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

**ACTS-096. ME A CHRISTIAN! by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then Agrlppa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."*

*Acts 26:28*

This Agrippa was son of the other Herod of whom we hear in the Acts as a persecutor. This one appears from other sources, to have had the vices but not the force of character of his bad race. He was weak and indolent, a mere hanger-on of Rome, to which he owed his kingdom, and to which he stoutly stuck during all the tragedy of the fall of Jerusalem. In position and in character (largely resulting from the position) he was uncommonly like those semi-independent rajahs in India, who are allowed to keep up a kind of shadow of authority on condition of doing what Calcutta bids them. Of course frivolity and debauchery become the business of such men. What sort of a man this was may be sufficiently inferred from the fact that Bernice was his sister.

But he knew a good deal about the Jews, about their opinions, their religion, and about what had been going on during the last half century amongst them. Or grounds of policy he professed to accept the Jewish faith--of which an edifying example is given in the fact that, on one occasion, Bernice was prevented from accompanying him to Rome because she was fulfilling a Nazarite vow in the Temple at Jerusalem!

So the Apostle was fully warranted in appealing to Agrippa's knowledge, not only of Judaism, but of the history of Jesus Christ, and in his further assertion, I know that thou believest. But the home-thrust was too much for the king. His answer is given in the words of our text.

They are very familiar words, and they have been made the basis of a great many sermons upon being all but persuaded to accept of Christ as Saviour. But, edifying as such a use of them is, it can scarcely be sustained by their actual meaning. Most commentators are agreed that our Authorised Version does not represent either Agrippa's words or his tone. He was not speaking in earnest. His words are sarcasm, not a half melting into conviction, and the Revised Version gives what may, on the whole, be accepted as being a truer representation of their intention when it reads, With but little persuasion thou wouldst fain make me a Christian.

He is half amused and half angry at the Apostle's presumption in supposing that so easily or so quickly he was going to land his fish. It is a more difficult task than you fancy, Paul, to make a Christian of a man like me. That is the real meaning of his words, and I think that, rightly understood, they yield lessons of no less value than those that have been so often drawn from them as they appear in our Authorised Version. So I wish to try and gather up and urge upon you now these lessons:--

**I. First, then, I see here an example of the danger of a superficial familiarity with Christian truth.**

As I said, Agrippa knew, in a general way, a good deal not only about the prophets and the Jewish religion, but of the outstanding facts of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul's assumption that he knew would have been very quickly repudiated if it had not been based upon fact. And the inference from his acceptance without contradiction of the Apostle's statement is confirmed by his use of the word Christian, which had by no means come into general employment when he spoke; and in itself indicates that he knew a good deal about the people who were so named. Mark the contrast, for instance, between him and the bluff Roman official at his side. To Festus, Paul's talking about a dead man's having risen, and a risen Jew becoming a light to all nations, was such utter nonsense that, with characteristic Roman contempt for men with ideas, he breaks in, with his rough, strident voice, Much learning has made thee mad. There was not much chance of that cause producing that effect on Festus. But he was apparently utterly bewildered at this entirely novel and unintelligible sort of talk. Agrippa, on the other hand, knows all about the Resurrection; has heard that there was such a thing, and has a general rough notion of what Paul believed as a Christian.

And was he any better for it? No; he was a great deal worse. It took the edge off a good deal of his curiosity. It made him fancy that he knew beforehand all that the Apostle had to say. It stood in the way of his apprehending the truths which he thought that he understood.

And although the world knows a great deal more about Jesus Christ and the Gospel than he did, the very same thing is true about hundreds and thousands of people who have all their lives long been brought into contact with Christianity. Superficial knowledge is the worst enemy of accurate knowledge, for the first condition of knowing a thing is to know that we do not know it. And so there are a great many of us who, having picked up since childhood vague and partially inaccurate notions about Christ and His Gospel and what He has done, are so satisfied on the strength of these that we know all about it, that we listen to preaching about it with a very languid attention. The ground in our minds is preoccupied with our own vague and imperfect apprehensions. I believe that there is nothing that stands more in the way of hundreds of people coming into real intelligent contact with Gospel truth than the half knowledge that they have had of it ever since they were children. You fancy that you know all that I can tell you. Very probably you do. But have you ever taken a firm hold of the plain central facts of Christianity--your own sinfulness and helplessness, your need of a Saviour, the perfect work of Jesus Christ who died on the Cross for you, and the power of simple faith therein to join you to Him, and, if followed by consecration and obedience, to make you partakers of His nature, and heirs of the inheritance that is above? These are but the fundamentals, the outlines of Gospel truth. But far too many of you see them, in such a manner as you see the figures cast upon a screen when the lantern is not rightly focussed, with a blurred outline, and the blurred outline keeps you from seeing the sharp-cut truth as it is in Jesus. In all regions of thought inaccurate knowledge is the worst foe to further understanding, and eminently is this the case in religion. Brethren, some of you are in that position.

