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

**ACTS-082. PHILIP THE EVANGELIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... We entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him."*

*Acts 21:8*

The life of this Philip, as recorded, is a very remarkable one. It is divided into two unequal halves: one full of conspicuous service, one passed in absolute obscurity. Like the moon in its second quarter, part of the disc is shining silver and the rest is invisible. Let us put together the notices of him.

He bears a name which makes it probable that he was not a Palestinian Jew, but one of the many who, of Jewish descent, had lived in Gentile lands and contracted Gentile habits and associations. We first hear of him as one of the Seven who were chosen by the Church, at the suggestion of the Apostles, in order to meet the grumbling of that section of the Church, who were called Hellenists, about their people being neglected in the distribution of alms. He stands in that list next to Stephen, who was obviously the leader. Then after Stephen's persecution, he flies from Jerusalem, like the rest of the Church, and comes down to Samaria and preaches there. He did that because circumstances drove him; he had become one of the Seven because his brethren appointed him, but his next step was in obedience to a specific command of Christ. He went and preached the Gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch, and then he was borne away from the new convert, and after the Spirit had put him down at Ashdod he had to tramp all the way up the Palestinian coast, left to the guidance of his own wits, until he came to Caesarea. There he remained for twenty years; and we do not hear a word about him in all that time. But at last Paul and his companions, hurrying to keep the Feast at Jerusalem, found that they had a little time to spare when they reached Caesarea, and so they came to the house of Philip the evangelist, whom we last heard of twenty years before, and spent many days with him. That is the final glimpse that we have of Philip.

Now let us try to gather two or three plain lessons, especially those which depend on that remarkable contrast between the first and the second periods of this man's life. There is, first, a brief space of brilliant service, and then there are long years of obscure toil.

**I. The brief space of brilliant service.**

The Church was in a state of agitation, and there was murmuring going on because, as I have already said, a section of it thought that their poor were unfairly dealt with by the native-born Jews in the Church. And so the Apostles said: What is the use of your squabbling thus? Pick out any seven that you like, of the class that considers itself aggrieved, and we will put the distribution of these eleemosynary grants into their hands. That will surely stop your mouths. Do you choose whom you please, and we will confirm your choice. So the Church selected seven brethren, all apparently belonging to the Grecians or Greek-speaking Jews, as the Apostles had directed that they should be, and one of them, not a Jew by birth, but a proselyte of Antioch. These men's partialities would all be in favour of the class to which they belonged, and to secure fair play for which they were elected by it.

Now these seven are never called deacons in the New Testament, though it is supposed that they were the first holders of that office. It is instructive to note how their office came into existence. It was created by the Apostles, simply as the handiest way of getting over a difficulty. Is that the notion of Church organisation that prevails among some of our brethren who believe that organisation is everything, and that unless a Church has the three orders of bishops, priests, and deacons, it is not worth calling a Church at all? The plain fact is that the Church at the beginning had no organisation. What organisation it had grew up as circumstances required. The only two laws which governed organisation were, first, One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren; and second, When the Spirit of the Lord is come upon thee, thou shalt do as occasion shall serve thee. Thus these seven were appointed to deal with a temporary difficulty and to distribute alms when necessary; and their office dropped when it was no longer required, as was probably the case when, very soon after, the Jerusalem Church was scattered. Then, by degrees, came elders and deacons. People fancy that there is but one rigid, unalterable type of Church organisation, when the reality is that it is fluent and flexible, and that the primitive Church never was meant to be the pattern according to which, in detail, and specifically, other Churches in different circumstances should be constituted. There are great principles which no organisation must break, but if these be kept, the form is a matter of convenience.

That is the first lesson that I take out of this story. Although it has not much to do with Philip himself, still it is worth saying in these days when a particular organisation of the Church is supposed to be essential to Christian fellowship, and we Nonconformists, who have not the orders that some of our brethren seem to think indispensable, are by a considerable school unchurched, because we are without them. But the primitive Church also was without them.

