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

**ACTS-076. THE FIGHT WITH WILD BEASTS AT EPHESUS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"21.* *After these things were ended, Paul purposed in the spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome. 22. So he sent into Macedonia two of them that ministered unto him, Timotheus and Erastus; but he himself stayed in Asia for a season. 23. And the same time there arose no small stir about that way. 24. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen; 25. Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. 26. Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: 27. So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth. 28. And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians. 29. And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre. 30. And when Paul would have entered in unto the people, the disciples suffered him not. 31. And certain of the chief of Asia, which were his friends, sent unto him, desiring him that he would not adventure himself into the theatre. 32. Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together. 33. And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander beckoned with the hand, and would have made his defence unto the people. 34. But when they knew that he was a Jew, all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.-."*

*Acts 19:21-34*

Paul's long residence in Ephesus indicates the importance of the position. The great wealthy city was the best possible centre for evangelising all the province of Asia, and that was to a large extent effected during the Apostle's stay there. But he had a wider scheme in his mind. His settled policy was always to fly at the head, as it were. The most populous cities were his favourite fields, and already his thoughts were travelling towards the civilised world's capital, the centre of empire--Rome. A blow struck there would echo through the world. Paul had his plan, and God had His, and Paul's was not realised in the fashion he had meant, but it was realised in substance. He did not expect to enter Rome as a prisoner. God shaped the ends which Paul had only rough-hewn.

The programme in verses 21 and 22 was modified by circumstances, as some people would say; Paul would have said, by God. The riot hastened his departure from Ephesus. He did go to Jerusalem, and he did see Rome, but the chain of events that drew him there seemed to him, at first sight, the thwarting, rather than the fulfilment, of his long-cherished hope. Well it is for us to carry all our schemes to God, and to leave them in His hands.

The account of the riot is singularly vivid and lifelike. It reveals a new phase of antagonism to the Gospel, a kind of trades-union demonstration, quite unlike anything that has met us in the Acts. It gives a glimpse into the civic life of a great city, and shows demagogues and mob to be the same in Ephesus as in England. It has many points of interest for the commentator or scholar, and lessons for all. Luke tells the story with a certain dash of covert irony.

**I.** We have, first, the protest of the shrine-makers' guild or trades-union, got up by the skilful manipulation of Demetrius. He was evidently an important man in the trade, probably well-to-do. As his speech shows, he knew exactly how to hit the average mind. The small shrines which he and his fellow-craftsmen made were of various materials, from humble pottery to silver, and were intended for votaries to dedicate in the temple, and represented the goddess Artemis sitting in a niche with her lions beside her. Making these was a flourishing industry, and must have employed a large number of men and much capital. Trade was beginning to be slack, and sales were falling off. No doubt there is exaggeration in Demetrius's rhetoric, but the meeting of the craft would not have been held unless a perceptible effect had been produced by Paul's preaching. Probably Demetrius and the rest were more frightened than hurt; but men are very quick to take alarm when their pockets are threatened.

The speech is a perfect example of how self-interest masquerades in the garb of pure concern for lofty objects, and yet betrays itself. The danger to our craft comes first, and the danger to the magnificence of the goddess second; but the precedence given to the trade is salved over by a not only, which tries to make the religious motive the chief. No doubt Demetrius was a devout worshipper of Artemis, and thought himself influenced by high motives in stirring up the craft. It is natural to be devout or moral or patriotic when it pays to be so. One would not expect a shrine-maker to be easily accessible to the conviction that they be no gods which are made with hands.

Such admixture of zeal for some great cause, with a shrewd eye to profit, is very common, and may deceive us if we are not always watchful. Jehu bragged about his zeal for the Lord when it urged him to secure himself on the throne by murder; and he may have been quite honest in thinking that the impulse was pure, when it was really mingled. How many foremost men in public life everywhere pose as pure patriots, consumed with zeal for national progress, righteousness, etc., when all the while they are chiefly concerned about some private bit of log-rolling of their own! How often in churches there are men professing to be eager for the glory of God, who are, perhaps half-unconsciously, using it as a stalking-horse, behind which they may shoot game for their own larder! A drop of quicksilver oxidises and dims as soon as exposed to the air. The purest motives get a scum on them quickly unless we constantly keep them clear by communion with God.

Demetrius may teach us another lesson. His opposition to Paul was based on the plain fact that, if Paul's teaching prevailed, no more shrines would be wanted. That was a new ground of opposition to the Gospel, resembled only by the motive for the action of the owners of the slave girl at Philippi; but it is a perennial source of antagonism to it. In our cities especially there are many trades which would be wiped out if Christ's laws of life were universally adopted. So all the purveyors of commodities and pleasures which the Gospel forbids a Christian man to use are arrayed against it. We have to make up our minds to face and fight them. A liquor-seller, for instance, is not likely to look complacently on a religion which would bring his trade into disrepute; and there are other occupations which would be gone if Christ were King, and which therefore, by the instinct of self-preservation, are set against the Gospel, unless, so to speak, its teeth are drawn.

