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

**ACTS-054. LUTHER—A STONE ON THE CAIRN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"36. For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and saw corruption: 37. But He, whom God raised again, saw no corruption."*

*Acts 13:36-37*

I take these words as a motto rather than as a text. You will have anticipated the use which I purpose to make of them in connection with the Luther Commemoration. They set before us, in clear sharp contrast, the distinction between the limited, transient work of the servants and the unbounded, eternal influence of the Master. The former are servants, and that but for a time; they do their work, they are laid in the grave, and as their bodies resolve into their elements, so their influence, their teaching, the institutions which they may have founded, disintegrate and decay. He lives. His relation to the world is not as theirs; He is not for an age, but for all time. Death is not the end of His work. His Cross is the eternal foundation of the world's hope. His life is the ultimate, perfect revelation of the divine Nature which can never be surpassed, or fathomed, or antiquated. Therefore the last thought, in all commemorations of departed teachers and guides, should be of Him who gave them all the force that they had; and the final word should be: They were not suffered to continue by reason of death, this Man continueth ever.

In the same spirit then as the words of my text, and taking them as giving me little more than a starting-point and a framework, I draw from them some thoughts appropriate to the occasion.

**I. First, we have to think about the limited and transient work of this great servant of God.**

The miner's son, who was born in that little Saxon village four hundred years ago, presents at first sight a character singularly unlike the traditional type of mediaeval Church fathers and saints. Their ascetic habits, and the repressive system under which they were trained, withdraw them from our sympathy; but this sturdy peasant, with his full-blooded humanity, unmistakably a man, and a man all round, is a new type, and looks strangely out of place amongst doctors and mediaeval saints.

His character, though not complex, is many-sided and in some respects contradictory. The face and figure that look out upon us from the best portraits of Luther tell us a great deal about the man. Strong, massive, not at all elegant; he stands there, firm and resolute, on his own legs, grasping a Bible in a muscular hand. There is plenty of animalism--a source of power as well as of weakness--in the thick neck; an iron will in the square chin; eloquence on the full, loose lips; a mystic, dreamy tenderness and sadness in the steadfast eyes-- altogether a true king and a leader of men!

The first things that strike one in the character are the iron will that would not waver, the indomitable courage that knew no fear, the splendid audacity that, single-handed, sprang into the arena for a contest to the death with Pope, Emperors, superstitions, and devils; the insight that saw the things that were hid from the wise and prudent, and the answering sincerity that would not hide what he saw, nor say that he saw what he did not.

But there was a great deal more than that in the man. He was no mere brave revolutionary, he was a cultured scholar, abreast of all the learning of his age, capable of logic-chopping and scholastic disputation on occasion, and but too often the victim of his own over-subtle refinements. He was a poet, with a poet's dreaminess and waywardness, fierce alternations of light and shade, sorrow and joy. All living things whispered and spoke to him, and he walked in communion with them all. Little children gathered round his feet, and he had a big heart of love for all the weary and the sorrowful.

Everybody knows how he could write and speak. He made the German language, as we may say, lifting it up from a dialect of boors to become the rich, flexible, cultured speech that it is. And his Bible, his single-handed work, is one of the colossal achievements of man; like Stonehenge or the Pyramids. His words were half-battles, they were living creatures that had hands and feet; his speech, direct, strong, homely, ready to borrow words from the kitchen or the gutter, is unmatched for popular eloquence and impression. There was music in the man. His flute solaced his lonely hours in his home at Wittemberg; and the Marseillaise of the Reformation, as that grand hymn of his has been called, came, words and music, from his heart. There was humour in him, coarse horseplay often; an honest, hearty, broad laugh frequently, like that of a Norse god. There were coarse tastes in him, tastes of the peasant folk from whom he came, which clung to him through life, and kept him in sympathy with the common people, and intelligible to them. And withal there was a constitutional melancholy, aggravated by his weary toils, perilous fightings, and fierce throes, which led him down often into the deep mire where there was no standing; and which sighs through all his life. The penitential Psalms and Paul's wail: O wretched man that I am, perhaps never woke more plaintive echo in any human heart than they did in Martin Luther's.

