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

**ACTS-068. THESSALONICA AND BEREA by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Now, when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: 2. And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath-days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, 3. Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. 4. And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few. 5. But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people, 6. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; 7. Whom Jason hath received; and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. 8. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. 9. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go. 10. And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. 12. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few."*

*Acts 17:1-12*

Shamefully entreated at Philippi, Paul tells the Thessalonians, he waxed bold in our God to preach to them. His experience in the former city might well have daunted a feebler faith, but opposition affected Paul as little as a passing hailstorm dints a rock. To change the field was common sense; to abandon the work would have been sin. But Paul's brave persistence was not due to his own courage; he drew it from God. Because he lived in communion with Him, his courage waxed as dangers gathered. He knew that he was doing a daring thing, but he knew who was his helper. So he went steadily on, whatever might front him. His temper of mind and the source of it are wonderfully revealed in his simple words.

The transference to Thessalonica illustrates another principle of his action; namely, his preference of great centres of population as fields of work. He passes through two less important places to establish himself in the great city. It is wise to fly at the head. Conquer the cities, and the villages will fall of themselves. That was the policy which carried Christianity through the empire like a prairie fire. Would that later missions had adhered to it!

The methods adopted in Thessalonica were the usual ones. Luke bids us notice that Paul took the same course of action in each place: namely, to go to the synagogue first, when there was one, and there to prove that Jesus was the Christ. The three Macedonian towns already mentioned seem not to have had synagogues. Probably there were comparatively few Jews in them, and these were ecclesiastically dependent on Thessalonica. We can fancy the growing excitement in the synagogue, as for three successive Sabbaths the stranger urged his proofs of the two all-important but most unwelcome assertions, that their own scriptures foretold a suffering Messiah,--a side of Messianic prophecy which was ignored or passionately denied--and that Jesus was that Messiah. Many a vehement protest would be shrieked out, with flashing eyes and abundant gesticulation, as he opened the sense of Scripture, and quoted passages--for that is the meaning here of the word rendered alleging. He gives us a glimpse of the hot discussions when he says that he preached in much conflict (1 Thess. 2:2).

With whatever differences in manner of presentation, the true message of the Christian teacher is still the message that woke such opposition in the synagogue of Thessalonica,--the bold proclamation of the personal Christ, His death and resurrection. And with whatever differences, the instrument of conviction is still the Scriptures, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. The more closely we keep ourselves to that message and that weapon the better.

The effects of the faithful preaching of the gospel are as uniform as the method. It does one of two things to its hearers--either it melts their hearts and leads them to faith, or it stirs them to more violent enmity. It is either a stone of stumbling or a sure corner-stone. We either build on or fall over it, and at last are crushed by it. The converts included Jews and proselytes in larger numbers, as may be gathered from the distinction drawn by some--referring to the former, and a great multitude--referring to the latter. Besides these there were a good many ladies of rank and refinement, as was also the case presently at Beroea. Probably these, too, were proselytes.

The prominence of women among the converts, as soon as the gospel is brought into Europe, is interesting and prophetic. The fact of the social position of these ladies may suggest that the upper classes were freer from superstition than the lower, and may point a not favourable contrast with present social conditions, which do not result in a similar accession of women of honourable estate to the Church.

Opposition follows as uniform a course as the preaching. The broad outlines are the same in each case, while the local colouring varies. If we compare Paul's narrative in I Thessalonians, which throbs with emotion, and, as it were, pants with the stress of the conflict, with Luke's calm account here, we see not only how Paul felt, but why the Jews got up a riot. Luke says that they became jealous. Paul expands that into they are contrary to all men; forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved. Then it was not so much dislike to the preaching of Jesus as Messiah as it was rage that their Jewish prerogative was infringed, and the children's bread offered to the dogs, that stung them to violent opposition. Israel had been chosen, that it might be God's witness, and diffuse the treasure it possessed through all the world. It had become, not the dispenser, but the would-be monopolist, of its gift. Have there been no Christian communities in later days animated by the same spirit?

