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

**ACTS-087. CHRIST'S WITNESSES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome."*

*Acts 23:11*

It had long been Paul's ambition to preach the Gospel to you that are at Rome also. His settled policy, as shown by this Book of the Acts, was to fly at the head, to attack the great centres of population. We trace him from Antioch to Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus; and of course Rome was the goal, where a blow struck at the heart might reverberate through the empire. So he had planned for it, and prayed about it, and thought about it, and spoken about it. But his wish was accomplished, as our prayers and purposes so often are, in a manner very strange to him. A popular riot in Jerusalem, a half-friendly arrest by the contemptuous impartiality of a Roman officer, a final rejection by the Sanhedrim, a prison in Caesarea, an appeal to Caesar, a weary voyage, a shipwreck: this was the chain of circumstances which fulfilled his desire, and brought him to the imperial city.

My text comes at the crisis of his fate. He has just been rejected by his people, and for the moment is in safety in the castle under the charge of the Roman garrison. One can fancy how, as he lay there in the barrack that night, he felt that he had come to a turning-point; and the thoughts were busy in his mind, Is this for life or for death? Am I to do any more work for Christ, or am I silenced for ever?--And the Lord stood by him and said, Be of good cheer, Paul! The divine message assured him that he should live; it testified of Christ's approbation of his past, and promised him that, in recompense for that past, he should have wider work to do. So he passed to the unknown future quietly; and went on his way with the Master by his side.

Now, dear friends, it seems to me that in these great words there lie lessons applying to all Christian people as truly, though in different fashion, as they did to the Apostle, and having an especial bearing on that great enterprise of Christian missions, with which I would connect them in this sermon. I desire, then, to draw out the lessons which seem to me to lie under the surface of this great promise.

**I. To live ought to be, for a Christian, to witness.**

The promise in form is a promise of continued testimony-bearing; in its substance, one might say, it is a promise of continued life. Paul is cheered, not by being told that the wrath of the enemy will launch itself at his head in vain, and that he will bear a charmed life through it all, but by being told that there is work for him to do yet. That is the shape in which the promise of life is held out to him. So it always ought to be; a Christian man's life ought to be one continuous witnessing for that Lord Christ who stood by the Apostle in the castle at Jerusalem.

Let me just urge this upon you for a few moments. It seems to me that to raise up witnesses for Himself is, in one aspect, the very purpose of all Christ's work. You and I, dear brethren, if we have any living hold of that Lord, have received Him into our hearts, not only in order that for ourselves we may rejoice in Him, but in order that, for ourselves rejoicing in Him, we may show forth the virtues of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvellous light. There is no creature so great as that he is not regarded as a means to a further end; and there is no creature so small but that he has the right to claim happiness and blessing from the Hand that made him. Jesus Christ has drawn us to Himself, that we may know the sweetness of His presence, the cleansing of His blood, the stirring and impulse of His indwelling life in us for our own joy and our own completion, but also that we may be His witnesses and weapons, according to that great word: This people have I formed for Myself. They shall shew forth My praise.

God has shined into our hearts in order that we may give, reflecting the beams that fall upon them, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ. Brother and sister, if you have the Christian life in your souls, one purpose of your possessing it is that you may bear witness for Him.

Again, such witness-bearing is the result of all true, deep, Christian life. All life longs to manifest itself in action. Every conviction that a man has seeks for utterance; especially so do the beliefs that go deepest and touch the moral and spiritual nature and relationships of a man. He that perceives them is thereby impelled to desire to utter them. There can be no real, deep possession of that great truth of the Gospel which we profess to be the foundation of our personal lives, unless we have felt the impulse to spread the name and to declare the sweetness of the Lord. The very same impulse that makes the loving heart carve the beloved name on the smooth rind of the tree makes it sweet to one who is in real touch and living fellowship with Jesus Christ to speak about Him. O brother! there is a very sharp test for us. I know that there are hundreds of professing Christians--decent, respectable sort of people, with a tepid, average amount of Christian faith and principle in them--who never felt that overmastering desire, I must let this thing out through my lips. Why? Why do they not feel it? Because their own possession of Christ is so superficial and partial. Jeremiah's experience will be repeated where there is vigorous Christian life: Thy word shut up in my bones was like a fire--that burned itself through all the mass that was laid upon it, and ate its way victoriously into the light--and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay. Christian men and women, do you know anything of that o'er-mastering impulse? If you do not, look to the depth and reality of your Christian profession.