Still further and more important for us, in these brief years of brilliant service I note the spontaneous impulse which sets a Christian man to do Christian work. It was his brethren that picked out Philip, and said, Now go and distribute alms, but his brethren had nothing to do with his next step. He was driven by circumstances out of Jerusalem, and he found himself in Samaria, and perhaps he remembered how Jesus Christ had said, on the day when He went up into Heaven, Ye shall be witnesses unto Me, both in Jerusalem and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. But whether he remembered that or not, he was here in Samaria, amongst the ancestral enemies of his nation. Nobody told him to preach when he went to Samaria. He had no commission from the Apostles to do so. He did not hold any office in the Church, except that which, according to the Apostles' intention in establishing it, ought to have stopped his mouth from preaching. For they said, when they appointed these seven, Let them serve tables, and we will give ourselves to the ministry of the word. But Jesus Christ has a way of upsetting men's restrictions as to the functions of His servants. And so Philip, without a commission, and with many prejudices to stop his mouth, was the first to break through the limitations which confined the message of salvation to the Jews. Because he found himself in Samaria, and they needed Christ there, he did not wait for Peter and James and John to lay their hands upon his head, and say, Now you are entitled to speak about Him; he did not wait for any appointment, but yielded to his own heart, a heart that was full of Jesus Christ, and must speak about Him; find he proclaimed the Gospel in that city.

So he has the noble distinction of being the very first Christian man who put a bold foot across the boundary of Judaism, and showed a light to men that were in darkness beyond. Remember he did it as a simple private Christian; uncalled, uncommissioned, unordained by anybody; and he did it because he could not help it, and he never thought to himself, I am doing a daring, new thing. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should preach in Samaria. So it would be to us, if we were Christians with the depth of faith and of personal experience which this man had.

There is another lesson that I take from these first busy years of Philip's service. Christ provides wider spheres for men who have been faithful in narrower ones. It was because he had won his spurs, if I may so say, in Samaria, and proved the stuff he was made of, that the angel of the Lord came and said to Philip, Go down on the road to Gaza, which is desert. Do not ask now what you are to do when you get there. Go! So with his sealed orders be went. No doubt he thought to himself, Strange that I should be taken from this prosperous work in Samaria, and sent to a desert road, where there is not a single human being! But he went; and when he struck the point of junction of the road from Samaria with that from Jerusalem, looked about to discover what he had been sent there for. The only thing in sight was one chariot, and he said to himself, Ah, that is it, and he drew near to the chariot, and heard the occupant reading aloud Isaiah's great prophecy. The Ethiopian chamberlain was probably not very familiar with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which he seems to have been using and, as poor readers often do, helped his comprehension by speaking the words he sees on the page. Philip knew at once that here was the object of his mission, and so joined himself to the chariot, and set himself to his work.

So Christ chooses His agents for further work from those who, out of their own spontaneous love of Him, have done what lay at their hands. To him that hath shall be given. If you are ambitious of a wider sphere, be sure that you fill your narrow one. It will widen quite fast enough for your capacities.

**II. Now let me say a word about the long years of obscurity.**

Philip went down to Caesarea, and, as I said, he drops out of the story for twenty years. I wonder why it was that when Jesus Christ desired that Cornelius, who lived in Caesarea, should hear the gospel, He did not direct him to Philip, who also was in Caesarea, but bid him send all the way to Joppa to bring Peter thence? I wonder why it was that when Barnabas at Antioch turned his face northwards to seek for young Saul at Tarsus, he never dreamed of turning southwards to call out Philip from Caesarea? I wonder how it came to pass that this man, who at one time looked as if he was going to be the leader in the extension of the Church to the Gentiles, and who, as a matter of fact, was the first, not only in Samaria but on the desert road, to press beyond the narrow bounds of Judaism, was passed over in the further stages by Jesus, and why his brethren passed him over, and left him there all these years in Caesarea, whilst there was so much going on that was the continuation and development of the very movement that he had begun. We do not know why, and it is useless to try to speculate, but we may learn lessons from the fact.

