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

**ACTS-098. A SHORT CONFESSION OF FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve."*

*Acts 27:23*

I turn especially to those last words, Whose I am and whom I serve.

A great calamity, borne by a crowd of men in common, has a wonderful power of dethroning officials and bringing the strong man to the front. So it is extremely natural, though it has been thought to be very unhistorical, that in this story of Paul's shipwreck he should become guide, counsellor, inspirer, and a tower of strength; and that centurions and captains and all the rest of those who held official positions should shrink into the background. The natural force of his character, the calmness and serenity that came from his faith--these things made him the leader of the bewildered crowd. One can scarcely help contrasting this shipwreck--the only one in the New Testament-- with that in the Old Testament. Contrast Jonah with Paul, the guilty stupor of the one, down in the sides of the ship cowering before the storm, with the calm behaviour and collected courage of the other.

The vision of which the Apostle speaks does not concern us here, but in the words which I have read there are several noteworthy points. They bring vividly before us the essence of true religion, the bold confession which it prompts, and the calmness and security which it ensures. Let us then look at them from these points of view.

**I. We note the clear setting forth of the essence of true religion.**

Remember that Paul is speaking to heathens; that his present purpose is not to preach the Gospel, but to make his own position clear. So he says the God--never mind who He is at present--the God to whom I belong --that covers all the inward life--and whom I serve --that covers all the outward.

Whose I am. That expresses the universal truth that men belong to God by virtue of their being the creatures of His hand. As the 100th Psalm says, according to one, and that a probably correct reading, It is He that hath made us, and we are His. But the Apostle is going a good deal deeper than any such thoughts, which he, no doubt, shared in common with the heathen men around him, when he declares that, in a special fashion, God had claimed him for His, and he had yielded to the claim. I am Thine, is the deepest thought of this man's mind and the deepest feeling of his heart. And that is godliness in its purest form, the consciousness of belonging to God. We must interpret this saying by others of the Apostle's, such as, Ye are not your own, ye are bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your bodies and spirits which are His. He traces God's possession of him, not to that fact of creation (which establishes a certain outward relationship, but nothing more), nor even to the continuous facts of benefits showered upon his head, but to the one transcendent act of the divine Love, which gave itself to us, and so acquired us for itself. For we must recognise as the deepest of all thoughts about the relations of spiritual beings, that, as in regard to ourselves in our earthly affections, so in regard to our relations with God, there is only one way by which a spirit can own a spirit, whether it be a man on the one side and a woman on the other, or whether it be God on the one side and a man on the other, and that one way is by the sweetness of complete and reciprocal love. He who gives himself to God gets God for himself. So when Paul said, Whose I am, he was thinking that he would never have belonged either to God or to himself unless, first of all, God, in His own Son, had given Himself to Paul. The divine ownership of us is only realised when we are consciously His, because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Brethren, God does not count that a man belongs to Him simply because He made him, if the man does not feel his dependence, his obligation, and has not surrendered himself. He in the heavens loves you and me too well to care for a formal and external ownership. He desires hearts, and only they who have yielded themselves unto God, moved thereto by the mercies of God, and especially by the encyclopaediacal mercy which includes all the rest in its sweep, only they belong to Him, in the estimate of the heavens.

And if you and I are His, then that involves that we have deposed from his throne the rebel Self, the ancient Anarch that disturbs and ruins us. They who belong to God cease to live to themselves. There are two centres for human life, and I believe there are only two--the one is God, the other is my wretched self. And if we are swept, as it were, out of the little orbit that we move in, when the latter is our centre, and are drawn by the weight and mass of the great central sun to become its satellites, then we move in a nobler orbit and receive fuller and more blessed light and warmth. They who have themselves for their centres are like comets, with a wide elliptical course, which carries them away out into the cold abysses of darkness. They who have God for their sun are like planets. The old fable is true of these sons of the morning--they make music as they roll and they flash back His light.

And then do not let us forget that this yielding of one's self to Him, swayed by His love, and this surrendering of will and purpose and affection and all that makes up our complex being, lead directly to the true possession of Him and the true possession of ourselves.

I have said that the only way by which spirit possesses spirit is by love, and that it must needs be on both sides. So we get God for ourselves when we give ourselves to God. There is a wonderful alternation of giving and receiving between the loving God and his beloved lovers; first the impartation of the divine to the human, then the surrender of the human to the divine, and then the larger gift of God to man, just as in some series of mirrors the light is flashed back from the one to the other, in bewildering manifoldness and shimmering of rays from either polished surface. God is ours when we are God's. And this is the covenant that I will make with them after these days, saith the Lord. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

And, in like manner, we never own ourselves until we have given ourselves to God. Each of us is like some feudatory prince, dependent upon an overlord. His subjects in his little territory rebel, and he has no power to subdue the insurgents, but he can send a message to the capital, and get the army of the king, who is his sovereign and theirs, to come down and bring them back to order, and establish his tottering throne. So if you desire to own yourself or to know the sweetness that you may get out of your own nature and the exercise of your powers, if you desire to be able to govern the realm within, put yourself into God's hands and say, I am Thine; hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.

