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

**ACTS-084. PAUL IN THE TEMPLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"27.* *And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him. 28. Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men everywhere against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place. 29. (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) 30. And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut. 31. And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul. 33. Then the chief captain came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done. 34. And some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude: and when he could not know the certainty for the tumult, he commanded him to be carried into the castle. 35. And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people. 36. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him. 37. And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek? 38. Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers? 39. But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people.."*

*Acts 21:27-39*

The stronger a man's faith, the greater will and should be his disposition to conciliate. Paul may seem to have stretched consideration for weak brethren to its utmost, when he consented to the proposal of the Jerusalem elders to join in performing the vow of a Nazarite, and to appear in the Temple for that purpose. But he was quite consistent in so doing; for it was not Jewish ceremonial to which he objected, but the insisting on it as necessary. For himself, he lived as a Jew, except in his freedom of intercourse with Gentiles. No doubt he knew that the death-warrant of Jewish ceremonial had been signed, but he could leave it to time to carry out the sentence. The one thing which he was resolved should not be was its imposition on Gentile Christians. Their road to Jesus was not through Temple or synagogue. As for Jewish Christians, let them keep to the ritual if they chose. The conciliatory plan recommended by the elders, though perfectly consistent with Paul's views and successful with the Jewish Christians, roused non-Christian Jews as might have been expected.

This incident brings out very strikingly the part played by each of the two factors in carrying out God's purposes for Paul. They are unconscious instruments, and co-operation is the last thing dreamed of on either side; but Jew and Roman together work out a design of which they had not a glimpse.

**I.** Note the charge against Paul. The Jews from Asia knew him by sight, as they had seen him in Ephesus and elsewhere; and possibly some of them had been fellow-passengers with him from Miletus. No wonder that they construed his presence in the Temple into an insult to it. If Luther or John Knox had appeared in St. Peter's, he would not have been thought to have come as a worshipper. Paul's teaching may very naturally have created the impression in hot-tempered partisans, who could not draw distinctions, that he was the enemy of Temple and sacrifice.

It has always been the vice of religious controversy to treat inferences from heretical teaching, which appear plain to the critics, as if they were articles of the heretic's belief. These Jewish zealots practised a very common method when they fathered on Paul all which they supposed to be involved in his position. Their charges against him are partly flat lies, partly conclusions drawn from misapprehension of his position, partly exaggeration, and partly hasty assumptions. He had never said a word which could be construed as against the people. He had indeed preached that the law was not for Gentiles, and was not the perfect revelation which brought salvation, and he had pointed to Jesus as in Himself realising all that the Temple shadowed; but such teaching was not against either, but rather for both, as setting both in their true relation to the whole process of revelation. He had not brought Greeks into the Temple, not even the one Greek whom malice multiplied into many. When passion is roused, exaggerations and assumptions soon become definite assertions. The charges are a complete object-lesson in the baser arts of religious (!) partisans; and they have been but too faithfully reproduced in all ages. Did Paul remember how he had been consenting to the death of Stephen on the very same charges? How far he has travelled since that day!

**II.** Note the immediately kindled flame of popular bigotry. The always inflammable population of Jerusalem was more than usually excitable at the times of the Feasts, when it was largely increased by zealous worshippers from a distance. Noble teaching would have left the mob as stolid as it found them; but an appeal to the narrow prejudices which they thought were religion was a spark in gunpowder, and an explosion was immediate. It is always easier to rouse men to fight for their religion than to live by it. Jehu was proud of what he calls his zeal for the Lord, which was really only ferocity with a mask on. The yelling crowd did not stop to have the charges proved. That they were made was enough. In Scotland people used to talk of Jeddart justice, which consisted in hanging a man first, and trying him leisurely afterwards. It was usually substantially just when applied to moss-troopers, but does not do so well when administered to Apostles.

Notice the carefulness to save the Temple from pollution, which is shown by the furious crowds dragging Paul outside before they kill him. They were not afraid to commit murder, but they were horror-struck at the thought of a breach of ceremonial etiquette. Of course! for when religion is conceived of as mainly a matter of outward observances, sin is reduced to a breach of these. We are all tempted to shift the centre of gravity in our religion, and to make too much of ritual etiquette. Kill Paul if you will, but get him outside the sacred precincts first. The priests shut the doors to make sure that there should be no profanation, and stopped inside the Temple, well pleased that murder should go on at its threshold. They had better have rescued the victim. Time was when the altar was a sanctuary for the criminal who could grasp its horns, but now its ministers wink at bloodshed with secret approval. Paul could easily have been killed in the crowd, and no responsibility for his death have clung to any single hand. No doubt that was the cowardly calculation which they made, and they were well on the way to carry it out when the other factor comes into operation.

