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

**ACTS-083. AN OLD DISCIPLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... One Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge."*

*Acts 21:16*

There is something that stimulates the imagination in these mere shadows of men that we meet in the New Testament story. What a strange fate that is to be made immortal by a line in this book-- immortal and yet so unknown! We do not hear another word about this host of Paul's, but his name will be familiar to men's ears till the world's end. This figure is drawn in the slightest possible outline, with a couple of hasty strokes of the pencil. But if we take even these few bare words and look at them, feeling that there is a man like ourselves sketched in them, I think we can get a real picture out of them, and that even this dim form crowded into the background of the Apostolic story may have a word or two to say to us.

His name and his birthplace show that he belonged to the same class as Paul, that is, he was a Hellenist, or a Jew by descent, but born on Gentile soil, and speaking Greek. He came from Cyprus, the native island of Barnabas, who may have been a friend of his. He was an old disciple, which does not mean simply that he was advanced in life, but that he was a disciple from the beginning, one of the original group of believers. If we interpret the word strictly, we must suppose him to have been one of the rapidly diminishing nucleus, who thirty years or more ago had seen Christ in the flesh, and been drawn to Him by His own words. Evidently the mention of the early date of his conversion suggests that the number of his contemporaries was becoming few, and that there were a certain honour and distinction conceded by the second generation of the Church to the survivors of the primitive band. Then, of course, as one of the earliest believers, he must, by this time, have been advanced in life. A Cypriote by birth, he had emigrated to, and resided in a village on the road to Jerusalem; and must have had means and heart to exercise a liberal hospitality there. Though a Hellenist like Paul he does not seem to have known the Apostle before, for the most probable rendering of the context is that the disciples from Caesarea, who were travelling with the Apostle from that place to Jerusalem, brought us to Mnason, implying that this was their first introduction to each other. But though probably unacquainted with the great teacher of the Gentiles--whose ways were looked on with much doubt by many of the Palestinian Christians--the old man, relic of the original disciples as he was, had full sympathy with Paul, and opened his house and his heart to receive him. His adhesion to the Apostle would no doubt carry weight with the many thousands of Jews which believed, and were all zealous of the law, and was as honourable to him as it was helpful to Paul.

Now if we put all this together, does not the shadowy figure begin to become more substantial? and does it not preach to us some lessons that we may well take to heart?

**I. The first thing which this old disciple says to us out of the misty distance is: Hold fast to your early faith, and to the Christ whom you have known.**

Many a year had passed since the days when perhaps the beauty of the Master's own character and the sweetness of His own words had drawn this man to Him. How much had come and gone since then--Calvary and the Resurrection, Olivet and the Pentecost! His own life and mind had changed from buoyant youth to sober old age. His whole feelings and outlook on the world were different. His old friends had mostly gone. James indeed was still there, and Peter and John remained until this present, but most had fallen on sleep. A new generation was rising round about him, and new thoughts and ways were at work. But one thing remained for him what it had been in the old days, and that was Christ. One generation cometh and another goeth, but the "Christ" abideth for ever.

We all are changed by still degrees;

All but the basis of the soul,

and the basis of the soul, in the truest sense, is that one God-laid foundation on which whosoever buildeth shall never be confounded, nor ever need to change with changing time. Are we building there? and do we find that life, as it advances, but tightens our hold on Jesus Christ, who is our hope?

There is no fairer nor happier experience than that of the old man who has around him the old loves, the old confidences, and some measure of the old joys. But who can secure that blessed unity in his life if he depend on the love and help of even the dearest, or on the light of any creature for his sunshine? There is but one way of making all our days one, because one love, one hope, one joy, one aim binds them all together, and that is by taking the abiding Christ for ours, and abiding in Him all our days. Holding fast by the early convictions does not mean stiffening in them. There is plenty of room for advancement in Christ. No doubt Mnason, when he was first a disciple, knew but very little of the meaning and worth of his Master and His work, compared with what he had learned in all these years. And our true progress consists, not in growing away from Jesus but in growing up into Him, not in passing through and leaving behind our first convictions of Him as Saviour, but in having these verified by the experience of years, deepened and cleared, unfolded and ordered into a larger, though still incomplete, whole. We may make our whole lives helpful to that advancement and blessed shall we be if the early faith is the faith that brightens till the end, and brightens the end. How beautiful it is to see a man, below whose feet time is crumbling away, holding firmly by the Lord whom he has loved and served all his days, and finding that the pillar of cloud, which guided him while he lived, begins to glow in its heart of fire as the shadows fall, and is a pillar of light to guide him when he comes to die! Dear friends, whether you be near the starting or near the prize of your Christian course, cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. See to it that the knowledge of the Father, which is the little children's possession, passes through the strength of youth, and the victory over the world into the calm knowledge of Him that is from the beginning, wherein the fathers find their earliest convictions deepened and perfected, Grow in grace and in the knowledge of Him, whom to know ever so imperfectly is eternal life, whom to know a little better is the true progress for men, whom to know more and more fully is the growth and gladness and glory of the heavens. Look at this shadowy figure that looks out on us here, and listen to his far-off voice exhorting us all that with purpose of heart we should cleave unto the Lord.