There were plenty of loafers in the market-place ready for any mischief, and by no means particular about the pretext for a riot. Anything that would give an opportunity for hurting somebody, and for loot, would attract them as corruption does flesh-flies. So the Jewish ringleaders easily got a crowd together. To tell their real reasons would scarcely have done, but to say that there was a house to be attacked, and some foreigners to be dragged out, was enough for the present. Jason's house was probably Paul's temporary home, where, as he tells us in 1 Thessalonians ii. 9, he had worked at his trade, that he might not be burdensome to any. Possibly he and Silas had been warned of the approach of the rioters and had got away elsewhere. At all events, the nest was empty, but the crowd must have its victims, and so, failing Paul, they laid hold of Jason. His offence was a very shadowy one. But since his day there have been many martyrs, whose only crime was harbouring Christians, or heretics, or recusant priests, or Covenanters. If a bull cannot gore a man, it will toss his cloak.

The charge against Jason is that he receives the Apostle and his party, and constructively favours their designs. The charge against them is that they are revolutionists, rebels against the Emperor, and partisans of a rival. Now we may note three things about the charge. First, it comes with a very distinct taint of insincerity from Jews, who were, to say the least, not remarkable for loyalty or peaceful obedience. The Gracchi are complaining of sedition! A Jew zealous for Caesar is an anomaly, which might excite the suspicions of the least suspicious ruler. The charge of breaking the peace comes with remarkable appropriateness from the leaders of a riot. They were the troublers of the city, not Paul, peacefully preaching in the synagogue. The wolf scolds the lamb for fouling the river.

Again, the charges are a violent distortion of the truth. Possibly the Jewish ringleaders believed what they said, but more probably they consciously twisted Paul's teachings, because they knew that no other charges would excite so much hostility or be so damning as those which they made. The mere suggestion of treason was often fatal. The wild exaggeration that the Christians had turned the whole civilised world upside down betrays passionate hatred and alarm, if it was genuine, or crafty determination to rouse the mob, if it was consciously trumped up. But whether the charges were believed or not by those who made them, here were Jews disclaiming their nation's dearest hope, and, like the yelling crowd at the Crucifixion, declaring they had no king but Caesar. The degradation of Israel was completed by these fanatical upholders of its prerogatives.

But, again, the charges were true in a far other sense than their bringers meant. For Christianity is revolutionary, and its very aim is to turn the world upside down, since the wrong side is uppermost at present, and Jesus, not Caesar, or any king or emperor or czar, is the true Lord and ruler of men. But the revolution which He makes is the revolution of individuals, turning them from darkness to light; for He moulds single souls first and society afterwards. Violence is always a mistake, and the only way to change evil customs is to change men's natures, and then the customs drop away of themselves. The true rule begins with the sway of hearts; then wills are submissive, and conduct is the expression of inward delight in a law which is sweet because the lawgiver is dear.

Missing Paul, the mob fell on Jason and the brethren. They were bound over to keep the peace. Evidently the rulers had little fear of these alleged desperate revolutionaries, and did as little as they dared, without incurring the reproach of being tepid in their loyalty.

Probably the removal of Paul and his travelling companions from the neighbourhood was included in the terms to which Jason had to submit. Their hurried departure does not seem to have been caused by a renewal of disturbances. At all events, their Beroean experience repeated that of Philippi and of Thessalonica, with one great and welcome difference. The Beroean Jews did exactly what their compatriots elsewhere would not do--they looked into the subject with their own eyes, and tested Paul's assertions by Scripture. Therefore, says Luke, with grand confidence in the impregnable foundations of the faith, many of them believed. True nobility of soul consists in willingness to receive the Word, combined with diligent testing of it. Christ asks for no blind adhesion. The true Christian teacher wishes for no renunciation, on the part of his hearers, of their own judgments. Open your mouth and shut your eyes, and swallow what I give you, is not the language of Christianity, though it has sometimes been the demand of its professed missionaries, and not the teacher only, but the taught also, have been but too ready to exercise blind credulity instead of intelligent examination and clear-eyed faith. If professing Christians to-day were better acquainted with the Scriptures, and more in the habit of bringing every new doctrine to them as its touchstone, there would be less currency of errors and firmer grip of truth.