**III.** Note the source of deliverance. The Roman garrison was posted in the fortress of Antonia, which commanded the Temple from a higher level at the north-west angle of the enclosure. Tidings came up to the officer in command, Claudius Lysias by name (Acts xxiii. 26), that all Jerusalem was in confusion. With disciplined promptitude he turned out a detachment and ran down upon them. The contrast between the quiet power of the legionaries and the noisy feebleness of the mob is striking. The best qualities of Roman sway are seen in this tribune's unhesitating action, before which the excited mob cowers in fright. They left beating of Paul, as knowing that a heavier hand would fall on them for rioting. With swift decision Lysias acts first and talks afterwards, securing the man who was plainly the centre of disturbance, and then having got him fast with two chains on him, inquiring who he was, and what he had been doing.

Then the crowd breaks loose again in noisy and contradictory explanations, all at the top of their voices, and each drowning the other. Clearly the bulk of them could not answer either of Lysias' questions, though they could all bellow Away with him! till their throats were sore. It is a perfect picture of a mob, which is always ferocious and volubly explanatory in proportion to its ignorance. One man kept his head in the hubbub, and that was Lysias, who determined to hold his prisoner till he did know something about him. So he ordered him to be taken up into the castle; and as the crowd saw their prey escaping they made one last fierce rush, and almost swept away the soldiers, who had to pick Paul up and carry him. Once on the stairs leading to the castle they were clear of the crowd, which could only send a roar of baffled rage after them, and to this the stolid legionaries were as deaf as were their own helmets.

The part here played by the Roman authority is that which it performs throughout the Acts. It shields infant Christianity from Jewish assailants, like the wolf which, according to legend, suckled Romulus. The good and the bad features of Roman rule were both valuable for that purpose. Its contempt for ideas, and above all for speculative differences in a religion which it regarded as a hurtful superstition, its unsympathetic incapacity for understanding its subject nations, its military discipline, its justice, which though often tainted was yet better than the partisan violence which it coerced, all helped to make it the defender of the first Christians. Strange that Rome should shelter and Jerusalem persecute!

Mark, too, how blindly men fulfil God's purposes. The two bitter antagonists, Jew and Roman, seem to themselves to be working in direct opposition; but God is using them both to carry out His design. Paul has to be got to Rome, and these two forces are combined by a wisdom beyond their ken, to carry him thither. Two cogged wheels turning in opposite directions fit into each other, and grind out a resultant motion, different from either of theirs. These soldiers and that mob were like pawns on a chessboard, ignorant of the intentions of the hand which moves them.

**IV.** Note the calm courage of Paul. He too had kept his head, and though bruised and hustled, and having but a minute or two beforehand looked death in the face, he is ready to seize the opportunity to speak a word for his Master. Observe the quiet courtesy of his address, and his calm remembrance of the tribune's right to prevent his speaking. There is nothing more striking in Paul's character than his self-command and composure in all circumstances. This ship could rise to any wave, and ride in any storm. It was not by virtue of happy temperament but of a fixed faith that his heart and mind were kept in perfect peace. It is not easy to disturb a man who counts not his life dear if only he may complete his course. So these two men front each other, and it is hard to tell which has the quieter pulse and the steadier hand. The same sources of tranquil self-control and calm superiority to fortune which stood Paul in such good stead are open to us. If God is our rock and our high tower we shall not be moved.

The tribune had for some unknown reason settled in his mind that the Apostle was a well-known Egyptian, who had headed a band of Sicarii or dagger-men, of whose bloody doings Josephus tells us. How the Jews should have been trying to murder such a man Lysias does not seem to have considered. But when he heard the courteous, respectful Greek speech of the Apostle he saw at once that he had got no uncultured ruffian to deal with, and in answer to Paul's request and explanation gave him leave to speak. That has been thought an improbability. But strong men recognise each other, and the brave Roman was struck with something in the tone and bearing of the brave Jew which made him instinctively sure that no harm would come of the permission. There ought to be that in the demeanour of a Christian which is as a testimonial of character for him, and sways observers to favourable constructions.