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

**JOHN-006**. **THE WORLD'S SIN-BEARER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."*

*John 1:29*

Our Lord, on returning from His temptation in the wilderness, came straight to John the Baptist. He was welcomed with these wonderful and rapturous words, familiarity with which has deadened our sense of their greatness. How audacious they would sound to some of their first hearers! Think of these two, one of them a young Galilean carpenter, to whom His companion witnesses and declares that He is of worldwide and infinite significance. It was the first public designation of Jesus Christ, and it throws into exclusive prominence one aspect of His work.

John the Baptist summing up the whole of former revelation which concentrated in Him, pointed a designating finger to Jesus and said, That is He!My text is the sum of all Christian teaching ever since. My task, and that of all preachers, if we understand it aright, is but to repeat the same message, and to concentrate attention on the same fact--The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. It is the one thing needful for you, dear friend, to believe. It is the truth that we all need most of all. There is no reason for our being gathered together now, except that I may beseech you to behold for yourselves the Lamb of God which takes away the world's sin.

**I. Now let me ask you to note, first, that Jesus Christ is the world's sin-bearer.**

The significance of the first clause of my text, the Lamb of God, is deplorably weakened if it is taken to mean only, or mainly, that Jesus Christ, in the sweetness of His human nature, is gentle and meek and patient and innocent and pure. It does mean all that, thank God! But it was no mere description of Christ's disposition which John the Baptist conceived himself to be uttering, as is clear by the words that follow in the next clause. His reason for selecting (under divine guidance, as I believe) that image of the Lamb of God, went a great deal deeper than anything in the temper of the Person of whom he was speaking. Many streams of ancient prophecy and ritual converge upon this emblem, and if we want to understand what is meant by the designation the Lamb of God, we must not content ourselves with the sentimentalisms which some superficial teachers have supposed to exhaust the significance of the expression; but we must submit to be led back by John, who was the summing up of all the ancient Revelation, to the sources in that Revelation from which he drew this metaphor.

First and chiefest of these, as I take it, are the words which no Jew ever doubted referred to the Messiah, until after He had come, and the Rabbis would not believe in Him, and so were bound to hunt up another interpretation--I mean the great words in the prophecy which, I suppose, is familiar to most of us, where there are found two representations, one, He was led as a Lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth; and the other, still more germane to the purpose of my text, the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all... . By His knowledge shall He justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities. John the Baptist, looking back through the ages to that ancient prophetic utterance, points to the young Man standing by his side, and says, There it is fulfilled.

But the prophetic symbol of the Lamb, and the thought that He bore the iniquity of the many, had their roots in the past, and pointed back to the sacrificial lamb, the lamb of the daily sacrifice, and especially to the lamb slain at the Passover, which was an emblem and sacrament of deliverance from bondage. Thus the conceptions of vicarious suffering, and of a death which is a deliverance, and of blood which, sprinkled on the doorposts, guards the house from the destroying angel, are all gathered into these words.

Nor do these exhaust the sources of this figure, as it comes from the venerable and sacred past. For when we read the Lamb of God, who is there that does not recognise, unless his eyes are blinded by obstinate prejudice, a glance backward to that sweet and pathetic story when the father went up with his son to the top of Mount Moriah, and to the boy's question, Where is the lamb?answered, My son, God Himself will provide the lamb!John says, Behold the Lamb that God has provided, the Sacrifice, on whom is laid a world's sins, and who bears them away.

Note, too, the universality of the power of Christ's sacrificial work. John does not say the sins, as the Litany, following an imperfect translation, makes him say. But he says, the sin of the world, as if the whole mass of human transgression was bound together, in one black and awful bundle, and laid upon the unshrinking shoulders of this better Atlas who can bear it all, and bear it all away. Your sin, and mine, and every man's, they were all laid upon Jesus Christ.

Now remember, dear brethren, that in this wondrous representation there lie, plain and distinct, two things which to me, and I pray they may be to you, are the very foundation of the Gospel to which we have to trust. One is that on Christ Jesus, in His life and in His death, were laid the guilt and the consequences of a world's sin. I do not profess to be ready with an explanation of how that is possible. That it is a fact I believe, on the authority of Christ Himself and of Scripture; that it is inconsistent with the laws of human nature may be asserted, but never can be proved. Theories manifold have been invented in order to make it plain. I do not know that any of them have gone to the bottom of the bottomless. But Christ in His perfect manhood, wedded, as I believe it is, to true divinity, is capable of entering into--not merely by sympathy, though that has much to do with it--such closeness of relation with human kind, and with every man, as that on Him can be laid the iniquity of us all.

