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

**ACTS-069. PAUL AT ATHENS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"22.* *Then Paul stood In the midst of Mars-hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. 23. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, To the Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. 24. God, that made the world, and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; 25. Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed any thing, seeing He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; 26. And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; 27. That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us: 28. For in Him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also His offspring. 29. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. 30. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: 31. Because he hath appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead. 32. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. 33. So Paul departed from among them. 34. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.."*

*Acts 17:22-34*

I am become all things to all men, said Paul, and his address at Athens strikingly exemplifies that principle of his action. Contrast it with his speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, which appeals entirely to the Old Testament, and is saturated with Jewish ideas, or with the remonstrance to the rude Lycaonian peasants (Acts 14:15, etc.), which, while handling some of the same thoughts as at Athens, does so in a remarkably different manner. There he appealed to God's gifts of rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, the things most close to his hearers' experience; here, speaking to educated philosophers, he quotes Greek poetry, and sets forth a reasoned declaration of the nature of the Godhead and the relations of a philosophy of history and an argument against idolatry. The glories of Greek art were around him; the statues of Pallas Athene and many more fair creations looked down on the little Jew who dared to proclaim their nullity as representations of the Godhead.

Paul's flexibility of mind and power of adapting himself to every circumstance were never more strikingly shown than in that great address to the quick-witted Athenians. It falls into three parts: the conciliatory prelude (vers. 22, 23); the declaration of the Unknown God (vers. 24-29); and the proclamation of the God-ordained Man (vers. 30, 31).

**I.** We have, first, the conciliatory prelude. It is always a mistake for the apostle of a new truth to begin by running a tilt at old errors. It is common sense to seek to find some point in the present beliefs of his hearers to which his message may attach itself. An orator who flatters for the sake of securing favour for himself is despicable; a missionary who recognises the truth which lies under the system which he seeks to overthrow, is wise.

It is incredible that Paul should have begun his speech to so critical an audience by charging them with excessive superstition, as the Authorised Version makes him do. Nor does the modified translation of the Revised Version seem to be precisely what is meant. Paul is not blaming the Athenians, but recording a fact which he had noticed, and from which he desired to start. Ramsay's translation gives the truer notion of his meaning--more than others respectful of what is divine. Superstition necessarily conveys a sense of blame, but the word in the original does not.

We can see Paul as a stranger wandering through the city, and noting with keen eyes every token of the all-pervading idolatry. He does not tell his hearers that his spirit burned within him when he saw the city full of idols; but he smothers all that, and speaks only of the inscription which he had noticed on one, probably obscure and forgotten, altar: To the Unknown God. Scholars have given themselves a great deal of trouble to show from other authors that there were such altars. But Paul is as good an authority' as these, and we may take his word that he did see such an inscription. Whether it had the full significance which he reads into it or not, it crystallised in an express avowal that sense of Something behind and above the gods many of Greek religion, which found expression in the words of their noblest thinkers and poets, and lay like a nightmare on them.

To charge an Athenian audience, proud of their knowledge, with ignorance, was a hazardous and audacious undertaking; to make them charge themselves was more than an oratorical device. It appealed to the deepest consciousness even of the popular mind. Even with this prelude, the claims of this wandering Jew to pose as the instructor of Epicureans and Stoics, and to possess a knowledge of the Divine which they lacked, were daring. But how calmly and confidently Paul makes them, and with what easy and conciliatory adoption of their own terminology, if we adopt the reading of verse 23 in Revised Version (What ye worship ... this, etc.), which puts forward the abstract conception of divinity rather than the personal God.

The spirit in which Paul approached his difficult audience teaches all Christian missionaries and controversialists a needed and neglected lesson. We should accentuate points of resemblance rather than of difference, to begin with. We should not run a tilt against even errors, and so provoke to their defence, but rather find in creeds and practices an ignorant groping after, and so a door of entrance for, the truth which we seek to recommend.

**II.** The declaration of the Unknown God has been prepared for, and now follows, and with it is bound up a polemic against idolatry. Conciliation is not to be carried so far as to hide the antagonism between the truth and error. We may give non-Christian systems of religion credit for all the good in them, but we are not to blink their contrariety to the true religion. Conciliation and controversy are both needful; and he is the best Christian teacher who has mastered the secret of the due proportion between them.

Every word of Paul's proclamation strikes full and square at some counter belief of his hearers. He begins with creation, which he declares to have been the act of one personal God, and neither of a multitude of deities, as some of his hearers held, nor of an impersonal blind power, as others believed, nor the result of chance, nor eternal, as others maintained. He boldly proclaims there, below the shadow of the Parthenon, that there is but one God,--the universal Lord, because the universal Creator. Many consequences from that fact, no doubt, crowded into Paul's mind; but he swiftly turns to its bearing on the pomp of temples which were the glory of Athens, and the multitude of sacrifices which he had beheld on their altars. The true conception of God as the Creator and Lord of all things cuts up by the roots the pagan notions of temples as dwelling-places of a god and of sacrifices as ministering to his needs. With one crushing blow Paul pulverises the fair fanes around him, and declares that sacrifice, as practised there, contradicted the plain truth as to God's nature. To suppose that man can give anything to Him, or that He needs anything, is absurd. All heathen worship reverses the parts of God and man, and loses sight of the fact that He is the giver continually and of everything. Life in its origination, the continuance thereof (breath), and all which enriches it, are from Him. Then true worship will not be giving to, but thankfully accepting from and using for, Him, His manifold gifts.