Then there is another way in which such knowledge as that of which the king in our text is an example is a hindrance, and that is, that it is knowledge which has no effect on character. What do hundreds of us do with our knowledge of Christianity? Our minds seem built in watertight compartments, and we keep the doors of them shut very close, so that truths in the understanding have no influence on the will. Many of you believe the Gospel intellectually, and it does not make a hairsbreadth of difference to anything that you ever either thought or wished or did. And because you so believe it, it is utterly impossible that it should ever be of any use to you. Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Yes, believest the prophets, and Bernice sitting by thy side there-- believest the prophets, and livest in utter bestial godlessness. What is the good of a knowledge of Christianity like that? And is it not such knowledge of Christianity that blocks the way with some of you for anything more real and more operative? There is nothing more impotent than a firmly believed and utterly neglected truth. And that is what the Christianity of some of you is when it is analysed.

**II. Now, secondly, notice how we have here the example of a proud man indignantly recoiling from submission.**

There is a world of contempt in Agrippa's words, in the very putting side by side of the two things. Me! Me, with a very large capital M--Me a Christian? He thinks of his dignity, poor creature. It was not such a very tremendous dignity after all. He was a petty kinglet, permitted by the grace of Rome to live and to pose as if he were the real thing, and yet he struts and claps his wings and crows on his little hillock as if it were a mountain. Me a Christian? The great Agrippa a Christian! And he uses that word Christian with the intense contempt which coined it and adhered to it, until the men to whom it was applied were wise enough to take it and bind it as a crown of honour upon their head. The wits at Antioch first of all hit upon the designation. They meant a very exquisite piece of sarcasm by their nickname. These people were Christians, just as some other people were Herodians--Christ's men, the men of this impostor who pretended to be a Messiah. That seemed such an intensely ludicrous thing to the wise people in Antioch that they coined the name; and no doubt thought they had done a very clever thing. It is only used in the Bible in tike notice of its origin; here, with a very evident connotation of contempt; and once more when Peter in his letter refers to it as being the indictment on which certain disciples suffered. So when Agrippa says, Me a Christian, he puts all the bitterness that he can into that last word. As if he said, Do you really think that I--I--am going to bow myself down to be a follower and adherent of that Christ of yours? The thing is too ridiculous! With but little persuasion you would fain make me a Christian. But you will find it a harder task than you fancy.

Now, my dear friends, the shape of this unwillingness is changed but the fact of it remains. There are two or three features of what I take to be the plain Gospel of Jesus Christ which grate very much against all self-importance and self-complacency, and operate very largely, though not always consciously, upon very many amongst us. I just run them over, very briefly.

The Gospel insists on dealing with everybody in the same fashion, and on regarding all as standing on the same level. Many of us do not like that. Translate Agrippa's scorn into words that fit ourselves: I am a well-to-do Manchester man. Am I to stand on the same level as my office-boy? Yes! the very same. I, a student, perhaps a teacher of science, or a cultivated man, a scholar, a lawyer, a professional man--am I to stand on the same level as people that scarcely know how to read and write? Yes, exactly. So, like the man in the Old Testament, he turned and went away in a rage. Many of us would like that there should be a little private door for us in consideration of our position or acquirements or respectability, or this, that, or the other thing. At any rate we are not to be classed in the same category with the poor and the ignorant and the sinful and the savage all over the world. But we are so classed. Do not you and the men in Patagonia breathe the same air? Are not your bodies subject to the same laws? Have you not to be contented to be fed in the same fashion, and to sleep and eat and drink in the same way? We have all of us one human heart; and there is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. The identities of humanity, in all its examples, are deeper than the differences in any. We have all the one Saviour and are to be saved in the same fashion. That is a humbling thing for those of us who stand upon some little elevation, real or fancied, but it is only the other side of the great truth that God's love is world-wide, and that Christ's Gospel is meant for humanity. Naaman, to whom I have already referred in passing, wanted to be treated as a great man who happened to be a leper; Elisha insisted on treating him as a leper who happened to be a great man. And that makes all the difference. I remember seeing somewhere that a great surgeon had said that the late Emperor of Germany would have had a far better chance of being cured if he had gone incognito to the hospital for throat diseases. We all need the same surgery, and we must be contented to take it in the same fashion. So, some of us recoil from humbling equality with the lowest and worst.

Then again, another thing that sometimes makes people shrink back from the Gospel is that it insists upon every one being saved solely by dependence on Another. We would like to have a part in our salvation, and many of us had rather do anything in the way of sacrifice or suffering or penance than take this position:

Nothing in my hand I bring,

Simply to Thy Cross I cling.

