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

**COLOSSIANS-002**. **SAINTS, BELIEVERS, BRETHREN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*" ... The saints and faithful brethren in Christ."*

*Colossians 1:2*

The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch, says the Acts of the Apostles. It was a name given by outsiders, and like most of the instances where a sect, or school, or party is labelled with the name of its founder, it was given in scorn. It hit and yet missed its mark. The early believers were Christians, that is, Christ's men, but they were not merely a group of followers of a man, like many other groups of whom the Empire at that time was full. So they never used that name themselves. It occurs twice only in Scripture, once when King Agrippa was immensely amused at the audacity of Paul in thinking that he would easily make a Christian of him; and once when Peter speaks of suffering as a Christian, where he is evidently quoting, as it were, the indictment on which the early believers were tried and punished. What did they call themselves then?

I have chosen this text not for the purpose of speaking about it only, but because it gathers together in brief compass the three principal designations by which the early believers knew themselves. Saints--that tells their relation to God, as well as their character, for it means consecrated, set apart for Him, and therefore pure; faithful--that means full of faith and is substantially equivalent to the usual believers, which defines their relation to Jesus Christ as the Revealer of God; brethren--that defines their relation and sentiment towards their fellows. These terms go a great deal deeper than the nickname which the wits of Antioch invented. The members of the Church were not content with the vague Christian, but they called themselves saints, believers, brethren. One designation does not appear here, which we must take into account for completeness: the earliest of all--disciples. Now, I purpose to bring together these four names, by which the early believers thought and spoke of themselves, in order to point the lessons as to our position and our duty, which are wrapped up in them. And I may just say that, perhaps, it is no sign of advance that the Church, as years rolled on, accepted the world's name for itself, and that people found it easier to call themselves Christians--which did not mean very much--than to call themselves saints or believers.

Now then, to begin with,

**I. They were Disciples first of all.**

The facts as to the use of that name are very plain, and as instructive as they are plain. It is a standing designation in the Gospels, both in the mouths of friends and of outsiders; it is sometimes, though very sparingly, employed by Jesus Christ Himself. It persists on through the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and then it stops dead, and we never hear it again.

Now its existence at first, and its entire abandonment afterwards, both seem to me to carry very valuable lessons. Let me try to work them out. Of course, disciple or scholar has for its correlative--as the logicians call it--teacher. And so we find that as the original adherents of Jesus called themselves disciples, they addressed Him as Master, which is the equivalent of Rabbi. That at once suggests the thought that to themselves, and to the people who saw the origination of the little Christian community, the Lord and His handful of followers seemed just to be like John and his disciples, the Pharisees and their disciples, and many another Rabbi and his knot of admiring adherents. Therefore whilst the name was in one view fitting, it was conspicuously inadequate, and as time went on, and the Church became more conscious of the uniqueness of the bond that knit it to Jesus Christ, it instinctively dropped the name disciple, and substituted others more intimate and worthy.

But yet it remains permanently true, that Christ's followers are Christ's scholars, and that He is their Rabbi and Teacher. Only the peculiarity, the absolute uniqueness, of His attitude and action as a Teacher lies in two things: one, that His main subject was Himself, as He said, I am the Truth, and consequently His characteristic demand from His scholars was not, as with other teachers, Accept this, that, or the other doctrine which I propound, but Believe in Me; and the other, that He seldom if ever argues, or draws conclusions from previous premises, that He never speaks as if He Himself had learnt and fought His way to what He is saying, or betrays uncertainty, limitation, or growth in His opinions, and that for all confirmation of His declarations, He appeals only to the light within and to His own authority: Verily, verily, I say unto you. No wonder that the common people were astonished at His teaching, and felt that here was an authority in which the wearisome citations of what Rabbi So-and-So had said, altogether lacked.

That teaching abides still, and, as I believe, opens out into, and is our source of, all that we know--in distinction and contrast from, imagine, hope, fear--of God, and of ourselves, and of the future. It casts the clearest light on morals for the individual and on politics for the community. Whatever men may say about Christianity being effete, it will not be effete till the world has learnt and absorbed the teaching of Jesus Christ; and we are a good long way from that yet!

