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

**ACTS-058. DEIFIED AND STONED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"11. And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. 12. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. 13. Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people. 14. Which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out. 15. And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: 16. Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. 17. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness. 18. And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them. 19. And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead. 20. Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. 21. And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch. 22. Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."*

*Acts 14:11-22*

The scene at Lystra offers a striking instance of the impossibility of eliminating the miraculous element from this book. The cure of a lame man is the starting-point of the whole story. Without it the rest is motiveless and inexplicable. There can be no explosion without a train and a fuse. The miracle, and the miracle only, supplies these. We may choose between believing and disbelieving it, but the rejection of the supernatural does not make this book easier to accept, but utterly chaotic.

**I.** We have, first, the burst of excited wonder which floods the crowd with the conviction that the two Apostles are incarnations of deities. It is difficult to grasp the indications of locality in the story, but probably the miracle was wrought in some crowded place, perhaps the forum. At all events, it was in full view of the multitudes, and they were mostly of the lower orders, as their speaking in the speech of Lycaonia suggests.

This half-barbarous crowd had the ancient faith in the gods unweakened, and the legends, which had become dim to pure Greek and Roman, some of which had originated in their immediate neighbourhood, still found full credence among them. A Jew's first thought on seeing a miracle was, by the prince of the devils; an average Greek's or Roman's was sorcery; these simple people's, like many barbarous tribes to which white men have gone with the marvels of modern science, was the gods have come down; our modern superior person's, on reading of one, is hallucination, or a mistake of an excited imagination. Perhaps the cry of the multitudes at Lystra gets nearer the heart of the thing than those others. For the miracle is a witness of present divine power, and though the worker of it is not an incarnation of divinity, God is with him.

But that joyful conviction, which shot through the crowd, reveals how deep lies the longing for the manifestation of divinity in the form of humanity, and how natural it is to believe that, if there is a divine being, he is sure to draw near to us poor men, and that in our own likeness. Then is the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation but one more of the many reachings out of the heart to paint a fair picture of the fulfilment of its longings? Well, since it is the only such that is alleged to have taken place in historic times, and the only one that comes with any body of historic evidence, and the only one that brings with it transforming power, and since to believe in a God, and also to believe that He has never broken the awful silence, nor done anything to fulfil a craving which He has set in men's hearts, is absurd, it is reasonable to answer, No. The gods are come down in the likeness of men is a wistful confession of need, and a dim hope of its supply. The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us is the supply.

Barnabas was the older man, and his very silence suggested his superior dignity. So he was taken for Jupiter (Zeus in the Greek), and the younger man for his inferior, Mercury (Hermes in the Greek), the messenger of the gods. Clearly the two missionaries did not understand what the multitudes were shouting in their barbarous language, or they would have intervened. Perhaps they had left the spot before the excitement rose to its height, for they knew nothing of the preparations for the sacrifice till they heard of it, and then they sprang forth, which implies that they were within some place, possibly their lodging.

If we could be sure what gates are meant in verse 13, the course of events would be plainer. Were they those of the city, in which case the priest and procession would be coming from the temple outside the walls? or those of the temple itself? or those of the Apostles lodging? Opinions differ, and the material for deciding is lacking. At all events, whether from sharing in the crowd's enthusiasm, or with an eye to the reputation of his shrine, the priest hurriedly procured oxen for a sacrifice, which one reading of the text specifies as an additional offering--that is, over and above the statutory sacrifices. Is it a sign of haste that the garlands, which should have been twined round the oxen's horns, are mentioned separately? If so, we get a lively picture of the exultant hurry of the crowd.

**II.** The Apostles are as deeply moved as the multitude is, but by what different emotions! The horror of idolatry, which was their inheritance from a hundred generations, flamed up at the thought of themselves being made objects of worship. They had met many different sorts of receptions on this journey, but never before anything like this. Opposition and threats left them calm, but this stirred them to the depths. Scoff at us, fight with us, maltreat us, and we will endure; but do not make gods of us. I do not know that their successors have always felt exactly so.

