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

**ACTS-059. DREAM AND REALITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"… The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men."*

*Acts 14:11*

This was the spontaneous instinctive utterance of simple villagers when they saw a deed of power and kindness. Many an English traveller and settler among rude people has been similarly honoured. And in Lycaonia the Apostles were close upon places that were celebrated in Greek mythology as having witnessed the very two gods, here spoken of, wandering among the shepherds and entertained with modest hospitality in their huts.

The incident is a very striking and picturesque one. The shepherd people standing round, the sudden flash of awe and yet of gladness which ran through them, the tumultuous outcry, which, being in their rude dialect, was unintelligible to the Apostles till it was interpreted by the appearance of the priest of Jupiter with oxen and garlands for offerings, the glimpse of the two Apostles--the older, graver, venerable Barnabas, the younger, more active, ready-tongued Paul, whom their imaginations converted into the Father of gods and men, and the herald Mercury, who were already associated in local legends; the priest, eager to gain credit for his temple before the city, the lowing oxen, and the vehement appeal of the Apostles, make a picture which is more vividly presented in the simple narrative than even in the cartoon of the great painter whom the narrative has inspired.

But we have not to deal with the picturesque element alone. The narratives of Scripture are representative because they are so penetrating and true. They go to the very heart of the men and things which they describe: and hence the words and acts which they record are found to contain the essential characteristics of whole classes of men, and the portrait of an individual becomes that of a class. This joyful outburst of the people of Lycaonia gives utterance to one of the most striking and universal convictions of heathenism, and stands in very close and intimate relations with that greatest of all facts in the history of the world, the Incarnation of the Eternal Word. That the gods come down in the likeness of men is the dream of heathenism. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, is the sober, waking truth which meets and vindicates and transcends that cry.

**I. The heathen dream of incarnation.**

In all lands we find this belief in the appearance of the gods in human form. It inspired the art and poetry of Greece. Rome believed that gods had charged in front of their armies and given their laws. The solemn, gloomy religion of Egypt, though it worshipped animal forms, yet told of incarnate and suffering gods. The labyrinthine mythologies of the East have their long-drawn stories of the avatars of their gods floating many a rood on the weltering ocean of their legends. Tibet cherishes each living sovereign as a real embodiment of the divine. And the lowest tribes, in their degraded worship, have not departed so far from the common type but that they too have some faint echoes of the universal faith.

Do these facts import anything at all to us? Are we to dismiss them as simply the products of a stage which we have left far behind, and to plume ourselves that we have passed out of the twilight?

Even if we listen to what comparative mythology has to say, it still remains to account for the tendency to shape legends of the earthly appearance of the gods; and we shall have to admit that, while they belong to an early stage of the world's progress, the feelings which they express belong to all stages of it.

Now I think we may note these thoughts as contained in this universal belief:

The consciousness of the need of divine help.

The certainty of a fellowship between heaven and earth.

The high ideal of the capacities and affinities of man.

We may note further what were the general characteristics of these incarnations. They were transient, they were docetic, as they are called--that is, they were merely apparent assumptions of human form which brought the god into no nearer or truer kindred with humanity, and they were, for the most part, for very self-regarding and often most immoral ends, the god's personal gratification of very ungodlike passions and lust, or his winning victories for his favourites, or satisfying his anger by trampling on those who had incurred his very human wrath.

**II. The divine answer which transcends the human dream.**

We have to insist that the truth of the Incarnation is the corner-stone of Christianity. If that is struck out the whole fabric falls. Without it there may be a Christ who is the loftiest and greatest of men, but not the Christ who saves His people from their sins.

That being so, and Christianity having this feature in common with all the religions of men, how are we to account for the resemblance? Are we to listen to the rude solution which says, All lies alike? Are we to see in it nothing but the operation of like tendencies, or rather illusions, of human thought--man's own shadow projected on an illuminated mist? Are we to let the resemblance discredit the Christian message? Or are we to say that all these others are unconscious prophecies--man's half-instinctive expression of his deep need and much misunderstood longing, and that the Christian proclamation that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh is the trumpet-toned announcement of Heaven's answer to earth's cry?

Fairly to face that question is to go far towards answering it. For as soon as we begin to look steadily at the facts, we find that the differences between all these other appearances and the Incarnation are so great as to raise the presumption that their origins are different. The gods slipped on the appearance of humanity over their garment of deity in appearance only, and that for a moment. Jesus is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, and is not merely found in fashion as a man, but is in all points like as we are. And that garb of manhood He wears for ever, and in His heavenly glory is the Man Christ Jesus.

But the difference between all these other appearances of gods and the Incarnation lies in the acts to which they and it respectively led, and the purposes for which they and it respectively took place. A god who came down to suffer, a god who came to die, a god who came to be the supreme example of all fair humanities, a god who came to suffer and to die that men might have life and be victors over sin-- where is he in all the religions of the world? And does not the fact that Christianity alone sets before men such a God, such an Incarnation, for such ends, make the assertion a reasonable one, that the sources of the universal belief in gods who come down among men and of the Christian proclamation that the Eternal Word became flesh are not the same, but that these are men's half-understood cries, and this is Heaven's answer?