**II. But there is another and, as some might think, opposite lesson to be gathered from this outline sketch, namely, The welcome which we should be ready to give to new thoughts and ways.**

It is evidently meant that we should note Mnason's position in the Church as significant in regard to his hospitable reception of the Apostle. We can fancy how the little knot of original disciples would be apt to value themselves on their position, especially as time went on, and their ranks were thinned. They would be tempted to suppose that they must needs understand the Master's meaning a great deal better than those who had never known Christ after the flesh; and no doubt they would be inclined to share in the suspicion with which the thorough-going Jewish party in the Church regarded this Paul, who had never seen the Lord. It would have been very natural for this good old man to have said, I do not like these new-fangled ways. There was nothing of this sort in my younger days. Is it not likely that we, who were at the beginning of the Gospel, should understand the Gospel and the Church's work without this new man coming to set us right? I am too old to go in with these changes. All the more honourable is it that he should have been ready with an open house to shelter the great champion of the Gentile Churches; and, as we may reasonably believe, with an open heart to welcome his teaching. Depend on it, it was not every old disciple that would have done as much.

Now does not this flexibility of mind and openness of nature to welcome new ways of work, when united with the persistent constancy in his old creed, make an admirable combination? It is one rare enough at any age, but especially in elderly men. We are always disposed to rend apart what ought never to be separated, the inflexible adherence to a fixed centre of belief, and the freest ranging around the whole changing circumference. The man of strong convictions is apt to grip every trifle of practice and every unimportant bit of his creed with the same tenacity with which he holds its vital heart, and to take obstinacy for firmness, and dogged self-will for faithfulness to truth. The man who welcomes new light, and reaches forward to greet new ways, is apt to delight in having much fluid that ought to be fixed, and to value himself on a liberality which simply means that he has no central truth and no rooted convictions. And as men grow older they stiffen more and more, and have to leave the new work for new hands, and the new thoughts for new brains. That is all in the order of nature, but so much the finer is it when we do see old Christian men who join to their firm grip of the old Gospel the power of welcoming, and at least bidding God-speed to, new thoughts and new workers and new ways of work.

The union of these two characteristics should be consciously aimed at by us all. Hold unchanging, with a grasp that nothing can relax, by Christ our life and our all; but with that tenacity of mind, try to cultivate flexibility too. Love the old, but be ready to welcome the new. Do not invest your own or other people's habits of thought or forms of work with the same sanctity which belongs to the central truths of our salvation; do not let the willingness to entertain new light lead you to tolerate any changes there. It is hard to blend the two virtues together, but they are meant to be complements, not opposites, to each other. The fluttering leaves and bending branches need a firm stem and deep roots. The firm stem looks noblest in its unmoved strength when it is contrasted with a cloud of light foliage dancing in the wind. Try to imitate the persistency and the open mind of that old disciple who was so ready to welcome and entertain the Apostle of the Gentile Churches.

**III. But there is still another lesson which, I think, this portrait may suggest, and that is, the beauty that may dwell in an obscure life.**

There is nothing to be said about this old man but that he was a disciple. He had done no great thing for his Lord. No teacher or preacher was he. No eloquence or genius was in him. No great heroic deed or piece of saintly endurance is to be recorded of him, but only this, that he had loved and followed Christ all his days. And is not that record enough? It is his blessed fate to live for ever in the world's memory, with only that one word attached to his name--a disciple.

The world may remember very little about us a year after we are gone. No thought, no deed may be connected with our names but in some narrow circle of loving hearts. There may be no place for us in any record written with a man's pen. But what does that matter, if our names, dear friends, are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, with this for sole epitaph, a disciple? That single phrase is the noblest summary of a life. A thinker? a hero? a great man? a millionaire? No, a disciple. That says all. May it be your epitaph and mine!

What Mnason could do he did. It was not his vocation to go into the regions beyond, like Paul; to guide the Church, like James; to put his remembrances of his Master in a book, like Matthew; to die for Jesus, like Stephen. But he could open his house for Paul and his company, and so take his share in their work. He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. He that with understanding and sympathy welcomes and sustains the prophet, shows thereby that he stands on the same spiritual level, and has the makings of a prophet in him, though he want the intellectual force and may never open his lips to speak the burden of the Lord. Therefore he shall be one in reward as he is in spirit. The old law in Israel is the law for the warfare of Christ's soldiers. As his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that abideth by the stuff: they shall part alike. The men in the rear who guard the camp and keep the communications open, may deserve honours, and crosses, and prize-money as much as their comrades who led the charge that cut through the enemy's line and scattered their ranks. It does not matter, so far as the real spiritual worth of the act is concerned, what we do, but only why we do it. All deeds are the same which are done from the same motive and with the same devotion; and He who judges, not by our outward actions but by the springs from which they come, will at last bracket together as equals many who were widely separated here in the form of their service and the apparent magnitude of their work.

She hath done what she could. Her power determined the measure and the manner of her work. One precious thing she had, and only one, and she broke her one rich possession that she might pour the fragrant oil over His feet. Therefore her useless deed of utter love and uncalculating self-sacrifice was crowned by praise from His lips whose praise is our highest honour, and the world is still filled with the odour of the ointment.

So this old disciple's hospitality is strangely immortal, and the record of it reminds us that the smallest service done for Jesus is remembered and treasured by Him. Men have spent their lives to win a line in the world's chronicles which are written on sand, and have broken their hearts because they failed; and this passing act of one obscure Christian, in sheltering a little company of travel-stained wayfarers, has made his name a possession for ever. Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not; but let us fill our little corners, doing our unnoticed work for love of our Lord, careless about man's remembrance or praise, because sure of Christ's, whose praise is the only fame, whose remembrance is the highest reward. God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love.