So Paul declares the one God as Creator and Sustainer of all. He goes on to sketch in broad outline what we may call a philosophy of history. The declaration of the unity of mankind was a wholly strange message to proud Athenians, who believed themselves to be a race apart, not only from the barbarians, whom all Greeks regarded as made of other clay than they, but from the rest of the Greek world. It flatly contradicted one of their most cherished prerogatives. Not only does Paul claim one origin for all men, but he regards all nations as equally cared for by the one God. His hearers believed that each people had its own patron deities, and that the wars of nations were the wars of their gods, who won for them territory, and presided over their national fortunes. To all that way of thinking the Apostle opposes the conception, which naturally follows from his fundamental declaration of the one Creator, of His providential guidance of all nations in regard to their place in the world and the epochs of their history.

But he rises still higher when he declares the divine purpose in all the tangled web of history--the variety of conditions of nations, their rise and fall, their glory and decay, their planting in their lands and their rooting out,--to be to lead all men to seek God. That is the deepest meaning of history. The whole course of human affairs is God's drawing men to Himself. Not only in Judea, nor only by special revelation, but by the gifts bestowed, and the schooling brought to bear on every nation, He would stir men up to seek for Him.

But that great purpose has not been realised. There is a tragic if haply inevitable; and men may refuse to yield to the impulses towards God. They are the more likely to do so, inasmuch as to find Him they must feel after Him, and that is hard. The tendrils of a plant turn to the far-off light, but men's spirits do not thus grope after God. Something has come in the way which frustrates the divine purpose, and makes men blind and unwilling to seek Him.

Paul docs not at once draw the two plain inferences, that there must be something more than the nations have had, if they are to find God, even His seeking them in some new fashion; and that the power which neutralises God's design in creation and providence is sin. He has a word to say about both these, but for the moment he contents himself with pointing to the fact, attested by his hearers' consciousness, and by many a saying of thinkers and poets, that the failure to find God does not arise from His hiding Himself in some remote obscurity. Men are plunged, as it were, in the ocean of God, encompassed by Him as an atmosphere, and--highest thought of all, and not strange to Greek thought of the nobler sort--kindred with Him as both drawing life from Him and being in His image. Whence, then, but from their own fault, could men have failed to find God? If He is unknown, it is not because He has shrouded Himself in darkness, but because they do not love the light. One swift glance at the folly of idolatry, as demonstrated by this thought of man's being the offspring of God, leads naturally to the properly Christian conclusion of the address.

**III.** It is probable that this part of it was prematurely ended by the mockery of some and the impatience of others, who had had enough of Paul and his talk, and who, when they said, We will hear thee again, meant, We will not hear you now. But, even in the compass permitted him, he gives much of his message.

We can but briefly note the course of thought. He comes back to his former word ignorance, bitter pill as it was for the Athenian cultured class to swallow. He has shown them how their religion ignores or contradicts the true conceptions of God and man. But he no sooner brings the charge than he proclaims God's forbearance. And he no sooner proclaims God's forbearance than he rises to the full height of his mission as God's ambassador, and speaks in authoritative tones, as bearing His commands.

Now the hint in the previous part is made more plain. The demand for repentance implies sin. Then the ignorance' was not inevitable or innocent. There was an element of guilt in men's not feeling after God, and sin is universal, for all men everywhere' are summoned to repent. Philosophers and artists, and cultivated triflers, and sincere worshippers of Pallas and Zeus, and all barbarian' people, are alike here. That would grate on Athenian pride, as it grates now on ours. The reason for repentance would be as strange to the hearers as the command was--a universal judgment, of which the principle was to be rigid righteousness, and the Judge, not Minos or Rhadamanthus, but a Man ordained for that function.

What raving nonsense that would appear to men who had largely lost the belief in a life beyond the grave! The universal Judge a man! No wonder that the quick Athenian sense of the ridiculous began to rise against this Jew fanatic, bringing his dreams among cultured people like them! And the proof which he alleged as evidence to all men that it is so, would sound even more ridiculous than the assertion meant to be proved. A man has been raised from the dead; and this anonymous Man, whom nobody ever heard of before, and who is no doubt one of the speaker's countrymen, is to judge us, Stoics, Epicureans, polished people, and we are to be herded to His bar in company with Boeotians and barbarians! The man is mad.

So the assembly broke up in inextinguishable laughter, and Paul silently departed from among them, having never named the name of Jesus to them. He never more earnestly tried to adapt his teaching to his audience; he never was more unsuccessful in his attempt by all means to gain some. Was it a remembrance of that scene in Athens that made him write to the Corinthians that his message was to the Greeks foolishness?