Here is a beautiful instance of the contented acceptance of a lot very much less conspicuous, very much less brilliant, than the early beginnings had seemed to promise. I suppose that there are very few of us but have had, back in the far-away past, moments when we seemed to have opening out before us great prospects of service which have never been realised; and the remembrance of the brief moments of dawning splendour is very apt to make the rest of the life look grey and dull, and common things flat, and to make us sour. We look back and we think, Ah, the gates were opened for me then, but how they have slammed to since! It is hard for me to go on in this lowly condition, and this eclipsed state into which I have been brought, without feeling how different it might have been if those early days had only continued. Well, for Philip it was enough that Jesus Christ sent him to the eunuch and did not send him to Cornelius. He took the position that his Master put him in and worked away therein.

And there is a further lesson for us, who, for the most part, have to lead obscure lives. For there was in Philip not only a contented acceptance of an obscure life, but there was a diligent doing of obscure work. Did you notice that one significant little word in the clause that I have taken for my text: We entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven? Luke does not forget Philip's former office, but he dwells rather on what his other office was, twenty years afterwards. He was an evangelist now, although the evangelistic work was being done in a very quiet corner, and nobody was paying much attention to it. Time was when he had a great statesman to listen to his words. Time was when a whole city was moved by his teaching. Time was when it looked as if he was going to do the work that Paul did. But all these visions were shattered, and he was left to toil for twenty long years in that obscure corner, and not a soul knew anything about his work except the people to whom it was directed and the four unmarried girls at home whom his example had helped to bring to Jesus Christ, and who were prophetesses. At the end of the twenty years he is Philip the evangelist.

There is patient perseverance at unrecompensed, unrecorded, and unnoticed work. Great and small have nothing to do with the work of Christian people. It does not matter who knows our work or who does not know it, the thing is that He knows it. Now the most of us have to do absolutely unnoticed Christian service. Those of us who are in positions like mine have a little more notoriety--and it is no blessing--and a year or two after a man's voice ceases to sound from a pulpit he is forgotten. What does it matter? Surely I will never forget any of their works. And in these advertising days, when publicity seems to be the great good that people in so many cases seek after, and no one is contented to do his little bit of work unless he gets reported in the columns of the newspapers, we may all take example from the behaviour of Philip, and remember the man who began so brilliantly, and for twenty years was hidden, and was the evangelist all the time.

**III. Now, there is one last lesson that I would draw, and that is the ultimate recognition of the work and the joyful meeting of the workers.**

I think it is very beautiful to see that when Paul entered Philip's house he came into a congenial atmosphere; and although he had been hurrying, out of breath as it were, all the way from Corinth to get to Jerusalem in time for the Feast, he slowed off at once; partly, no doubt, because he found that he was in time, and partly, no doubt, that he felt the congeniality of the society that he met.

So there was no envy in Philip's heart of the younger brother that had so outrun him. He was quite content to share the fate of pioneers, and rejoiced in the junior who had entered into his labour. One soweth and another reapeth; he was prepared for that, and rejoiced to hear about what the Lord had done by his brother, though once he had thought it might have been done by him. How they would talk! How much there would be to tell! How glad the old man would be at the younger man's success!

And there was one sitting by who did not say very much, but had his ears wide open, and his name was Luke. In Philip's long, confidential conversations he no doubt got some of the materials, which have been preserved for us in this book, for his account of the early days of the Church in Jerusalem.

So Philip, after all, was not working in so obscure a corner as he thought. The whole world knows about him. He had been working behind a curtain all the while, and he never knew that the beloved physician, who was listening so eagerly to all he had to tell about the early days, was going to twitch down the curtain and let the whole world see the work that he thought he was doing, all unknown and soon to be forgotten.

And that is what will happen to us all. The curtain will be twitched down, and when it is, it will be good for us if we have the same record to show that this man had--namely, toil for the Master, indifferent to whether men see or do not see; patient labour for Him, coming out of a heart purged of all envy and jealousy of those who have been called to larger and more conspicuous service.

May we not take these many days of quiet converse in Philip's house, when the pioneer and the perfecter of the work talked together, as being a kind of prophetic symbol of the time when all who had a share in the one great and then completed work will have a share in its joy? No matter whether they have dug the foundations or laid the early courses or set the top stone and the shining battlements that crown the structure, they have all their share in the building and their portion in the gladness of the completed edifice, that he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.