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

**JOHN-010**. **THE FIRST DISCIPLES - PART 4: NATHANAEL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"45. Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found Him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. 46. And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. 47. Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! 48. Nathanael saith unto Him, Whence knowest Thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. 49. Nathanael answered and saith unto Him, Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel."*

*John 1:45-49*

The words are often the least part of a conversation. The Evangelist can tell us what Nathanael said to Jesus, and what Jesus said to Nathanael, but no Evangelist can reproduce the look, the tone, the magnetic influence which streamed out from Christ, and, we may believe, more than anything He said, riveted these men to Him.

It looks as if Nathanael and his companions were very easily convinced, as if their adhesion to such tremendous claims as those of Jesus Christ was much too facile a thing to be a very deep one. But what can be put down in black and white goes a very short way to solve the secret of the power which drew them to Himself.

The incident which is before us now runs substantially on the same lines as the previous bringing of Peter to Jesus Christ. In both cases the man is brought by a friend, in both cases the friend's weapon is simply the expression of his own personal experience, We have found the Messias, although Philip has a little more to say about Christ's correspondence with the prophetic word. In both cases the work is finished by our Lord Himself manifesting His own supernatural knowledge to the inquiring spirit, though in the case of Nathanael that process is a little more lengthened out than in the case of Peter, because there was a little ice of hesitation and of doubt to be melted away. And Nathanael, starting from a lower point than Peter, having questions and hesitations which the other had not, rises to a higher point of faith and certitude, and from his lips first of all comes the full articulate confession, beyond which the Apostles never went as long as our Lord was upon earth: Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel. So that both in regard to the revelation that is given of the character of our Lord, and in regard to the teaching that is given of the development and process of faith in a soul, this last narrative fitly crowns the whole series. In looking at it with you now, I think I shall best bring out its force by asking you to take it as falling into these three portions: first, the preparation--a soul brought to Christ by a brother; then the conversation--a soul fastened to Christ by Himself; and then the rapturous confession--Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.

**I. Look, then, first of all, at the preparation--a soul brought to Christ by a brother.**

Philip findeth Nathanael. Nathanael, in all probability, as commentators will tell you, is the Apostle Bartholomew; and in the catalogues of the Apostles in the Gospels, Philip and he are always associated together. So that the two men, friends before, had their friendship riveted and made more close by this sacredest of all bonds, that the one had been to the other the means of bringing him to Jesus Christ. There is nothing that ties men to each other like that. If you want to know the full sweetness of association with friends, and of human love, get some heart knit to yours by this sacred and eternal bond that it owes to you its first knowledge of the Saviour. So all human ties will be sweetened, ennobled, elevated, and made perpetual.

We have found Him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph. Philip knows nothing about Christ's supernatural birth, nor about its having been in Bethlehem; to him He is the son of a Nazarene peasant. But, notwithstanding that, He is the great, significant, mysterious Person for whom the whole sacred literature of Israel had been one long yearning for centuries; and he has come to believe that this Man standing beside him is the Person on whom all previous divine communications for a millennium past focussed and centred.

I need not dwell upon these words, because to do so would be to repeat substantially what I said in a former sermon on these first disciples, about the value of personal conviction as a means of producing conviction in the minds of others, and about the necessity and the possibility of all who have found Christ for themselves saying so to others, and thereby becoming His missionaries and evangelists.

I do not need to repeat what I said on that occasion; therefore I pass on to the very natural hesitation and question of Nathanael: Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?A prejudice, no doubt, but a very harmless one; a very thin ice which melted as soon as Christ's smile beamed upon him. And a most natural prejudice. Nathanael came from Cana of Galilee, a little hill village, three or four miles from Nazareth. We all know the bitter feuds and jealousies of neighbouring villages, and how nothing is so pleasant to the inhabitants of one as a gibe about the inhabitants of another. And in Nathanael's words there simply speaks the rustic jealousy of Cana against Nazareth.