According to one reading, the shouts of the craftsmen which told that Demetrius had touched them in the tenderest part, their pockets, was an invocation, Great Diana! not a profession of faith; and we have a more lively picture of an excited crowd if we adopt the alteration. It is easy to get a mob to yell out a watchword, whether religious or political; and the less they understand it, the louder are they likely to roar. In Athanasius' days the rabble of Constantinople made the city ring with cries, degrading the subtlest questions as to the Trinity, and examples of the same sort have not been wanting nearer home. It is criminal to bring such incompetent judges into religious or political or social questions, it is cowardly to be influenced by them. The voice of the people is not always the voice of God. It is better to be in the right with two or three than to swell the howl of Diana's worshippers,

**II.** A various reading of verse 28 gives an additional particular, which is of course implied in the received text, but makes the narrative more complete and vivid if inserted. It adds that the craftsmen rushed into the street, and there raised their wild cry, which naturally filled the city with confusion. So the howling mob, growing larger and more excited every minute, swept through Ephesus, and made for the theatre, the common place of assembly.

On their road they seem to have come across two of Paul's companions, whom they dragged with them. What they meant to do with the two they had probably not asked themselves. A mob has no plans, and its most savage acts are unpremeditated. Passion let loose is almost sure to end in bloodshed, and the lives of Gaius and Aristarchus hung by a thread. A gust of fury storming over the mob, and a hundred hands might have torn them to atoms, and no man have thought himself their murderer.

What a noble contrast to the raging crowd the silent submission, no doubt accompanied by trustful looks to Heaven and unspoken prayers, presents! And how grandly Paul comes out! He had not been found, probably had not been sought for, by the rioters, whose rage was too blind to search for him, but his brave soul could not bear to leave his friends in peril and not plant himself by their sides. So he was minded to enter in unto the people, well knowing that there he had to face more ferocious wild beasts than if a cageful of lions had been loosed on him. Faith in God and fellowship with Christ lift a soul above fear of death. The noblest kind of courage is not that born of flesh or temperament, or of the madness of battle, but that which springs from calm trust in and absolute surrender to Christ.

Not only did the disciples restrain Paul as feeling that if the shepherd were smitten the sheep would be scattered, but interested friends started up in an unlikely quarter. The chief of Asia or Asiarchs, who sent to dissuade him, were the heads of the imperial political-religious organisation of the province, in the worship of "Rome and the emperors"; and their friendly attitude is a proof both that the spirit of the imperial policy was not as yet hostile to the new teaching, and that the educated classes did not share the hostility of the superstitious vulgar (Ramsay, St. Paul the Traveller, p. 281). It is probable that, in that time of crumbling faith and religious unrest, the people who knew most about the inside of the established worship believed in it least, and in their hearts agreed with Paul that they be no gods which are made with hands.

So we have in these verses the central picture of calm Christian faith and patient courage, contrasted on the one hand with the ferocity and excitement of heathen fanatical devotees, and on the other with the prudent regard to their own safety of the Asiarchs, who had no such faith in Diana as to lead them to joining the rioters, nor such faith in Paul's message as to lead them to oppose the tumult, or to stand by his side, but contented themselves with sending to warn him. Who can doubt that the courage of the Christians is infinitely nobler than the fury of the mob or the cowardice of the Asiarchs, kindly as they were? If they were his friends, why did they not do something to shield him? A plague on such backing!

**III.** The scene in the theatre, to which Luke returns in verse 32, is described with a touch of scorn for the crowd, who mostly knew not what had brought them together. One section of it kept characteristically cool and sharp-eyed for their own advantage. A number of Jews had mingled in it, probably intending to fan the flame against the Christians, if they could do it safely. As in so many other cases in Acts, common hatred brought Jew and Gentile together, each pocketing for the time his disgust with the other. The Jews saw their opportunity. Half a dozen cool heads, who know what they want, can often sway a mob as they will. Alexander, whom they put forward, was no doubt going to make a speech disclaiming for the Jews settled in Ephesus any connection with the obnoxious Paul. We may be very sure that his defence was of the former, not of the latter.

But the rioters were in no mood to listen to fine distinctions among the members of a race which they hated so heartily. Paul was a Jew, and this man was a Jew; that was enough. So the roar went up again to Great Diana, and for two long hours the crowd surged and shouted themselves hoarse, Gaius and Aristarchus standing silent all the while and expecting every moment to be their last. The scene reminds one of Baal's priests shrieking to him on Carmel. It is but too true a representation of the wild orgies which stand for worship in all heathen religions. It is but too lively an example of what must always happen when excited crowds are ignorantly stirred by appeals to prejudice or self-interest.

The more democratic the form of government under which we live, the more needful is it to distinguish the voice of the people from the voice of the mob, and to beware of exciting, or being governed by, clamour however loud and long.