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

**ACTS-094. BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19.* *Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: 20. But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judsea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance. 21. For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me. 22. Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come; 23. That Christ should suffer, and that He should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles. 24. And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. 25. But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. 26. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner. 27. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. 28. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. 29. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds. 30. And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them: 31. And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds. 32. Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar."*

*Acts 26:19-32*

Festus was no model of a righteous judge, but he had got hold of the truth as to Paul, and saw that what he contemptuously called certain questions of their own superstition, and especially his assertion of the Resurrection, were the real crimes of the Apostle in Jewish eyes. But the fatal wish to curry favour warped his course, and led him to propose a removal of the venue to Jerusalem. Paul knew that to return thither would seal his death-warrant, and was therefore driven to appeal to Rome.

That took the case out of Festus's jurisdiction. So that the hearing before Agrippa was an entertainment, got up for the king's diversion, when other amusements had been exhausted, rather than a regular judicial proceeding. Paul was examined to make a Roman holiday. Festus's speech (chap. 25:24-27) tries to put on a colour of desire to ascertain more clearly the charges, but that is a very thin pretext. Agrippa had said that he would like to hear the man, and so the performance was got up by request. Not a very sympathetic audience fronted Paul that day. A king and his sister, a Roman governor, and all the elite of Caesarean society, ready to take their cue from the faces of these three, did not daunt Paul. The man who had seen Jesus on the Damascus road could face small and great.

The portion of his address included in the passage touches substantially the same points as did his previous apologies. We may note how strongly he puts the force that impelled him on his course, and lays bare the secret of his life. I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision; then the possibility of disobedience was open after he had heard Christ ask, Why persecutest thou Me? and had received commands from His mouth. Then, too, the essential character of the charge against him was that, instead of kicking against the owner's goad, he had bowed his neck to his yoke, and that his obstinate will had melted. Then, too, the light above the brightness of the sun still shone round him, and his whole life was one long act of obedience.

We note also how he sums up his work in verse 20, representing his mission to the Gentiles as but the last term in a continuous widening of his field, from Damascus to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to Judaea (a phase of his activity not otherwise known to us, and for which, with our present records, it is difficult to find a place), from Judaea to the Gentiles. Step by step he had been led afield, and at each step the heavenly vision had shone before him.

How superbly, too, Paul overleaps the distinction of Jew and Gentile, which disappeared to him in the unity of the broad message, which was the same to every man. Repentance, turning to God, works worthy of repentance, are as needful for Jew as for Gentile, and as open to Gentile as to Jew. What but universal can such a message be? To limit it would be to mutilate it.

We note, too, the calmness with which he lays his finger on the real cause of Jewish hate, which Festus had already found out. He does not condescend to rebut the charge of treason, which he had already repelled, and which nobody in his audience believed. He is neither afraid nor angry, as he quietly points to the deadly malice which had no ground but his message.

We further note the triumphant confidence in God and assurance of His help in all the past, so that, like some strong tower after the most crashing blows of the battering-ram, he still stands. His steps had wellnigh slipped, when foe after foe stormed against him, but Thy mercy, O Lord, held me up.

Finally, Paul gathers himself together, to leave as his last word the mighty sentence in which he condenses his whole teaching, in its aspect of witness-bearing, in its universal destination and identity to the poorest and to loftily placed men and women, such as sat languidly looking at him now, in its perfect concord with the earlier revelation, and in its threefold contents, that it was the message of the Christ who suffered, who rose from the dead, who was the Light of the world. Surely the promise was fulfilled to him, and it was given him in that hour what he should speak.