If He is thus the Teacher, the perpetual Teacher, and the only Teacher, of mankind in regard to all these high things about God and man and the relation between them, about life and death and the world, and about the practice and conduct of the individual and of the community, then we, if we are His disciples, build houses on the rock, in the degree in which we not only hear but do the things that He commands. For this Teacher is no theoretical handler of abstract propositions, but the authoritative imposer of the law of life, and all His words have a direct bearing upon conduct. Therefore it is vain for us to say: Lord, Lord, Thou hast taught in our streets and we have accepted Thy teaching. He looks down upon us from the Throne, as He looked upon the disciples in that upper room, and He says to each of us: If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

But the complete disappearance of the name as the development of the Church advanced, brings with it another lesson, and that is, that precious and great as are the gifts which Jesus Christ bestows as a Teacher, and unique as His act and attitude in that respect are, the name either of teacher or of disciple fails altogether to penetrate to the essence of the relation which knits us together. It is not enough for our needs that we shall be taught. The worst man in the world knows a far nobler morality than the best man practises. And if it were true, as some people superficially say is the case, that evil-doing is the result of ignorance, there would be far less evil-doing in the world than, alas! there is. It is not for the want of knowing, that we go wrong, as our consciences tell us; but it is for want of something that can conquer the evil tendencies within, and lift off the burden of a sinful past which weighs on us. As in the carboniferous strata what was pliant vegetation has become heavy mineral, our evil deeds lie heavy on our souls. What we need is not to be told what we ought to be, but to be enabled to be it. Electricity can light the road, and it can drive the car along it; and that is what we want, a dynamic as well as an illuminant, something that will make us able to do and to be what conscience has told us we ought to be and do.

Teacher? Yes. But if only teacher, then He is nothing more than one of a multitude who in all generations have vainly witnessed to sinful men of the better path. There is no reformation for the individual, and little hope for humanity, in a Christ whom you degrade to the level of a Rabbi, or in a Church which has not pressed nearer to Him than to feel itself His disciples.

There was a man who came to Jesus by night, and was in the dark about the Jesus to whom he came, and he said, We know that Thou art a Teacher come from God. But Jesus did not accept the witness, though a young teacher fighting for recognition might have been glad to get it from an authoritative member of the Sanhedrim. But He answered, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. If we need to be born again before we see it, it is not teachers of it that will serve our turn, but One who takes us by the hand, and translates us out of the tyranny of the darkness into the Kingdom of the Son of God's love. So much, then, for the first of these names and lessons.

Now turn to the second--

**II. The Disciples must be Believers.**

That name begins to appear almost immediately after Pentecost, and continues throughout. It comes in two forms, one which is in my text, the faithful, meaning thereby not the reliable, but the people that are full of faith; the other, meaning the same thing, they who believe, the believers. The Church found that disciple was not enough. It went deeper; and, with a true instinct, laid hold of the unique bond which knits men to their Lord and Saviour. That name indicates that Jesus Christ appears to the man who has faith in a new character. He is not any longer the Teacher who is to be listened to, but He is the Object of trust. And that implies the recognition, first, of His Divinity, which alone is strong enough to bear up the weight of millions of souls leaning hard upon it; and, second, of what He has done and not merely of what He has said. We accept the Teacher's word; we trust the Saviour's Cross. And in the measure in which men learned that the centre of the work of the Rabbi Jesus was the death of the Incarnate Son of God, their docility was sublimed into faith.

That faith is the real bond that knits men to Jesus Christ. We are united to Him, and become recipient of the gifts that He has to bestow, by no sacraments, by no externals, by no reverential admiration of His supreme wisdom and perfect beauty of character, not by assuming the attitude of the disciple, but by flinging our whole selves upon Him, because He is our Saviour. That unites us to Jesus Christ; nothing else does. Faith is the opening of the heart, by which all His power can be poured into us. It is the grasping of His hand, by which, even though the cold waters be above our knees and be rising to our hearts, we are lifted above them and they are made a solid pavement for our feet. Faith is the door opened by ourselves, and through which will come all the Glory that dwelt between the cherubim, and will fill the secret place in our hearts. To be the disciple of a Rabbi is something; to be the faithful dependent on the Saviour is to be His indeed.

And then there is to be remembered, further, that this bond, which is the only vital link between a man and Christ, is therefore the basis of all virtue, of all nobility, of all beauty of conduct, and that whatsoever things are lovely and of good report are its natural efflorescence and fruit. And so that leads us to the third point--

**III. The believing Disciple is a Saint.**

That name does not appear in the Gospels, but it begins to show in the Acts of the Apostles, and it becomes extremely common throughout the Epistles of Paul. He had no hesitation in calling the very imperfect disciples in Corinth by this great name. He was going to rebuke them for some very great offences, not only against Christian elevation of conduct, but against common pagan morality; but he began by calling them saints.