In verse 14 Barnabas is named first, contrary to the order prevailing since Paphos, the reason being that the crowd thought him the superior. The remonstrance ascribed to both, but no doubt spoken by Paul, contains nothing that any earnest monotheist, Jew or Gentile philosopher, might not have said. The purpose of it was not to preach Christ, but to stop the sacrifice. It is simply a vehemently earnest protest against idolatry, and a proclamation of one living God. The comparison with the speech in Athens is interesting, as showing Paul's exquisite felicity in adapting his style to his audience. There is nothing to the peasants of Lycaonia about poets, no argumentation about the degradation of the idea of divinity by taking images as its likeness, no wide view of the course of history, no glimpse of the mystic thought that all creatures live and move in Him. All that might suit the delicate ears of Athenians, but would have been wasted in Lystra amidst the tumultuous crowd. But we have instead of these the fearless assertion, flung in the face of the priest of Jupiter, that idols are vanities, as Paul had learned from Isaiah and Jeremiah; the plain declaration of the one God, living, and not like these inanimate images; of His universal creative power; and the earnest exhortation to turn to Him.

In verse 16 Paul meets an objection which rises in his mind as likely to be springing in his hearers: If there is such a God, why have we never heard of Him till now? That is quite in Paul's manner. The answer is undeveloped, as compared with the Athenian address or with Romans i. But there is couched in verse 16 a tacit contrast between the generations gone by and the present, which is drawn out in the speech on Mars Hill: but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent, and also a contrast between the nations left to walk in their own ways, and Israel to whom revelation had been made. The place and the temper of the listeners did not admit of enlarging on such matters.

But there was a plain fact, which was level to every peasant's apprehension, and might strike home to the rustic crowd. God had left the nations to walk in their own ways, and yet not altogether. That thought is wrought out in Romans i., and the difference between its development there and here is instructive. Beneficence is the sign-manual of heaven. The orderly sequence of the seasons, the rain from heaven, the seat of the gods from which the two Apostles were thought to have come down, the yearly miracle of harvest, and the gladness that it brings--all these are witnesses to a living Person moving the processes of the universe towards a beneficent end for man.

In spite of all modern impugners, it still remains true that the phenomena of nature, their continuity, their co-operation, and their beneficent issues, demand the recognition of a Person with a loving purpose moving them all. Thou crownest the year with Thy goodness; and Thy paths drop fatness.

**III.** The malice of the Jews of Antioch is remarkable. Not content with hounding the Apostles from that city, they came raging after them to Lystra, where there does not appear to have been a synagogue, since we hear only of their stirring up the multitudes. The mantle of Saul had fallen on them, and they were now persecuting him even unto strange cities.

No note is given of the time between the attempted sacrifice and the accomplished stoning, but probably some space intervened. Persuading the multitudes, however fickle they were, would take some time; and indeed one ancient text of Acts has an expansion of the verse: They persuaded the multitudes to depart from them [the Apostles], saying that they spake nothing true, but lied in everything.

No doubt some time elapsed, but few emotions are more transient than such impure religious excitement as the crowd had felt, and the ebb is as great as the flood, and the oozy bottom laid bare is foul. Popular favourites in other departments have to experience the same fate--one day, roses, roses, all the way; the next, rotten eggs and curses. Other folks than the ignorant peasants at Lystra have had devout emotion surging over them and leaving them dry.

Who are they who stoned Paul? Grammatically, the Jews, and probably it was so. They hated him so much that they themselves began the stoning; but no doubt the mob, which is always cruel, because it needs strong excitement, lent willing hands. Did Paul remember Stephen, as the stones came whizzing on him? It is an added touch of brutality that they dragged the supposed corpse out of the city, with no gentle hands, we may be sure. Perhaps it was flung down near the very temple before the city, where the priest that wanted to sacrifice was on duty.

The crowd, having wreaked their vengeance, melted away, but a handful of brave disciples remained, standing round the bruised, unconscious form, ready to lay it tenderly in some hastily dug grave. No previous mention of disciples has been made. The narrative of Acts does not profess to be complete, and the argument from its silence is precarious.

Luke shows no disposition to easy belief in miracles. He does not know that Paul was dead; his medical skill familiarised him with protracted states of unconsciousness; so all he vouches for is that Paul lay as if dead on some rubbish heap without the camp, and that, with courage and persistence which were supernatural, whether his reviving was so or not, the man thus sorely battered went back to the city, and next day went on with his work, as if stoning was a trifle not to be taken account of.

The Apostles turned at Derbe, and coming back on their outward route, reached Antioch, encouraging the new disciples, who had now to be left truly like shepherdless sheep among wolves. They did not encourage them by making light of the dangers waiting them, but they plainly set before them the law of the Kingdom, which they had seen exemplified in Paul, that we must suffer if we would reign with the King. That we in verse 22 is evidently quoted from Paul, and touchingly shows how he pointed to his own stoning as what they too must be prepared to suffer. It is a thought frequently recurring in his letters. It remains true in all ages, though the manner of suffering varies.