Again, this witnessing is the condition of all strong life. If you keep nipping the buds off a plant you will kill it. If you never say a word to a human soul about your Christianity, your Christianity will tend to evaporate. Action confirms and strengthens convictions; speech deepens conviction; and although it is possible for any one-- and some of us ministers are in great danger of making the possibility a reality--to talk away his religion, for one of us who loses it by speaking too much about it, there are twenty that damage it by speaking too little. Shut it up, and it will be like some wild creature put into a cellar, fast locked and unventilated; when you open the door it will be dead. Shut it up, as so many of our average Christian professors and members of our congregations and churches do, and when you come to take it out, it will be like some volatile perfume that has been put into a vial and locked away in a drawer and forgotten; there will be nothing left but an empty bottle, and a rotten cork. Speak your faith if you would have your faith strengthened. Muzzle it, and you go a long way to kill it. You are witnesses, and you cannot blink the obligation nor shirk the duties without damaging that in yourselves to which you are to witness.

Further, this task of witnessing for Christ can be done by all kinds of life. I do not need to dwell upon the distinction between the two great methods which open themselves out before every one of us. They do so; for direct work in speaking the name of Jesus Christ is possible for every Christian, whoever he or she is, however weak, ignorant, uninfluential, with howsoever narrow a circle. There is always somebody that God means to be the audience of His servant whenever that servant speaks of Christ. Do you not know that there are people in this world, as wives, children, parents, friends of different sorts, who would listen to you more readily than they would listen to any one else speaking about Jesus Christ? Friend, have you utilised these relationships in the interests of that great Name, and in the highest interests of the persons that sustain them to you, and of yourselves who sustain these to them?

And then there is indirect work that we can all do in various ways, I do not mean only by giving money, though of course that is important, but I mean all the manifold ways in which Christian people can show their sympathy with, and their interest in, the various forms in which adventurous, chivalrous, enterprising Christian benevolence expresses itself. It was an old law in Israel that as his part was that went down into the battle, so should his part be that tarried by the stuff. When victory was won and the spoil came to be shared, the men who had stopped behind and looked after the base of operations and kept open the communications received the same portion as the man that, in the front rank of the battle, had rushed upon the spears of the Amalekites. Why? Because from the same motive they had been co-operant to the same great end. The Master has taken up that very thought, and has applied it in relation to the indirect work of His people, when He says, He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. The motive is the same; therefore the essential character of the act is the same; therefore the recompense is identical. You can witness for Christ directly, if you can say--and you can all say if you like--We have found the Messias, and you can witness for Christ by casting yourselves earnestly into sympathy with and, so far as possible, help to the work that your brethren are doing. Dear friends, I beseech you to remember that we are all of us, if we are His followers, bound in our humble measure and degree, and with a reverent apprehension of the gulf between us and Him, still to take up His words and say, To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth.

**II. There is a second thought that I would suggest from these words, and that is that secular events are ordered with a view to this witnessing.**

Take the case before us. Here are two independent and hostile powers; on the one hand the bigoted Jewish Sanhedrim, hating the Roman yoke; and on the other hand the haughty and cruel pressure of that yoke on a recalcitrant and reluctant people: and these two internecine enemies are working on their own lines, each very willing to thwart the other, Mechanicians talk of the composition of forces, by which two pressures acting at right angles to each other on a given object, impart to it a diagonal motion. The Sanhedrim on the one side, representing Judaism, and the captain of the castle on the other, representing the Roman power, work into each other's hands, although neither of them knows it; and work out the fulfilment of a purpose that is hidden from them both.

No doubt it would be a miserably inadequate account of things to say that the Roman Empire came into existence for the sake of propagating Christianity. No doubt it is always dangerous to account for any phenomenon by the ends which, to our apprehension, it serves. But at the same time the study of the purposes which a given thing, being in existence, serves, and the study of the forces which brought it into existence, ought to be combined, and when combined, they present a double reason for adoring that great Providence which makes the wrath of men to praise it, and uses for moral and spiritual ends the creatures that exist, the events that emerge, and even the godless doings of godless men.

So here we have a standing example of the way in which, like silk-worms that are spinning threads for a web that they have no notion of, the deeds of men that think not so are yet grasped and twined together by Jesus Christ, the Lord of providence, so as to bring about the realisation of His great purposes. And that is always so, more or less clearly.

