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

**ACTS-065. PAUL AT PHILIPPI by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And on the sabbath day we went forth without the gate, by a river side, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which were come together."*

*Acts 16:13 (R.V.)*

This is the first record of the preaching of the Gospel in Europe, and probably the first instance of it. The fact that the vision of the man of Macedonia was needed in order to draw the Apostle across the straits into Macedonia, and the great length at which the incidents at Philippi are recorded, make this probable. If so, we are here standing, as it were, at the wellhead of a mighty river, and the thin stream of water assumes importance when we remember the thousand miles of its course, and the league-broad estuary in which it pours itself into the ocean. Here is the beginning; the Europe of to-day is what came out of it. There is no sign whatever that the Apostle was conscious of an epoch in this transference of the sphere of his operations, but we can scarcely help being conscious of such.

And so, looking at the words of my text, and seeing here how unobtrusively there stole into the progressive part of the world the power which was to shatter and remould all its institutions, to guide and inform the onward march of its peoples, to be the basis of their liberties, and the starting-point of their literature, we can scarcely avoid drawing lessons of importance.

The first point which I would suggest, as picturesquely enforced for us by this incident, is--

**I. The apparent insignificance and real greatness of Christian work.**

There did not seem in the whole of that great city that morning a more completely insignificant knot of people than the little weather-beaten Jew, travel-stained, of weak bodily presence, and of contemptible speech, with the handful of his attendants, who slipped out in the early morning and wended their way to the quiet little oratory, beneath the blue sky, by the side of the rushing stream, and there talked informally and familiarly to the handful of women. The great men of Philippi would have stared if any one had said to them, You will be forgotten, but two of these women will have their names embalmed in the memory of the world for ever. Everybody will know Euodia and Syntyche. Your city will be forgotten, although a battle that settled the fate of the civilised world was fought outside your gates. But that little Jew and the letter that he will write to that handful of believers that are to be gathered by his preaching will last for ever. The mightiest thing done in Europe that morning was when the Apostle sat down by the riverside, and spake to the women which resorted thither.

The very same vulgar mistake as to what is great and as to what is small is being repeated over and over again; and we are all tempted to it by that which is worldly and vulgar in ourselves, to the enormous detriment of the best part of our natures. So it is worth while to stop for a moment and ask what is the criterion of greatness in our deeds? I answer, three things--their motive, their sphere, their consequences. What is done for God is always great. You take a pebble and drop it into a brook, and immediately the dull colouring upon it flashes up into beauty when the sunlight strikes through the ripples, and the magnitude of the little stone is enlarged. If I may make use of such a violent expression, drop your deeds into God, and they will all be great, however small they are. Keep them apart from Him, and they will be small, though all the drums of the world beat in celebration, and all the vulgar people on the earth extol their magnitude. This altar magnifies and sanctifies the giver and the gift. The great things are the things that are done for God.

A deed is great according to its sphere. What bears on and is confined to material things is smaller than what affects the understanding. The teacher is more than the man who promotes material good. And on the very same principle, above both the one and the other, is the doer of deeds which touch the diviner part of a man's nature, his will, his conscience, his affections, his relations to God. Thus the deeds that impinge upon these are the highest and the greatest; and far above the scientific inventor, and far above the mere teacher, as I believe, and as I hope you believe, stands the humblest work of the poorest Christian who seeks to draw any other soul into the light and liberty which he himself possesses. The greatest thing in the world is charity, and the purest charity in the world is that which helps a man to possess the basis and mother-tincture of all love, the love towards God who has first loved us, in the person and the work of His dear Son.

That which being done has consequences that roll through souls, and grow for ever and for ever, is a greater work than the deed whose issues are more short-lived. And so the man who speaks a word which may deflect a soul into the paths which have no end until they are swallowed up in the light of the God who is a Sun, is a worker whose work is truly great. Brethren, it concerns the nobleness of the life of us Christian people far more closely than we sometimes suppose, that we should purge our souls from the false estimate of magnitudes which prevails so extensively in the world's judgment of men and their doings. And though it is no worthy motive for a man to seek to live so that he may do great things, it is a part of the discipline of the Christian mind, as well as heart, that we should be able to reduce the swollen bladders to their true flaccidity and insignificance, and that we should understand that things done for God, things done on men's souls, things done with consequences which time will not exhaust, nor eternity put a period to, are, after all, the great things of human life.

Ah, there will be a wonderful reversal of judgments one day! Names that now fill the trumpet of fame will fall silent. Pages that now are read as if they were leaves of the Book of Life will be obliterated and unknown, and when all the flashing cressets in Vanity Fair have smoked and stunk themselves out, They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. The great things are the Christian things, and there was no greater deed done that day, on this round earth, than when that Jewish wayfarer, travel-stained and insignificant, sat himself down in the place of prayer, and spake unto the women which resorted thither. Do not be over-cowed by the loud talk of the world, but understand that Christian work is the mightiest work that a man can do.

Let us take from this incident a hint as to--

**II. The law of growth in Christ's Kingdom.**

Here, as I have said, is the thin thread of water at the source. We to-day are on the broad bosom of the expanded stream. Here is the little beginning; the world that we see around us has come from this, and there is a great deal more to be done yet before all the power that was transported into Europe, on that Sabbath morning, has wrought its legitimate effects. That is to say, the Kingdom of God cometh not by observation. Let me say a word, and only a word, based on this incident, about the law of small beginnings and the law of slow, inconspicuous development.