The rustle in the crowd was scarcely over, when the strong masterful voice of the governor rasped out the coarse taunt, which, according to one reading, was made coarser (and more lifelike) by repetition, Thou art mad, Paul; thou art mad. So did a hard practical man think of that strain of lofty conviction, and of that story of the appearance of the Christ. To be in earnest about wealth or power or science or pleasure is not madness, so the world thinks; but to be in earnest about religion, one's own soul, or other people's, is. Which was the saner, Paul, who counted all things but dung that he might win Christ, or Festus, who counted keeping his governorship, and making all that he could out of it, the one thing worth living for? Who is the madman, he who looks up and sees Jesus, and bows before Him for lifelong service, or he who looks up and says, I see nothing up there; I keep my eyes on the main chance down here? It would be a saner and a happier world if there were more of us mad after Paul's fashion.

Paul's unruffled calm and dignity brushed aside the rude exclamation with a simple affirmation that his words were true in themselves, and spoken by one who had full command over his faculties; and then he turned away from Festus, who understood nothing, to Agrippa, who, at any rate, did understand a little. Indeed, Festus has to take the second place throughout, and it may have been the ignoring of him that nettled him. For all his courtesy to Agrippa, he knew that the latter was but a vassal king, and may have chafed at Paul's addressing him exclusively.

The Apostle has finished his defence, and now he towers above the petty dignitaries before him, and goes straight at the conscience of the king. Festus had dismissed the Resurrection of one Jesus as unimportant: Paul asserted it, the Jews denied it. It was not worth while to ask which was right. The man was dead, that was agreed. If Paul said He was alive after death, that was only another proof of madness, and a Roman governor had more weighty things to occupy him than investigating such obscure and absurd trifles. But Agrippa, though not himself a Jew, knew enough of the history of the last twenty years to have heard about the Resurrection and the rise of the Church. No doubt he would have been ready to admit his knowledge, but Paul shows a disposition to come to closer quarters by his swift thrust, Believest thou the prophets? and the confident answer which the questioner gives.

What was the Apostle bringing these two things--the publicity given to the facts of Christ's life, and the belief in the prophets-- together for? Obviously, if Agrippa said Yes, then the next question would be, Believest thou the Christ, whose life and death and resurrection thou knowest, and who has fulfilled the prophets thereby? That would have been a hard question for the king to answer. His conscience begins to be uncomfortable, and his dignity is wounded by this extremely rude person, who ventures to talk to him as if he were a mere common man. He has no better answer ready than a sarcasm; not a very forcible one, betraying, however, his penetration into, and his dislike of, and his embarrassment at, Paul's drift. His ironical words are no confession of being almost persuaded, but a taunt. And do you really suppose that it is so easy a matter to turn me--the great Me, a Herod, a king, and he might have added, a sensual bad man, into a Christian?

Paul met the sarcastic jest with deep earnestness, which must have hushed the audience of sycophants ready to laugh with the king, and evidently touched him and Festus. His whole soul ran over in yearning desire for the salvation of them all. He took no notice of the gibe in the word Christian, nor of the levity of Agrippa. He showed that purest love fills his heart, that he has found the treasure which enriches the poorest and adds blessedness to the highest. So peaceful and blessed is he, a prisoner, that he can wish nothing better for any than to be like him in his faith. He hints his willingness to take any pains and undergo any troubles for such an end; and, with almost a smile, he looks at his chains, and adds, except these bonds.

Did Festus wince a little at the mention of these, which ought not to have been on his wrists? At all events, the entertainment had taken rather too serious a turn for the taste of any of the three,--Festus, Agrippa, or Bernice. If this strange man was going to shake their consciences in that fashion, it was high time to end what was, after all, as far as the rendering of justice was concerned, something like a farce.

So with a rustle, and amid the obeisances of the courtiers, the three rose, and, followed by the principal people, went through the form of deliberation. There was only one conclusion to be come to. He was perfectly innocent. So Agrippa solemnly pronounced, what had been known before, that he had done nothing worthy of death or bonds, though he had these bonds on his arms; and salved the injustice of keeping an innocent man in custody by throwing all the blame on Paul himself for appealing to Caesar. But the person to blame was Festus, who had forced Paul to appeal in order to save his life.