Oh, brethren! what was the meaning of I have a baptism to be baptized with, unless the cold waters of the flood into which He unshrinkingly stepped, and allowed to flow over Him, were made by the gathered accumulation of the sins of the whole world? What was the meaning of the agony in Gethsemane? What was the meaning of that most awful word ever spoken by human lips, in which the consciousness of union with, and of separation from, God, were so marvellously blended, My God! my God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?unless the Guiltless was then loaded with the sins of the world, which rose between Him and God?

Dear friends, it seems to me that unless this transcendent element be fairly recognised as existing in the passion and death of Jesus Christ, His demeanour when He came to die was far less heroic and noble and worthy of imitation than have been the deaths of hundreds of people who drew all their strength to die from Him. I do not venture to bring a theory, but I press upon you the fact, He bears the sins of the world, and in that awful load are yours and mine.

There is the other truth here, as clearly, and perhaps more directly, meant by the selection of the expression in my text, that the Sin-bearer not only carries, but carries away, the burden that is laid upon Him. Perhaps there may be a reference--in addition to the other sources of the figure which I have indicated as existing in ritual, and prophecy, and history--there may be a reference in the words to yet another of the eloquent symbols of that ancient system which enshrined truths that were not peculiar to any people, but were the property of humanity. You remember, no doubt, the singular ceremonial connected with the scapegoat, and many of you will recall the wonderful embodiment of it given by the Christian genius of a modern painter. The sins of the nation were symbolically laid upon its head, and it was carried out to the edge of the wilderness and driven forth to wander alone, bearing away upon itself into the darkness and solitude--far from man and far from God--the whole burden of the nation's sins. Jesus Christ takes away the sin which He bears, and there is, as I believe, only one way by which individuals, or society, or the world at large, can thoroughly get rid of the guilt and penal consequences and of the dominion of sin, and that is, by beholding the Lamb of God that takes upon Himself, that He may carry away out of sight, the sin of the world. So much, then, for the first thought that I wish to suggest to you.

**II. Now let me ask you to look with me at a second thought, that such a world's Sin-bearer is the world's deepest need.**

The sacrifices of every land witness to the fact that humanity all over the world, and through all the ages, and under all varieties of culture, has been dimly conscious that its deepest need was that the fact of sin should be dealt with. I know that there are plenty of modern ingenious ways of explaining the universal prevalence of an altar and a sacrifice, and the slaying of innocent creatures, on other grounds, some of which I think it is not uncharitable to suppose are in favour mainly because they weaken this branch of the evidence for the conformity of Christian truth with human necessities. But notwithstanding these, I venture to affirm, with all proper submission to wiser men, that you cannot legitimately explain the universal prevalence of sacrifice, unless you take into account as one--I should say the main--element in it, this universally diffused sense that things are wrong between man and the higher Power, and need to be set right even by such a method.

But I do not need to appeal only to this world-wide fact as being a declaration of what man's deepest need is. I would appeal to every man's own consciousness--hard though it be to get at it; buried as it is, with some of us, under mountains of indifference and neglect; and callous as it is with many of us by reason of indulgence in habits of evil. I believe that in every one of us, if we will be honest, and give heed to the inward voice, there does echo a response and an amen to the Scripture declaration, God hath shut up all under sin. I ask you about yourselves, is it not so? Do you not know that, however you may gloss over the thing, or forget it amidst a whirl of engagements and occupations, or try to divert your thoughts into more or less noble or ignoble channels of pleasures and pursuits, there does lie, in each of our hearts, the sense, dormant often, but sometimes like a snake in its hybernation, waking up enough to move, and sometimes enough to sting--there does lie, in each of us, the consciousness that we are wrong with God, and need something to put us right?

And, brethren, let modern philanthropists of all sorts take this lesson: The thing that the world wants is to have sin dealt with--dealt with in the way of conscious forgiveness; dealt with in the way of drying up its source, and delivering men from the power of it. Unless you do that, I do not say you do nothing, but you pour a bottle full of cold water into Vesuvius, and try to put the fire out with that. You may educate, you may cultivate, you may refine; you may set political and economical arrangements right in accordance with the newest notions of the century, and what then? Why! the old thing will just begin over again, and the old miseries will appear again, because the old grandmother of them all is there, the sin that has led to them.