Corrupt forms of Christianity have taken an acute measure of the worst parts of human nature, when they have taught men that they can eke out Christ's work by their own, and have some kind of share in their own salvation. Dear brethren, I have to bring to you another Gospel than that, and to say, All is done for us, and all will be done in us, and nothing has to be done by us. Some of you do not like that. Just as a man drowning is almost sure to try to help himself, and get his limbs inextricably twisted round his would-be rescuer and drown them both, so men will not, without a struggle, consent to owe everything to Jesus Christ, and to let Him draw them out of many waters and set them on the safe shore. But unless we do so, we have little share in His Gospel.

And another thing stands in the way--namely, that the Gospel insists upon absolute obedience to Jesus Christ. Agrippa fancied that it was an utterly preposterous idea that he should lower his flag, and doff his crown, and become the servant of a Jewish peasant. A great many of us, though we have a higher idea of our Lord than his, do yet find it quite as hard to submit our wills to His, and to accept the condition of absolute obedience, utter resignation to Him, and entire subjection to His commandment. We say, Let my own will have a little bit of play in a corner. Some of us find it very hard to believe that we are to bring all our thinking upon religious and moral subjects to Him, and to accept His word as conclusive, settling all controversies. I, with my culture; am I to accept what Christ says as the end of strife? Yes, absolute submission is the plainest condition of real Christianity. The very name tells us that. We are Christians, i.e. Christ's men; and unless we are, we have no right to the name. But some of us had rather be our own masters and enjoy the miseries of independence and self-will, and so be the slaves of our worse selves, than bow ourselves utterly before that dear Lord, and so pass into the freedom of a service love-inspired, and by love accepted, Thou wouldst fain persuade me to be a Christian, is the recoil of a proud heart from submission. Brethren, let me beseech you that it may not be yours.

**III. Again, we have here an example of instinctive shrinking from the personal application of broad truths.**

Agrippa listened, half-amused and a good deal interested, to Paul as long as he talked generalities and described his own experience. But when he came to point the generalities and to drive them home to the hearer's heart it was time to stop him. That question of the Apostle's, keen and sudden as the flash of a dagger, went straight home, and the king at once gathered himself together into an attitude of resistance. Ah, that is what hundreds of people do! You will let me preach as long as I like--only you will get a little weary sometimes--you will let me preach generalities ad libitum. But when I come to And thou? then I am rude and inquisitorial and personal and trespassing on a region where I have no business, and so on and so on. And so you shut up your heart if not your ears.

And yet, brethren, what is the use of toothless generalities? What am I here for if I am not here to take these broad, blunt truths and sharpen them to a point, and try to get them in between the joints of your armour? Can any man faithfully preach the Gospel who is always flying over the heads of his hearers with universalities, and never goes straight to their hearts with Thou--thou art the man! Believest thou?

And so, dear friends, let me press that question upon you. Never mind about other people. Suppose you and I were alone together and my words were coming straight to thee. Would they not have more power than they have now? They are so coming. Think away all these other people, and this place, ay, and me too, and let the word of Christ, which deals with no crowds but with single souls, come to you in its individualising force: Believest thou? You will have to answer that question one day. Better to face it now and try to answer it than to leave it all vague until you get yonder, where each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

**IV. Lastly, we have here an example of a soul close to the light, but passing into the dark.**

Agrippa listens to Paul; Bernice listens; Festus listens. And what comes of it? Only this, And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man hath done nothing worthy of death or of bonds. May I translate into a modern equivalent: And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man preached a very impressive sermon, or, This man preached a very wearisome sermon, and there an end.

Agrippa and Bernice went their wicked way, and Festus went his, and none of them knew what a fateful moment they had passed through. Ah, brethren! there are many such in our lives when we make decisions that influence our whole future, and no sign shows that the moment is any way different from millions of its undistinguished fellows. It is eminently so in regard to our relation to Jesus Christ and His Gospel. These three had been in the light; they were never so near it again. Probably they never heard the Gospel preached any more, and they went away, not knowing what they had done when they silenced Paul and left him. Now you will probably hear plenty of sermons in future. You may or you may not. But be sure of this, that if you go away from this one, unmelted and unbelieving, you have not done a trivial thing. You have added one more stone to the barrier that you yourself build to shut you out from holiness and happiness, from hope and heaven. It is not I that ask you the question, it is not Paul that asks it, Jesus Christ Himself says to you, as He said to the blind man, Dost thou believe on the Son of God? or as He said to the weeping sister of Lazarus, Believest thou this? O dear friends, do not answer like this arrogant bit of a king, but cry with tears, Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!