We have here an instance of the law of small, silent beginnings. Let us go back to the highest example of everything that is good; the life of Jesus Christ. A cradle at Bethlehem, a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, thirty years buried in a village, two or three years, at most, going up and down quietly in a remote nook of the earth, and then He passed away silently and the world did not know Him. He shall not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets. And as the Christ so His Church, and so His Gospel, and so all good movements that begin from Him. Destructive preparations may be noisy; they generally are. Constructive beginnings are silent and small. If a thing is launched with a great beating of drums and blowing of trumpets, you may be pretty sure there is very little in it. Drums are hollow, or they would not make such a noise. Trumpets only catch and give forth wind. They say--I know not whether it is true--that the Wellingtonia gigantea, the greatest of forest trees, has a smaller seed than any of its congeners. It may be so, at any rate it does for an illustration. The germ-cell is always microscopic. A little beginning is a prophecy of a great ending.

In like manner there is another large principle suggested here which, in these days of impatient haste and rushing to and fro, and religious as well as secular advertising and standing at street corners, we are very apt to forget, but which we need to remember, and that is that the rate of growth is swift when the duration of existence is short. A reed springs up in a night. How long does an oak take before it gets too high for a sheep to crop at? The moth lives its full life in a day. There is no creature that has helpless infancy so long as a man. We have the slow work of mining; the dynamite will be put into the hole one day, and the spark applied-- and then? So an inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning, but the end thereof shall not be blessed.

Let us apply that to our own personal life and work, and to the growth of Christianity in the world, and let us not be staggered because either are so slow. The Lord is not slack concerning His promises, as some men count slackness. One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. How long will that day be of which a thousand years are but as the morning twilight? Brethren, you have need of patience. You Christian workers, and I hope I am speaking to a great many such now; how long does it take before we can say that we are making any impression at all on the vast masses of evil and sin that are round about us? God waited, nobody knows how many millenniums and more than millenniums, before He had the world ready for man. He waited for more years than we can tell before He had the world ready for the Incarnation. His march is very slow because it is ever onwards. Let us be thankful if we forge ahead the least little bit; and let us not be impatient for swift results which are the fool's paradise, and which the man who knows that he is working towards God's own end can well afford to do without.

And now, lastly, let me ask you to notice, still further as drawn from this incident--

**III. The simplicity of the forces to which God entrusts the growth of His Kingdom.**

It is almost ludicrous to think, if it were not pathetic and sublime, of the disproportion between the end that was aimed at and the way that was taken to reach it, which the text opens before us. We went out to the riverside, and we spake unto the women which resorted thither. That was all. Think of Europe as it was at that time. There was Greece over the hills, there was Rome ubiquitous and ready to exchange its contemptuous toleration for active hostility. There was the unknown barbarism of the vague lands beyond. Think of the established idolatries which these men had to meet, around which had gathered, by the superstitious awe of untold ages, everything that was obstinate, everything that was menacing, everything that was venerable. Think of the subtleties to which they had to oppose their unlettered message. Think of the moral corruption that was eating like an ulcer into the very heart of society. Did ever a Cortez on the beach, with his ships in flames behind him, and a continent in arms before, cast himself on a more desperate venture? And they conquered! How? What were the small stones from the brook that slew Goliath? Have we got them? Here they are, the message that they spoke, the white heat of earnestness with which they spoke it, and the divine Helper who backed them up. And we have this message. Brethren, that old word, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, is as much needed, as potent, as truly adapted to the complicated civilisation of this generation, as surely reaching the deepest wants of the human soul, as it was in the days when first the message poured, like a red-hot lava flood, from the utterances of Paul. Like lava it has gone cold to-day, and stiff in many places, and all the heat is out of it. That is the fault of the speaker, never of the message. It is as mighty as ever it was, and if the Christian Church would keep more closely to it, and would realise more fully that the Cross does not need to be propped up so much as to be proclaimed, I think we should see that it is so. That sword has not lost its temper, and modern modes of warfare have not antiquated it. As David said to the high priests at Nob, when he was told that Goliath's sword was hid behind the ephod, Give me that. There is none like it. It was not miracles, it was the Gospel that was preached, which was the power of God unto salvation.

And that message was preached with earnestness. There is one point in which every successful servant of Jesus Christ who has done work for Him, winning men to Him, has been like every other successful servant, and there is only one point. Some of them have been wise men, some of them have been foolish. Some of them have been clad with many puerile notions and much rubbish of ceremonial and sacerdotal theories. Some of them have been high Calvinists, some of them low Arminians; some of them have been scholars, some of them could hardly read. But they have all had this one thing: they believed with all their hearts what they spake. They fulfilled the Horatian principle, If you wish me to weep, your own eyes must overflow--and if you wish me to believe, you must speak, not with bated breath and whispering humbleness, but as if you yourself believed it, and were dead set on getting other people to believe it, too.

And then the third thing that Paul had we have, and that is the presence of the Christ. Note what it says in the context about one convert who was made that morning, Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened. Now I am not going to deduce Calvinism or any other ism from these words, but I pray you to note that there is emerging on the surface here what runs all through this book of Acts, and animates the whole of it, viz., that Jesus Christ Himself is working, doing all the work that is done through His servants. Wherever there are men aflame with that with which every Christian man and woman should be aflame, the consciousness of the preciousness of their Master, and their own responsibility for the spreading of His Name, there, depend upon it, will be the Christ to aid them. The picture with which one of the Evangelists closes his Gospel will be repeated: They went everywhere preaching the word, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.

Dear brethren, the vision of the man of Macedonia which drew Paul across the water from Troas to Philippi speaks to us. Come over and help us, comes from many voices. And if we, in however humble and obscure, and as the foolish purblind world calls it, small, way, yield to the invitation, and try to do what in us lies, then we shall find that, like Paul by the riverside in that oratory, we are building better than we know, and planting a little seed, the springing whereof God will bless. Thou sowest not that which shall be, but bare grain ... and God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him.