What is a saint? First and foremost, a man who has given himself to God, and is consecrated thereby. Whoever has cast himself on Christ, and has taken Christ for his, therein and in the same degree as he is exercising faith, has thus yielded himself to God. If your faith has not led you to such a consecration of will and heart and self, you had better look out and see whether it is faith at all. But then, because faith involves the consecration of a man to God, and consecration necessarily implies purity, since nothing can be laid on God's altar which is not sanctified thereby, the name of saint comes to imply purity of character. Sanctity is the Christian word which means the very flower and fragrant aroma of what the world calls virtue.

But sanctity is not emotion, A man may luxuriate in devout feeling, and sing and praise and pray, and be very far from being a saint; and there is a great deal of the emotional Christianity of this day which has a strange affinity for the opposite of saintship. Sanctity is not aloofness. There were saints in Caesar's household--a very unlikely place; they were flowers on a dunghill, and perhaps their blossoms were all the brighter because of what they grew on, and which they could transmute from corruption into beauty. So sanctity is no blue ribbon of the Christian profession, to be given to a few select (and mostly ascetic) specimens of consecration, but it is the designation of each of us, if we are disciples who are more than disciples, that is, believers. And thus, brethren, we have to see to it that, in our own cases, our faith leads to surrender, and our self-surrender to purity of life and conduct. Faith, if real, brings sanctity; sanctity, if real, is progressive. Sanctity, though imperfect, may be real.

**IV. The believing Saints are Brethren.**

That is the name that predominates over all others in the latter portions of the New Testament, and it is very natural that it should do so. It reposes upon and implies the three preceding. Its rapid adoption and universal use express touchingly the wonder of the early Church at its own unity. The then world was rent asunder by deep clefts of misunderstanding, alienation, animosity, racial divisions of Jew and Greek, Parthian, Scythian; by sexual divisions which flung men and women, who ought to have been linked hand in hand, and united heart to heart, to opposite sides of a great gulf; by divisions of culture which made wise men look down on the unlearned, and the unlearned hate the wise men; by clefts of social position, and mainly that diabolical one of slave and free. All these divisive and disintegrating forces were in active operation. The only thing except Christianity, which produced even a semblance of union, was the iron ring of the Roman power which compressed them all into one indeed, but crushed the life out of them in the process. Into that disintegrating world, full of mutual repulsion, came One who drew men to Himself and said, One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren. And to their own astonishment, male and female, Greek and Jew, bond and free, philosopher and fool, found themselves sitting at the same table as members of one family; and they looked in each other's eyes and said, Brother! There had never been anything like it in the world. The name is a memorial of the unifying power of the Christian faith.

And it is a reminder to us of our own shortcomings. Of course, in the early days, the little band were driven together, as sheep that stray over a pasture in the sunshine will huddle into a corner in a storm, or when the wolves are threatening. There are many reasons to-day which make less criminal the alienation from one another of Christian communities and Christian individuals. I am not going to dwell on the evident signs in this day, for which God be thanked, that Christian men are beginning, more than they once did, to realise their unity in Jesus Christ, and to be content to think less of the things that separate than of the far greater things that unite. But I would lay upon your hearts, as individual parts of that great whole, this, that whatever may be the differences in culture, outlook, social position, or the like, between two Christian men, they each, the rich man and the poor, the educated man and the unlettered one, the master and the servant, ought to feel that deep down in their true selves they are nearer one another than they are to the men who, differing from them in regard to their faith in Jesus Christ, are like them in all these superficial respects. Regulate your conduct by that thought.

That name, too, speaks to us of the source from which Christian brotherhood has come. We are brethren of each other because we have one Father, even God, and the Fatherhood which makes us brethren is not that which communicates the common life of humanity, but that which imparts the new life of sonship through Jesus Christ. So the name points to the only way by which the world's dream of a universal brotherhood can ever be fulfilled. If there is to be fraternity there must be fatherhood, and the life which, possessed by each, makes a family of all, is the life which He gives, who is the first-born among many brethren, and who, to them who believe on Him, gives power to become the sons of God, and the brethren of all the other sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty.

So, dear friends, take these names, ponder their significance and the duties they impose. Let us make sure that they are true of us. Do not be content with the vague, often unmeaning name of Christian, but fill it with meaning by being a believer on Christ, a saint devoted to God, and a brother of all who, by like precious faith, have become Sons of God.