. I do not think that there is anything to be built upon the resemblance, but at all events I think that the use of the same unusual word in the two cases, and nowhere else, seems to suggest that Luke felt how strangely events sometimes double themselves; and how the Apostle who is here all but a martyr is re-enacting, with differences, something like the former scene, when he was altogether a traitor. But, be that as it may, there are some lessons which we may gather from this vivid picture of Rhoda and her behaviour on the one side of the door, while Peter stood hammering, in the morning twilight, on the other.

**I. We may notice in the relations of Rhoda to the assembled believers a striking illustration of the new bond of union supplied by the Gospel.**

Rhoda was a slave. The word rendered in our version damsel means a female slave. Her name, which is a Gentile name, and her servile condition, make it probable that she was not a Jewess. If one might venture to indulge in a guess, it is not at all unlikely that her mistress, Mary, John Mark's mother, Barnabas' sister, a well-to-do woman of Jerusalem, who had a house large enough to take in the members of the Church in great numbers, and to keep up a considerable establishment, had brought this slave-girl from the island of Cyprus. At all events, she was a slave. In the time of our Lord, and long after, these relations of slavery brought an element of suspicion, fear, and jealous espionage into almost every Roman household, because every master knew that he passed his days and nights among men and women who wanted nothing better than to wreak their vengeance upon him. A man's foes were eminently those of his own household. And now here this child-slave, a Gentile, has been touched by the same mighty love as her mistress; and Mary and Rhoda were kneeling together in the prayer-meeting when Peter began to hammer at the door. Neither woman thought now of the unnatural, unwholesome relation which had formerly bound them. In God's good time, and by the slow process of leavening society with Christian ideas, that diabolical institution perished in Christian lands. Violent reformation of immoralities is always a blunder. Raw haste is half-sister to delay. Settlers in forest lands have found that it is endless work to grub up the trees, or even to fell them. Root and branch reform seldom answers. The true way is to girdle the tree by taking off a ring of bark round the trunk, and letting nature do the rest. Dead trees are easily dealt with; living ones blunt many axes and tire many arms, and are alive after all. Thus the Gospel waged no direct war with slavery, but laid down principles which, once they are wrought into Christian consciousness, made its continuance impossible. But, pending that consummation, the immediate action of Christianity was to ameliorate the condition of the slave. The whole aspect of the ugly thing was changed as soon as master and slave together became the slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel has the same sort of work to do to-day, and there are institutions in full flourishing existence in this and every other civilised community as entirely antagonistic to the spirit and principles of Christianity as Roman slavery was. I, for my part, believe that the one uniting bond and healing medicine for society is found in Jesus Christ; and that in Him, and that the principles deducible from His revelation by word and work, applied to all social evils, are their cure, and their only cure. That slight, girlish figure standing at the door of Mary, her slave and yet her sister in Christ, may be taken as pointing symbolically the way by which the social and civic evils of this day are to be healed, and the war of classes to cease.

**II. Note how we get here a very striking picture of the sacredness and greatness of small common duties.**

Bhoda came out from the prayer-meeting to open the gate. It was her business, as we say, to answer the door, and so she left off praying to go and do it. So doing, she was the means of delivering the Apostle from the danger which still dogged him. It was of little use to be praying on one side of the shut door when on the other he was standing in the street, and the day was beginning to dawn; Herod's men would be after him as soon as daylight disclosed his escape. The one thing needful for him was to be taken in and sheltered. So the praying group and the girl who stops praying when she hears the knock, to which it was her business to attend, were working in the same direction. It is not necessary to insist that no heights or delights of devotion and secret communion are sufficient excuses for neglecting or delaying the doing of the smallest and most menial task which is our task. If your business is to keep the door, you will not be leaving, but abiding in, the secret place of the Most High, if you get up from your knees in the middle of your prayer, and go down to open it. The smallest, commonest acts of daily life are truer worship than is rapt and solitary communion or united prayer, if the latter can only be secured by the neglect of the former. Better to be in the lower parts of the house attending to the humble duties of the slave than to be in the upper chamber, uniting with the saints in supplication and leaving tasks unperformed.