It is easy to blame him, but do you think that you or I, if we had been in his place, would have been likely to have said anything very different? Suppose you were told that a peasant out of Ross-shire was a man on whom the whole history of this nation hung. Do you think you would be likely to believe it without first saying, That is a strange place for such a person to be born in? Galilee was the despised part of Palestine, and Nazareth obviously was a proverbially despised village of Galilee; and this Jesus was a carpenter's son that nobody had ever heard of. It seemed to be a strange head on which the divine dove should flutter down, passing by all the Pharisees and the Scribes, all the great people and wise people. Nathanael's prejudice was but the giving voice to a fault that is as wide as humanity, and which we have every day of our lives to fight with; not only in regard to religious matters but in regard to all others--namely, the habit of estimating people, and their work, and their wisdom, and their power to teach us, by the class to which they are supposed to belong, or even by the place from which they come.

Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?Can a German teach an Englishman anything that he does not know?Is a Protestant to owe anything of spiritual illumination to a Roman Catholic?Are we Dissenters to receive any wisdom or example from Churchmen?Will a Conservative be able to give any lessons in politics to a Liberal?Is there any other bit of England that can teach Lancashire?Take care that whilst you are holding up your hands in horror against the prejudices of our Lord's contemporaries, who stumbled at His origin, you are not doing the same thing in regard to all manner of subjects twenty times a day.

That is one very plain lesson, and not at all too secular for a sermon. Take another. This three-parts innocent prejudice of Nathanael brings into clear relief for us what a very real obstacle to the recognition of our Lord's Messianic authority His apparent lowly origin was. We have got over it, and it is no difficulty to us; but it was so then. When Jesus Christ came into this world Judaea was ruled by the most heartless of aristocracies, an aristocracy of cultured pedants. Wherever you get such a class you get people who think that there can be nobody worth looking at, or worth attending to, outside the little limits of their own supercilious superiority. Why did Jesus Christ come from the men of the earth, as the Rabbis called all who had not learned to cover every plain precept with spiderswebs of casuistry? Why, for one thing, in accordance with the general law that the great reformers and innovators always come from outside these classes, that the Spirit of the Lord shall come on a herdsman like Amos, and fishermen and peasants spread the Gospel through the world; and that in politics, in literature, in science, as well as in religion, it is always true that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called. To the cultivated classes you have to look for a great deal that is precious and good, but for fresh impulse, in unbroken fields, you have to look outside them. And so the highest of all lives is conformed to the general law.

More than that, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph, came thus because He was the poor man's Christ, because He was the ignorant man's Christ, because His word was not for any class, but as broad as the world. He came poor, obscure, unlettered, that all who, like Him, were poor and untouched by the finger of earthly culture, might in Him find their Brother, their Helper, and their Friend.

Philip saith unto him, Come and see. He is not going to argue the question. He gives the only possible answer to it--You ask Me, can any good thing come out of Nazareth?Come and see whether it is a good thing or no; and if it is, and if it came out of Nazareth, well then, the question has answered itself. The quality of a thing cannot be settled by the origin of the thing.

As it so happened, this Man did not come out of Nazareth at all, though neither Philip nor Nathanael knew it; but if He had, it would have been all the same. The right answer was Come and see.

Now although, of course, there is no kind of correspondence between the mere prejudice of this man Nathanael and the rooted intellectual doubts of other generations, yet Come and seecarries in it the essence of all Christian apologetics. By far the wisest thing that any man who has to plead the cause of Christianity can do is to put Christ well forward, and let people look at Him, and trust Him to produce His own impression. We may argue round, and round, and round about Him for evermore, and we shall never convince as surely as by simply holding Him forth. I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me. Yet we are so busy proving Christianity that we sometimes have no time to preach it; so busy demonstrating that Jesus Christ is this, that, and the other thing, or contradicting the notion that He is not this, that, and the other thing, that we forget simply to present Him for men to look at. Depend upon it, whilst argument has its function, and there are men that must be approached thereby; on the whole, and for the general, the best way of propagating Christianity is to proclaim it, and the second best way is to prove it. Our arguments do fare very often very much as did that elaborate discourse that a bishop once preached to prove the existence of a God, at the end of which a simple old woman who had not followed his reasoning very intelligently, exclaimed, Well, for all he says, I can't help thinking there is a God after all. The errors that are quoted to be confuted often remain more clear in the hearersminds than the attempted confutations. Hold forth Christ--cry aloud to men, Come and see!and some eyes will turn and some hearts cleave to Him.