Faults he had, gross and plain as the heroic mould in which he was cast. He was vehement and fierce often; he was coarse and violent often. He saw what he did see so clearly, that he was slow to believe that there was anything that he did not see. He was oblivious of counterbalancing considerations, and given to exaggerated, incautious, unguarded statements of precious truths. He too often aspired to be a driver rather than a leader of men; and his strength of will became obstinacy and tyranny. It was too often true that he had dethroned the pope of Rome to set up a pope at Wittemberg. And foul personalities came from his lips, according to the bad controversial fashion of his day, which permitted a licence to scholars that we now forbid to fishwives.

All that has to be admitted; and when it is all admitted, what then? This is a fastidious generation; Erasmus is its heroic type a great deal more than Luther--I mean among the cultivated classes of our day--and that very largely because in Erasmus there is no quick sensibility to religious emotion as there is in Luther, and no inconvenient fervour. The faults are there--coarse, plain, palpable-- and perhaps more than enough has been made of them. Let us remember, as to his violence, that he was following the fashion of the day; that he was fighting for his life; that when a man is at death-grips with a tiger he may be pardoned if he strikes without considering whether he is going to spoil the skin or not; and that on the whole you cannot throttle snakes in a graceful attitude. Men fought then with bludgeons; they fight now with dainty polished daggers, dipped in cold, colourless poison of sarcasm. Perhaps there was less malice in the rougher old way than in the new.

The faults are there, and nobody who is not a fool would think of painting that homely Saxon peasant-monk's face without the warts and the wrinkles. But it is quite as unhistorical, and a great deal more wicked, to paint nothing but the warts and wrinkles; to rake all the faults together and make the most of them; and present them in answer to the question: What sort of a man was Martin Luther?

As to the work that he did, like the work of all of us, it had its limitations, and it will have its end. The impulse that he communicated, like all impulses that are given from men, will wear out its force. New questions will arise of which the dead leaders never dreamed, and in which they can give no counsel. The perspective of theological thought will alter, the centre of interest will change, a new dialect will begin to be spoken. So it comes to pass that all religious teachers and thinkers are left behind, and that their words are preserved and read rather for their antiquarian and historical interest than because of any impulse or direction for the present which may linger in them; and if they founded institutions, these too, in their time, will crumble and disappear.

But I do not mean to say that the truths which Luther rescued from the dust of centuries, and impressed upon the conscience of Teutonic Europe, are getting antiquated. I only mean that his connection with them and his way of putting them, had its limitations and will have its end: This man, having served his own generation by the will of God, was gathered to his fathers, and saw corruption.

What were the truths, what was his contribution to the illumination of Europe, and to the Church? Three great principles--which perhaps closer analysis might reduce to one; but which for popular use, on such an occasion as the present, had better be kept apart--will state his service to the world.

There were three men in the past who, as it seems to me, reach out their hands to one another across the centuries--Paul, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther, The three very like each other, all three of them joining the same subtle speculative power with the same capacity of religious fervour, and of flaming up at the contemplation of divine truth; all of them gifted with the same exuberant, and to fastidious eyes, incorrect eloquence; all three trained in a school of religious thought of which each respectively was destined to be the antagonist and all but the destroyer.

The young Pharisee, on the road to Damascus, blinded, bewildered, with all that vision flaming upon him, sees in its light his past, which he thought had been so pure, and holy, and God-serving, and amazedly discovers that it had been all a sin and a crime, and a persecution of the divine One. Beaten from every refuge, and lying there, he cries: What wouldst Thou have me to do, Lord?

The young Manichean and profligate in the fourth century, and the young monk in his convent in the fifteenth, passed through a similar experience;--different in form, identical in substance--with that of Paul the persecutor. And so Paul's Gospel, which was the description and explanation, the rationale, of his own experience, became their Gospel; and when Paul said: Not by works of righteousness which our own hands have done, but by His mercy He saved us (Titus 3:5), the great voice from the North African shore, in the midst of the agonies of barbarian invasions and a falling Rome, said Amen. Man lives by faith, and the voice from the Wittemberg convent, a thousand years after, amidst the unspeakable corruption of that phosphorescent and decaying Renaissance, answered across the centuries, It is true! Herein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith. Luther's word to the world was Augustine's word to the world; and Luther and Augustine were the echoes of Saul of Tarsus--and Paul learned his theology on the Damascus road, when the voice bade him go and proclaim forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me (Acts 26:18). That is Luther's first claim on our gratitude, that he took this truth from the shelves where it had reposed, dust-covered, through centuries, that he lifted this truth from the bier where it had lain, smothered with sacerdotal garments, and called with a loud voice, I say unto thee, arise! and that now the commonplace of Christianity is this: All men are sinful men, justice condemns us all, our only hope is God's infinite mercy, that mercy comes to us all in Jesus Christ that died for us, and he that gets that into his heart by simple faith, he is forgiven, pure, and he is an heir of Heaven.