Let us remember how we may find here an illustration of another great truth, that the smallest things, done in the course of the quiet discharge of recognised duty, and being, therefore, truly worship of God, have in them a certain quality of immortality, and may be eternally commemorated. It was not only the lofty and unique expression of devotion, which another woman gave when she broke the alabaster box to anoint the feet of the Saviour which were to be pierced with nails to-morrow, that has been held worthy of undying remembrance. The name and act of a poor slave girl have been commemorated by that Spirit who preserves nothing in vain, in order that we should learn that things which we vulgarly call great, and those which we insolently call small, are regarded by Him, not according to their apparent magnitude, but according to their motive and reference to Him. He says, I will never forget any of their works; and this little deed of Rhoda's, like the rose petals that careful housekeepers in the country keep upon the sideboard in china bowls to diffuse a fragance through the room, is given us to keep in memory for ever, a witness of the sanctity of common life when filled with acts of obedience to Him.

**III. The same figure of the damsel named Rhoda may give us a warning as to the possibility of forgetting very plain duties under the pressure of very legitimate excitement.**

She opened not the door for gladness, but ran in and told them. And if, whilst she was running in with her message, Herod's quaternions of soldiers had come down the street, there would have been no small stir in the church as to what had become of Peter. He would have gone back to his prison sure enough. Her first duty was to open the door; her second one was to go and tell the brethren, we have got him safe inside; but in the rush of joyous emotions she naively forgot what her first business was, lost her head, as we say, and so went off to tell that he was outside, instead of letting him in. Now joy and sorrow are equally apt to make us forget plain and pressing duties, and we may learn from this little incident the old-fashioned, but always necessary advice, to keep feeling well under control, to use it as impulse, not as guide, and never to let emotion, which should be down in the engine-room, come on deck and take the helm. It is dangerous to obey feeling, unless its decrees are countersigned by calm common sense illuminated by Scripture. Sorrow is apt to obscure duty by its darkness, and joy to do so by its dazzle. It is hard to see the road at midnight, or at midday when the sun is in our eyes. Both need to be controlled. Duty remains the same, whether my heart is beating like a sledge-hammer, or whether my bosom's lord sits lightly on its throne. Whether I am sad or glad, the door that God has given me to watch has to be opened and shut by me. And whether I am a door-keeper in the house of the Lord, like Rhoda in Mary's, or have an office that people think larger and more important, the imperativeness of my duties is equally independent of my momentary emotions and circumstances. Remember, then, that duty remains while feeling fluctuates, and that, sorrowful or joyful, we have still the same Lord to serve and the same crown to win.

**IV. Lastly, we have here an instance of a very modest but positive and fully-warranted trust in one's own experience in spite of opposition.**

I need not speak about that extraordinary discussion which the brethren got up in the upper room. They had been praying, as has often been remarked, for Peter's deliverance, and now that he is delivered they will not believe it. I am afraid that there is often a dash of unbelief in immediate answers to our prayers mingling with the prayers. And although the petitions in this case were intense and fervent, as the original tells us, and had been kept up all night long, and although their earnestness and worthiness are guaranteed by the fact that they were answered, yet when the veritable Peter, in flesh and blood, stood before the door, the suppliants first said to the poor girl, Thou art mad, and then, It is his angel! It cannot be he. Nobody seems to have thought of going to the door to see whether it was he or not, but they went on arguing with Rhoda as to whether she was right or wrong. The unbelief that alloys even golden faith is taught us in this incident.

Rhoda constantly affirmed that it was so, like the other porteress that had picked out Peter's voice amongst the men huddled round the fire in the high priest's chamber.

The lesson is--trust your own experience, whatever people may have to say against it. If you have found that Jesus Christ can help you, and has loved you, and that your sins have been forgiven, because you have trusted in Him, do not let anybody laugh or talk you out of that conviction. If you cannot argue, do like Rhoda, constantly affirm that it is so. That is the right answer, especially if you can say to the antagonistic party, Have you been down to the door, then, to see? And if they have to say No! then the right answer is, You go and look as I did, and you will come back with the same belief which I have.

So at last they open the door and there he stands. Peter's hammer, hammer, hammer at the gate is wonderfully given in the story. It goes on as a kind of running accompaniment through the talk between Rhoda and the friends. It might have put a stop to the conversation, one would have thought. But Another stands at the door knocking, still more persistently, still more patiently. Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If any man open the door I will come in.