And on the other side, dear brethren, you have not done fairly by Christianity until you have complied with this invitation, and submitted your mind and heart honestly to the influence and the impression that Christ Himself would make upon it.

**II. We come now to the second stage--the conversation between Christ and Nathanael, where we see a soul fastened to Christ by Himself.**

In general terms, as I remarked, the method by which our Lord manifests His Messiahship to this single soul is a revelation of His supernatural knowledge of him. But a word or two may be said about the details. Mark the emphasis with which the Evangelist shows us that our Lord speaks this discriminating characterisation of Nathanael before Nathanael had come to Him: He saw him coming. So it was not with a swift, penetrating glance of intuition that He read his character in his face. It was not that He generalised rapidly from one action which He had seen him do. It was not from any previous personal knowledge of him, for, obviously, from the words of Philip to Nathanael, the latter had never seen Jesus Christ. As Nathanael was drawing near Him, before he had done anything to show himself, our Lord speaks the words which show that He had read his very heart: Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.

That is to say, here is a man who truly represents that which was the ideal of the whole nation. The reference is, no doubt, to the old story of the occasion on which Jacob's name was changed to Israel. And we shall see a further reference to the same story in the subsequent verses. Jacob had wrestled with God in that mysterious scene by the brook Jabbok, and had overcome, and had received instead of the name Jacob, a supplanter, the name of Israel, for as a Prince hast thou power with God and hast prevailed. And, says Christ: This man also is a son of Israel, one of God's warriors, who has prevailed with Him by prayer. In whom is no guile--Jacob in his early life had been marked and marred by selfish craft. Subtlety and guile had been the very keynote of his character. To drive that out of him, years of discipline and pain and sorrow had been needed. And not until it had been driven out of him could his name be altered, and he become Israel. This man has had the guile driven out of him. By what process? The words are a verbal quotation from Psalm xxxii.: Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile. Clear, candid openness of spirit, and the freedom of soul from all that corruption which the Psalmist calls guile, is the property of him only who has received it, by confession, by pardon, and by cleansing, from God. Thus Nathanael, in his wrestling, had won the great gift. His transgression had been forgiven; his iniquity had been covered; to him God had not imputed his sin; and in his spirit, therefore, there was no guile. Ah, brother! if that black drop is to be cleansed out of your heart, it must be by the same means--confession to God and pardon from God. And then you too will be a prince with Him. and your spirit will be frank and free, and open and candid.

Nathanael, with astonishment, says, Lord, whence knowest Thou me?Not that he appropriates the description to himself, or recognises the truthfulness of it, but he is surprised that Christ should have means of forming any judgment with reference to him, and so he asks Him, half expecting an answer which will show the natural origin of our Lord's knowledge: Whence knowest Thou me?Then comes the answer, which, to supernatural insight into Nathanael's character, adds supernatural knowledge of Nathanael's secret actions: Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. And it is because I saw thee under the fig-tree that I knew thee to be "an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile."So then, under the fig-tree, Nathanael must have been wrestling in prayer; under the fig-tree must have been confessing his sins; under the fig-tree must have been longing and looking for the Deliverer who was to turn away ungodliness from Jacob. So solitary had been that vigil, and so little would any human eye that had looked upon it have known what had been passing in his mind, that Christ's knowledge of it and of its significance at once lights up in Nathanael's heart the fire of the glad conviction, Thou art the Son of God. If we had seen Nathanael, we should only have seen a man sitting, sunk in thought, under a fig-tree; but Jesus had seen the spiritual struggle which had no outward marks, and to have known which He must have exercised the divine prerogative of reading the heart.

I ask you to consider whether Nathanael's conclusion was not right, and whether that woman of Samaria was not right when she hurried back to the city, leaving her water-pot, and said, Come and see a man that told me all that ever I did. That allwas a little stretch of facts, but still it was true in spirit. And her inference was absolutely true: Is not this the Christ, the Son of God?This is the first miracle that Jesus Christ wrought. His supernatural knowledge, which cannot be struck out from the New Testament representations of His character, is as much a mark of divinity as any of the other of His earthly manifestations. It is not the highest; it does not appeal to our sympathies as some of the others do, but it is irrefragable. Here is a man to whom all men with whom He came in contact were like those clocks with a crystal face which shows us all the works. How does He come to have this perfect and absolute knowledge?

