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

**ISAIAH-065. THE SERVANT'S TRIUMPH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8. He is near that justifieth Me; who will contend with Me? let us stand together: who is Mine adversary? let him come near to Me. 9. Behold, the Lord God will help Me; who is he that shall condemn Me? lo, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up."*

*Isaiah 50:8-9*

We have reached the final words of this prophecy, and we hear in them a tone of lofty confidence and triumph. While the former ones sounded plaintive like soft flute music, this rings out clear like the note of a trumpet summoning to battle. The Servant of the Lord seems here to be eager for the conflict, not merely patient and enduring, not merely setting His face like a flint, but confidently challenging His adversaries, and daring them to the strife.

As for the form of the words, the image underlying the whole is that of a suit at law. It is noteworthy that since Isaiah xli. this metaphor has run through the whole prophecy. The great controversy is God versus Idols. God appears at the bar of men, pleads His cause, calls His witnesses (xliii. 9). Let them (i.e. idols) bring forth their witnesses that they may be justified.

Possibly the form of the words here is owing to the dominance of that idea in the context, and implies nothing more than the general notion of opposition and victory. But it is at least worth remembering that in the life of Christ we have many instances in which the prophetic images were literally fulfilled even though their meaning was mainly symbolical: as e.g. the riding on the ass, the birth in Bethlehem, the silence before accusers, a bone of Him shall not be broken, and in this very contest, shame and spitting. So here there may be included a reference to that time when the hatred of opposition reached its highest point--in the sufferings and death of our Lord. And it is at least a remarkable coincidence that that highest point was reached in formal trials before the ecclesiastical and civil authorities, for the purpose of convicting Him, and that these processes as legal procedures broke down so signally.

Keeping up the metaphor, we mark here--

* The Messiah's lofty challenge to His accusers.
* The Messiah's expectation of divine vindication and acquittal.
* The Messiah's confidence of ultimate triumph.

**I. Messiah's lofty challenge to His accusers.**

The justifying which He expects may refer either to personal character or to official functional faithfulness. I think it refers to both, and that we have here, expressed in prophetic outline, not only the fact of Christ's sinlessness, but the fact of His consciousness of sinlessness.

The words are the strongest assertion of His absolute freedom from anything that an adversary could lay hold of on which to found a charge, and not merely so, but they also dare to assert that the unerring and all-penetrating eye of the Judge of all will look into His heart, and find nothing there but the mirrored image of His own perfection. I do not need to dwell on the fact of Christ's sinlessness, that He is perfect manhood without stain, without defect. I have had occasion to touch upon that truth in a former sermon on I was not rebellious. Here we have to do not so much with sinlessness as with the consciousness of sinlessness.

Now note that consciousness on Christ's part.

We have to reckon with the fact of it as expressed in His own words: I do always the things that please Him. Which of you convinceth Me of sin? The Prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in Me.

In Him there is the absence of all trace of sense of sin.

No prayer for forgiveness comes from His lips.

No penitence, no acknowledgment of even weakness is heard from Him. Even in His baptism, which for others was an acknowledgment of impurity, He puts His submission to the rite, not on the ground of needing to be washed from sin, but of fulfilling all righteousness.

Now, unless Christ was sinless, what do we say of these assertions? If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us--are we to apply that canon to Him when He stands before us and asks, Which of you convinceth Me of sin? Surely it augurs small self-knowledge or a low moral standard if, from the lips of a religious teacher, there never comes one word to indicate that he has felt the hold of evil on him. I make bold to say that if Christ were not sinless, the Apostle Paul stood far above Him, with his of whom I am chief. What difference would there be between Him and the Pharisees who called forth His bitterest words by this very absence in them of consciousness of sin: If ye were blind ye would have no sin, but now ye say, We see, therefore your sin remaineth.

Singularly enough the world has accepted Him at His own estimate, and has felt that these lofty assertions of absolute perfection were borne out by His life, and were consistent with the utmost lowliness of heart.

As to the adversary's failure, I need only recall the close of His life, which is representative of the whole impression made on the world by Him. What a wonderful and singular concurrence of testimonies was borne to His pure and blameless life! After months of hatred and watching, even the rulers lynx-eyed jealousy found nothing, and they had to fall back upon false witnesses. Hearest thou not how many things they witness against Thee? He stood with unmoved silence, and the lies fell down dead at His feet. Had He answered, they would have been preserved and owed their immortality to the Gospels: He held His peace and they vanished. All attempts failed so signally that at the last they were fain, in well-simulated holy abhorrence, to base His condemnation on what He had said in their presence. How think ye, ye have heard the blasphemy? So all that the adversary, raking through a life, could find, was that one word. That was His sin; in all else He was pure. Remember Pilate's acquittal: I find no fault in Him, and his wife's warning, Have thou nothing to do with that just Person. Think of Judas, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. Listen to the penitent thief's low voice gasping out in his pangs and almost collapse: This man hath done nothing amiss. Listen to the Centurion telling the impression made even on his rough nature: Truly this was a righteous Man.