I need not say more than just a word about the other side of Paul's confession of faith, Whom I serve. He employs the word which means the service of a worshipper, or even of a priest, and not that which means the service of a slave. His purpose was to represent how, as his whole inward nature bowed in submission to, and was under the influence of, God to whom he belonged, so his whole outward life was a life of devotion. He was serving Him there in the ship, amidst the storm and the squalor and the terror. His calmness was service; his confidence was service; the cheery words that he was speaking to these people were service. And on his whole life he believed that this was stamped, that he was devoted to God. So there is the true idea of a Christian life, that in all its aspects, attitudes, and acts it is to be a manifestation, in visible form, of inward devotion to, and ownership by, God. All our work may be worship, and we may pray without ceasing, though no supplications come from our lips, if our hearts are in touch with Him and through our daily life we serve and honour Him. God's priests never are far away from their altar, and never are without, somewhat to offer, as long as they have the activities of daily duty and the difficulties of daily conflict to bring to Him and spread before Him.

**II. So let me turn for a moment to some of the other aspects of these words to which I have already referred, I find in them, next, the bold confession which true religion requires.**

Shipboard is a place where people find out one another very quickly. Character cannot well be hid there. And such circumstances as Paul had been in for the last fortnight, tossing up and down in Adria, with Death looking over the bulwarks of the crazy ship every moment, were certain to have brought out the inmost secrets of character. Paul durst not have said to these people the God whose I am and whom I serve if he had not known that he had been living day by day a consistent and godly life amongst them.

And so, I note, first of all, that this confession of individual and personal relationship to God is incumbent on every Christian. We do not need to be always brandishing it before people's faces. There is very little fear of the average Christian of this day blundering on that side. But we need, still less, to be always hiding it away. One hears a great deal from certain quarters about a religion that does not need to be vocal but shows what it is, without the necessity for words. Blessed be God! there is such a religion, but you will generally find that the people who have most of it are the people who are least tongue-tied when opportunity arises; and that if they have been witnessing for God in their quiet discharge of duty, with their hands instead of their lips, they are quite as ready to witness with their lips when it is fitting that they should do so. And surely, surely, if a man belongs to God, and if his whole life is to be the manifestation of the ownership that he recognises, that which specially reveals him--viz., his own articulate speech--cannot be left out of his methods of manifestation.

I am afraid that there are a great many professing Christian people nowadays who never, all their lives, have said to any one, The God whose I am and whom I serve. And I beseech you, dear brethren, suffer this word of exhortation. To say so is a far more effectual, or at least more powerful, means of appeal than any direct invitation to share in the blessings. You may easily offend a man by saying to him, Won't you be a Christian too? But it is hard to offend if you simply say that you are a Christian. The statement of personal experience is more powerful by far than all argumentation or eloquence or pleading appeals. We do more when we say, That which we have tasted and felt and handled of the Word of Life, declare we unto you, than by any other means.

Only remember that the avowal must be backed up by a life, as Paul's was backed up on board that vessel. For unless it is so, the profession does far more harm than good. There are always keen critics round us, especially if we say that we are Christians. There were keen critics on board that ship. Do you think that these Roman soldiers, and the other prisoners, would not have smiled contemptuously at Paul, if this had been the first time that they had any reason to suppose that he was at all different from them? They would have said, The God whose you are and whom you serve? Why, you are just the same sort of man as if you worshipped Jupiter like the rest of us! And that is what the world has a right to say to Christian people. The clearer our profession, the holier must be our lives.

**III. Last of all, I find in these words the calmness and security which true religion secures.**

The story, as I have already glanced at it in my introductory remarks, brings out very wonderfully and very beautifully Paul's promptitude, his calmness in danger, his absolute certainty of safety, and his unselfish thoughtfulness about his companions in peril. And all these things were the direct results of his entire surrender to God, and of the consistency of his daily life. It needed the angel in the vision to assure him that his life would be spared. But whether the angel had ever come or not, and though death had been close at his hand, the serenity and the peaceful assurance of safety which come out so beautifully in the story would have been there all the same. The man who can say I belong to God does not need to trouble himself about dangers. He will have to exercise his common sense, as the Apostle shows us; he will have to use all the means that are in his power for the accomplishment of ends that he knows to be right and legitimate. But having done all that, he can say, I belong to Him, it is His business to look after His own property. He is not going to hold His possessions with such a slack hand as that they shall slip between His fingers, and be lost in the mire. Thou wilt not lose the souls that are Thine in the grave, neither wilt Thou suffer the man whom Thou lovest to see corruption. God keeps His treasures, and the surer we are that He is able to keep them unto that day, the calmer we may be in all our trouble.

And the safety that followed was also the direct result of the relationship of mutual possession and love established between God and the Apostle. We do not know to which of the two groups of the shipwrecked Paul belonged; whether he could swim or whether he had to hold on to some bit of floating wreckage or other, and so got safe to land. But whichever way it was, it was neither his swimming nor the spar to which, perhaps, he clung, that landed him safe on shore. It was the God to whom he belonged. Faith is the true lifebelt that keeps us from being drowned in any stormy sea. And if you and I feel that we are His, and live accordingly, we shall be calm amid all change, serene when others are troubled, ready to be helpers of others even when we ourselves are in distress. And when the crash comes, and the ship goes to pieces: so it will come to pass that, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship, they all come safe to land, and when the Owner counts His subjects and possessions on the quiet shore, as the morning breaks, there will not be one who has been lost in the surges, or whose name will be unanswered to when the muster-roll of the crew is called.