For instance, if we wish to understand our own lives, do not let us dwell upon the superficialities of joy or sorrow, gain or loss, but let us get down to the depth, and see that all these externals have two great purposes in view--first, that we may be made like our Lord, as the Scripture itself says, That we may be partakers of His holiness, and then that we may bear our testimony to His grace and love. Oh, if we would only look at life from that point of view, we should be brought to a stand less often at what we choose to call the mysteries of providence! Not enjoyment, not sorrow, but our perfecting in godliness and of the increase of our power and opportunities to bear witness to Him, are the intention of all that befalls us.

I need not speak about how this same principle must be applied, by every man who believes in a divine providence, to the wider events of the world's history, I need not dwell upon that, nor will your time allow me to do it, but one word I should like to say, and that is that surely the two facts that we, as Christians, possess, as we believe, the pure faith, and that we, as Englishmen, are members of a community whose influence is world-wide, do not come together for nothing, or only that some of you might make fortunes out of the East Indian and China trade, but in order that all we English Christians might feel that, our speaking as we do the language which is destined, as it would appear, to run round the whole world, and our having, as we have, the faith which we believe brings salvation to every man of every race and tongue who accepts it, and our having this responsible necessary contact with the heathen races, lay upon us English Christians obligations the pressure and solemnity of which we have yet failed to appreciate.

Paul was immortal till his work was done. Be of good cheer, Paul; thou must bear witness at Rome. And so, for ourselves and for the Gospel that we profess, the same divine Providence which orders events so that His servants may have the opportunities of witnessing to it, will take care that it shall not perish--notwithstanding all the premature jubilation of anti-Christian literature and thought in this day--until it has done its work. We need have no fear for ourselves, for though our blind eyes often fail to see, and our bleeding hearts often fail to accept, the conviction that there are no unfinished lives for His servants, yet we may be sure that He will watch over each of His children till they have finished the work that He gives them to do. And we may be sure, in regard to His great Gospel, that nothing can sink the ship that carries Christ and His fortunes. Be of good cheer ... thou hast borne witness ... thou must bear witness.

**III. Lastly, we have here another principle--namely that faithful witnessing is rewarded by further witnessing.**

Thou hast ... in Jerusalem, the little city perched upon its crag; Thou must ... in Rome, the great capital seated on its seven hills. The reward for work is more work. Jesus Christ did not say to the Apostle, though he was wearied with that which came upon him daily, the care of all the churches, Thou hast borne witness, and now come apart and rest; but He said to him, Thou hast filled the smaller sphere; for recompense I put thee into a larger.

That is the law for life and everywhere, the tools to the hand that can use them. The man that can do a thing gets it to do in too large a measure, as he sometimes thinks; but he gets it, and it is all right that he should. To him that hath shall be given. And it is the law for heaven. Thou hast borne witness down on the little dark earth; come up higher and witness for Me here, amid the blaze.

It is the law for this Christian work of ours. If you have shone faithfully in your little corner, as the child's hymn says, you will be taken out and set upon the lamp-stand, that you may give light to all that are in the house. And it is the law for this great enterprise of Christian missions, as we all know. We are overwhelmed with our success. Doors are opening around us on every side. There is no limit to the work that English Churches can do, except their inclination to do it. But the opportunities open to us require a far deeper consecration and a far closer dwelling beside our Master than we have ever realised. We are half asleep yet; we do not know our resources in men, in money, in activity, in prayer.

Surely there can be no sadder sign of decadence and no surer precursor of extinction than to fall beneath the demands of our day; to have doors opening at which we are too lazy or selfish to go in; to be so sound asleep that we never hear the man of Macedonia when he stands by us and cries, Come over and help us! We are members of a Church that God has appointed to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. We are citizens of a nation whose influence is ubiquitous and felt in every land. By both characters, God summons us to tasks which will tax all our resources worthily to do. We inherit a work from our fathers which God has shown that He owns by giving us these golden opportunities. He summons us: Lengthen thy cords and strengthen thy stakes. Come out of Jerusalem; come into Rome. Shall we respond? God give us grace to fill the sphere in which He has set us, till He lifts us to the wider one, where the faithfulness of the steward is exchanged for the authority of the ruler, and the toil of the servant for the joy of the Lord!