These are the answers to the Servant's challenge, wrung from the lips of His adversaries; and they but represent the universal judgment of humanity.

There is one Man whose life has been without stain or spot, whose soul has never been crossed by a breath of passion, nor dimmed by a speck of sin, whose will has ever been filled with happy obedience, whose conscience has been undulled by evil and untaught to speak in condemnation, whose whole nature has been like some fair marble, pure in hue, perfect in form, and unstained to the very core. There is one Man who can front the most hostile scrutiny with the bold challenge, Which of you convinceth Me of sin? and His very haters have to answer, I find no fault in Him, while those that love Him rejoice to proclaim Him holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. There is one Man who can front the most rigid Law of Duty and say, I came not to destroy but to fulfil, and the stony tables seem to glow with tender light, as of rocky cliffs in morning sunshine, attesting that He has indeed fulfilled all righteousness. There is one Man who can stand before God without repentance or confession, and whose claim I do always the things that please Him, the awful voice from the opening heavens endorses, when it proclaims; This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. The lowly Servant of God flings out His challenge to the universe: Who will contend with Me? and that gage has lain in the lists for nineteen centuries unlifted.

**II. The Messiah's expectation of divine vindication and acquittal.**

Like many another man, Christ had to strengthen Himself against calumny and slander by turning to God, and finding comfort in the belief that there was One who would do Him right, and as throughout this context we have had the true humanity of our Lord in great prominence, it is worth while to dwell for a moment on that thought of His real sharing in the pain of misconstruction and groundless charges, and of His too having to say, as we have so often to say, Well, there is one who knows. Men may condemn but God will acquit.

But there is something more than that here. The divine vindication and acquittal is not a mere hidden thought and judgment in the mind of God. It is a declaring and showing to be innocent, and that not by word but by deed. That expectation seemed to be annihilated and made ludicrous by His death. But the justifying of which our text speaks takes place in Christ's resurrection and ascension.

Manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit (1 Timothy iii. 16). Declared to be the Son of God with power, ... by the resurrection from the dead (Rom. i. 4).

His death seems the entire abandonment of this holy and sinless man. It seems to demonstrate His claims to be madness, His hope to be futile, His promises to be wind. No wonder that the sorrowing apostles wailed, We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel. The death of Christ, if it were but a martyr's death, and if we had to believe that that frame had crumbled into dust, and that heart ceased for ever to beat, would not only destroy the worth of all that He spoke, but would be the saddest instance in all history of the irreversible sway that death wields over all mankind, and would deepen the darkness and sadden the gloom of the grave. True, there were not wanting even in His dying hours mysterious indications, such as His promise to the penitent thief. But these only make the disappointment the deeper, if there was nothing more after His death.

So Christ's justification is in His resurrection and ascension.

**III. The Messiah's confidence of ultimate triumph.**

In the last words of the text the adversaries are massed together. The confidence that the Lord God will help and justify leads to the conviction that all opposition to Him is futile and leads to destruction.

We see the historical fulfilment in the fate of the nation. His blood be upon us and upon our children.

We have a truth applying universally that antagonism to Him is self-destructive.

Two forms of destruction are here named. There is a slow decay going on in the opponents and their opposition, as a garment waxing old, and there is a being fretted away by the imperceptible working of external causes, as by gnawing moths.

Applied to persons. To opposing systems.

How many antagonists the Gospel has had, and one after another has been antiquated, and their books are only known because fragments of them are preserved in Christian writings. Paganism is gone from Europe, and its idols are in our museums. Each generation has its own phase of opposition, which lasts for a little while. The mists round the sun melt, the clouds piled in the north, surging up to bury it beneath their banks, are dissipated. The sea roars and smashes on the cliffs, but it ebbs and calms. Some of us have seen more than one school of thought which came to the assault of Christianity, with colours flying and drums rattling, defeated utterly and forgotten, and so it will always be. One may be sure that each enemy in turn will descend to the oblivion that has already received so many, and can imagine these beaten foes rising from their seats to welcome the newcomer with the sad greeting: Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?

We are justified in His justification.

The real connection between us and Christ by faith, makes our justification to be involved in His, so that it is no mere accommodation but a profound perception of the real relation between Christ and us, when Paul, in Romans viii. 34, triumphantly claims the words of our text for Christ's disciples, and rings out their challenge on behalf of all believers: It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?

Do you trust in Christ? Then you too can dare to say: The Lord God will help me; who is he that shall condemn me?