Now do not misunderstand me, as if I were warring against good and noble men who are trying to remedy the world's evils by less thorough methods than Christ's Gospel. They will do a great deal. But you may have high education, beautiful refinement of culture and manners; you may divide out political power in accordance with the most democratic notions; you may give everybody a living wage, however extravagant his notions of a living wage may be. You may carry out all these panaceas and the world will groan still, because you have not dealt with the tap-root of all the mischief. You cannot cure an internal cancer with a plaster upon the little finger, and you will never stanch the world's wounds until you go to the Physician that has balm and bandage, even Jesus Christ, that takes away the sins of the world. I profoundly distrust all these remedies for the world's misery as in themselves inadequate, even whilst I would help them all, and regard them all as then blessed and powerful, when they are consequences and secondary results of the Gospel, the first task of which is to deal by forgiveness and by cleansing with individual transgression.

And if I might venture to go a step further, I would like to say that this aspect of our Lord's work on which John the Baptist concentrated all our attention is the only one which gives Him power to sway men, and which makes the Gospel--the record of His work--the kingly power in the world that it is meant to be. Depend upon it, that in the measure in which Christian teachers fail to give supreme importance to that aspect of Christ's work they fail altogether. There are many other aspects which, as I have just said, follow in my conception from this first one; but if, as is obviously the tendency in many quarters to-day, Christianity be thought of as being mainly a means of social improvement, or if its principles of action be applied to life without that basis of them all, in the Cross which takes away the world's iniquity, then it needs no prophet to foretell that such a Christianity will only have superficial effects, and that, in losing sight of this central thought, it will have cast away all its power.

I beseech you, dear brethren, remember that Jesus Christ is something more than a social reformer, though He is the first of them, and the only one whose work will last. Jesus Christ is something more than a lovely pattern of human conduct, though He is that. Jesus Christ is something more than a great religious genius who set forth the Fatherhood of God as it had never been set forth before. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the record not only of what He said but of what He did, not only that He lived but that He died; and all His other powers, and all His other benefits and blessings to society, come as results of His dealing with the individual soul when He takes away its guilt and reconciles it to God.

**III. And so, lastly, let me ask you to notice that this Sin-bearer of the world is our Sin-bearer if we behold Him.**

John was simply summoning ignorant eyes to look, and telling of what they would see. But his call is susceptible, without violence, of a far deeper meaning. This is really the one truth that I want to press upon you, dear friends--Behold the Lamb of God!

What is that beholding? Surely it is nothing else than our recognising in Him the great and blessed work which I have been trying to describe, and then resting ourselves upon that great Lord and sufficient Sacrifice. And such an exercise of simple trust is well named beholding, because they who believe do see, with a deeper and a truer vision than sense can give. You and I can see Christ more really than these men who stood round Him, and to whom His flesh was a veil--as the Epistle to the Hebrews calls it--hiding His true divinity and work. They who thus behold by faith lack nothing either of the directness or of the certitude that belong to vision. Seeing is believing, says the cynical proverb. The Christian version inverts its terms, Believing is seeing. Whom having not seen ye love, in whom though now ye see Him not, yet believing ye rejoice.

And your simple act of beholding, by the recognition of His work and the resting of yourself upon it, makes the world's Sin-bearer your Sin-bearer. You appropriate the general blessing, like a man taking in a little piece of a boundless prairie for his very own. Your possession does not make my possession of Him less, for every eye gets its own beam, and however many eyes wait upon Him, they all receive the light on to their happy eyeballs. You can make Christ your own, and have all that He has done for the world as your possession, and can experience in your own hearts the sense of your own forgiveness and deliverance from the power and guilt of your own sin, on the simple condition of looking unto Jesus. The serpent is lifted on the pole, the dying camp cannot go to it, but the filming eyes of the man in his last gasp may turn to the gleaming image hanging on high; and as he looks the health begins to tingle back into his veins, and he is healed.

And so, dear brethren, behold Him; for unless you do, though He has borne the world's sin, your sin will not be there, but will remain on your back to crush you down. O Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon me!