That omniscience, as manifested here, shows us how glad Christ is when He sees anything good, anything that He can praise in any of us. Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile. Not a word about Nathanael's prejudice, not a word about any of his faults (though no doubt he had plenty of them), but the cordial praise that he was an honest, a sincere man, following after God and after truth. There is nothing which so gladdens Christ as to see in us any faint traces of longing for, and love towards, and likeness to, His own self. His omniscience is never so pleased as when beneath heaps and mountains of vanity and sin it discerns in a man's heart some poor germ of goodness and longing for His grace.

And then again, notice how we have here our Lord's omniscience set forth as cognisant of all our inward crises and struggles, When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. I suppose all of us could look back to some place or other, under some hawthorn hedge, or some boulder by the seashore, or some mountain-top, or perhaps in some back-parlour, or in some crowded street, where some never-to-be-forgotten epoch in our soul's history passed, unseen by all eyes, and which would have shown no trace to any onlooker, except perhaps a tightly compressed lip. Let us rejoice to feel that Christ sees all these moments which no other eye can see. In our hours of crisis, and in our monotonous, uneventful moments, in the rush of the furious waters, when the stream of our lives is caught among rocks, and in the long, languid reaches of its smoothest flow, when we are fighting with our fears or yearning for His light, or even when sitting dumb and stolid, like snow men, apathetic and frozen in our indifference, He sees us, and pities, and will help the need which He beholds.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,

And thy Saviour is not by;

Think not thou canst weep a tear,

And thy Saviour is not near.

When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.

**III. One word more about this rapturous confession, which crowns the whole: Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.**

Where had Nathanael learned these great names? He was a disciple of John the Baptist, and he had no doubt heard John's testimony as recorded in this same chapter, when he told us how the voice from Heaven had bid him recognise the Messiah by the token of the descending Dove, and how he saw and bare record that this is the Son of God. John's testimony was echoed in Nathanael's confession. Undoubtedly he attached but vague ideas to the name, far less articulate and doctrinal than we have the privilege of doing. To him Son of Godcould not have meant all that it ought to mean to us, but it meant something that he saw clearly, and a great deal beyond that he saw but dimly. It meant that God had sent, and was in some special sense the Father of, this Jesus of Nazareth.

Thou art the King of Israel, John had been preaching, The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The Messiah was to be the theocratic King, the King, not of Judahnor of the Jews, but of Israel, the nation that had entered into covenant with God. So the substance of the confession was the Messiahship of Jesus, as resting upon His special divine relationship and leading to His Kingly sway.

Notice also the enthusiasm of the confession; one's ear hears clearly a tone of rapture in it. The joy-bells of the man's heart are all a-ringing. It is no mere intellectual acknowledgment of Christ as Messiah. The difference between mere head-belief and heart-faith lies precisely in the presence of these elements of confidence, of enthusiastic loyalty, and absolute submission.

So the great question for each of us is, not, Do I believe as a piece of my intellectual creed that Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel? I suppose almost all my hearers here now do that. That will not make you a Christian, my friend. That will neither save your soul nor quiet your heart, nor bring you peace and strength in life, nor open the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven to you. A man may be miserable, wholly sunk in all manner of wickedness and evil, die the death of a dog, and go to punishment hereafter, though he believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the King of Israel. You want something more than that. You want just this element of rapturous acknowledgment, of loyal submission, absolute obedience, of unfaltering trust.

Look at these first disciples, six brave men that had all that loyalty and love to Him; though there was not a soul in the world but themselves to share their convictions. Do they not shame you? When He comes to you, as He does come, with this question, Whom do ye say that I am?may God give you grace to answer, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God, and not only to answer it with your lips, but to trust Him wholly with your hearts, and with enthusiastic devotion to bow your whole being in adoring wonder and glad submission at His feet. If we are Israelites indeed, our hearts will crown Him as the King of Israel.