There are other aspects of Christian truth which Luther failed to apprehend. The Gospel is, of course, not merely a way of reconciliation and forgiveness. He pushed his teaching of the uselessness of good works as a means of salvation too far. He said rash and exaggerated things in his vehement way about the justifying power of faith alone. Doubtless his language was often overstrained, and his thoughts one-sided, in regard to subjects that need very delicate handling and careful definition. But after all this is admitted, it remains true that his strong arm tossed aside the barriers and rubbish that had been piled across the way by which prodigals could go home to their Father, and made plain once more the endless mercy of God, and the power of humble faith. He was right when he declared that whatever heights and depths there may be in God's great revelation, and however needful it is for a complete apprehension of the truth as it is in Jesus that these should find their place in the creed of Christendom, still the firmness with which that initial truth of man's sinfulness and his forgiveness and acceptance through simple faith in Christ is held, and the clear earnestness with which it is proclaimed, are the test of a standing or a falling Church.

And then closely connected with this central principle, and yet susceptible of being stated separately, are the other two; of neither of which do I think it necessary to say more than a word. Following on that great discovery--for it was a discovery--by the monk in his convent, of justification by faith, there comes the other principle of the entire sweeping away of all priesthood, and the direct access to God of every individual Christian soul. There are no more external rites to be done by a designated and separate class. There is one sacrificing Priest, and one only, and that is Jesus Christ, who has sacrificed Himself for us all, and there are no other priests, except in the sense in which every Christian man is a priest and minister of the most high God. And no man comes between me and my Father; and no man has power to do anything for me which brings me any grace, except in so far as mine own heart opens for the reception, and mine own faith lays hold of the grace given.

Luther did not carry that principle so far as some of us modern Nonconformists carry it. He left illogical fragments of sacramentarian and sacerdotal theories in his creed and in his Church. But, for all that, we owe mainly to him the clear utterance of that thought, the warm breath of which has thawed the ice chains which held Europe in barren bondage. Notwithstanding the present portentous revival of sacerdotalism, and the strange turning again of portions of society to these beggarly elements of the past, I believe that the figments of a sacrificing priesthood and sacramental efficacy will never again permanently darken the sky in this land, the home of the men who speak the tongue of Milton, and owe much of their religious and political freedom to the reformation of Luther.

And the third point, which is closely connected with these other two, is this, the declaration that every illuminated Christian soul has a right and is bound to study God's Word without the Church at his elbow to teach him what to think about it. It was Luther's great achievement that, whatever else he did, he put the Bible into the hands of the common people. In that department and region, his work perhaps bears more distinctly the traces of limitation and imperfection than anywhere else, for he knew nothing--how could he?-- of the difficult questions of this day in regard to the composition and authority of Scripture, nor had he thought out his own system or done full justice to his own principle.

He could be as inquisitorial and as dogmatic as any Dominican of them all. He believed in force; he was as ready as all his fellows were to invoke the aid of the temporal power. The idea of the Church, as helped and sustained--which means fettered, and weakened, and paralysed--by the civic government, bewitched him as it did his fellows. We needed to wait for George Fox, and Roger Williams, and more modern names still, before we understood fully what was involved in the rejection of priesthood, and the claim that God's Word should speak directly to each Christian soul. But for all that, we largely owe to Luther the creed that looks in simple faith to Christ, a Church without a priest, in which every man is a priest of the Most High,--the only true democracy that the world will ever see--and a Church in which the open Bible and the indwelling Spirit are the guides of every humble soul within its pale. These are his claims on our gratitude.

Luther's work had its limitations and its imperfections, as I have been saying to you. It will become less and less conspicuous as the ages go on. It cannot be otherwise. That is the law of the world. As a whole green forest of the carboniferous era is represented now in the rocks by a thin seam of coal, no thicker than a sheet of paper, so the stormy lives and the large works of the men that have gone before, are compressed into a mere film and line, in the great cliff that slowly rises above the sea of time and is called the history of the world.

**II. Be it so; be it so! Let us turn to the other thought of our text, the perpetual work of the abiding Lord.**

He whom God raised up saw no corruption. It is a fact that there are thousands of men and women in the world to-day who have a feeling about that nineteen-centuries-dead Galilean carpenter's son that they have about no one else. All the great names of antiquity are but ghosts and shadows, and all the names in the Church and in the world, of men whom we have not seen, are dim and ineffectual to us. They may evoke our admiration, our reverence, and our wonder, but none of them can touch our hearts. But here is this unique, anomalous fact that men and women by the thousand love Jesus Christ, the dead One, the unseen One, far away back there in the ages, and feel that there is no mist of oblivion between them and Him.

That is because He does for you and me what none of these other men can do. Luther preached about the Cross; Christ died on it. Was Paul crucified for you? there is the secret of His undying hold upon the world. The further secret lies in this, that He is not a past force but a present one. He is no exhausted power but a power mighty to-day; working in us, around us, on us, and for us--a living Christ. This Man whom God raised up from the dead saw no corruption, the others move away from us like figures in a fog, dim as they pass into the mists, having a blurred half-spectral outline for a moment, and then gone.

Christ's death has a present and a perpetual power. He has offered one sacrifice for sins for ever; and no time can diminish the efficacy of His Cross, nor our need of it, nor the full tide of blessings which flow from it to the believing soul. Therefore do men cling to Him today as if it was but yesterday that He had died for them. When all other names carved on the world's records have become unreadable, like forgotten inscriptions on decaying grave-stones, His shall endure for ever, deep graven on the fleshly tables of the heart. His revelation of God is the highest truth. Till the end of time men will turn to His life for their clearest knowledge and happiest certainty of their Father in heaven. There is nothing limited or local in His character or works. In His meek beauty and gentle perfectness, He stands so high above us all that, to-day, the inspiration of His example and the lessons of His conduct touch us as much as if He had lived in this generation, and will always shine before men as their best and most blessed law of conduct. Christ will not be antiquated till He is outgrown, and it will be some time before that happens.

But Christ's power is not only the abiding influence of His earthly life and death. He is not a past force, but a present one. He is putting forth fresh energies to-day, working in and for and by all who love Him. We believe in a living Christ.

Therefore the final thought, in all our grateful commemoration of dead helpers and guides, should be of the undying Lord. He sent whatsoever power was in them. He is with His Church to-day, still giving to men the gifts needful for their times. Aaron may die on Hor, and Moses be laid in his unknown grave on Pisgah, but the Angel of the Covenant, who is the true Leader, abides in the pillar of cloud and fire, Israel's guide in the march, and covering shelter in repose. That is our consolation in our personal losses when our dear ones are not suffered to continue by reason of death. He who gave them all their sweetness is with us still, and has all the sweetness which He lent them for a time. So if we have Christ with us we cannot be desolate. Looking on all the men, who in their turn have helped forward His cause a little way, we should let their departure teach us His presence, their limitations His all-sufficiency, their death His life.

Luther was once found, at a moment of peril and fear, when he had need to grasp unseen strength, sitting in an abstracted mood, tracing on the table with his finger the words Vivit! vivit!--He lives! He lives! It is our hope for ourselves, and for God's truth, and for mankind. Men come and go; leaders, teachers, thinkers speak and work for a season and then fall silent and impotent. He abides. They die, but He lives. They are lights kindled, and therefore sooner or later quenched, but He is the true light from which they draw all their brightness, and He shines for evermore. Other men are left behind and, as the world glides forward, are wrapped in ever-thickening folds of oblivion, through which they shine feebly for a little while, like lamps in a fog, and then are muffled in invisibility. We honour other names, and the coming generations will forget them, but His name shall endure for ever, His name shall continue as long as the sun, and men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed.