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

**JOHN-011**. **THE FIRST DISCIPLES - PART 5: BELIEVING AND SEEING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"50. Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. 51. And He saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."*

*John 1:50-51*

Here we have the end of the narrative of the gathering together of the first disciples, which has occupied several sermons. We have had occasion to point out how each incident in the series has thrown some fresh light upon two main subjects, namely, upon some phase or other of the character and work of Jesus Christ, or upon the various ways by which faith, which is the condition of discipleship, is kindled in men's souls. These closing words may be taken as the crowning thoughts on both these matters.

Our Lord recognises and accepts the faith of Nathanael and his fellows, but, like a wise Teacher, lets His pupils at the very beginning get a glimpse of how much lies ahead for them to learn; and in the act of accepting the faith gives just one hint of the great tract of yet uncomprehended knowledge of Him which lies before them; Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. He accepts Nathanael's confession and the confession of his fellows. Human lips have given Him many great and wonderful titles in this chapter. John called Him the Lamb of God; the first disciples hailed Him as the Messias, which is the Christ; Nathanael fell before Him with the rapturous exclamation, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel!All these crowns had been put on His head by human hands, but here He crowns Himself. He makes a mightier claim than any that they had dreamed of, and proclaims Himself to be the medium of all communication and intercourse between heaven and earth: Hereafter ye shall see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

So, then, there are two great principles that lie in these verses, and are contained in, first, our Lord's mighty promise to His new disciples, and second, in our Lord's witness to Himself. Let me say a word or two about each of these.

**I. Our Lord's promise to His new disciples.**

Christ's words here may be translated either as a question or as an affirmation. It makes comparatively little difference to the substantial meaning whether we read believest thou?or thou believest. In the former case there will be a little more vivid expression of surprise and admiration at the swiftness of Nathanael's faith, but in neither case are we to find anything of the nature of blame or of doubt as to the reality of his belief. The question, if it be a question, is no question as to whether Nathanael's faith was a genuine thing or not. There is no hint that he has been too quick with his confession, and has climbed too rapidly to the point that he has attained. But in either case, whether the word be a question or an affirmation, we are to see in it the solemn and glad recognition of the reality of Nathanael's confession and belief.

Here is the first time that that word beliefcame from Christ's lips; and when we remember all the importance that has been attached to it in the subsequent history of the Church, and the revolution in human thought which followed upon our Lord's demand of our faith, there is an interest in noticing the first appearance of the word. It was an epoch in the history of the world when Christ first claimed and accepted a man's faith.

Of course the second part of this verse, Thou shalt see greater things than these, has its proper fulfilment in the gradual manifestation of His person and character, which followed through the events recorded in the Gospels. His life of service, His words of wisdom, His deeds of power and of pity, His death of shame and of glory, His Resurrection and His Ascension, these are the greater thingswhich Nathanael is promised. They all lay unrevealed yet, and what our Lord means is simply this: If you will continue to trust in Me, as you have trusted Me, and stand beside Me, you will see unrolled before your eyes and comprehended by your faith the great facts which will make the manifestation of God to the world. But though that be the original application of the words, yet I think we may fairly draw from them some lessons that are of importance to ourselves; and I ask you to look at the hint that they give us about three things,--faith and discipleship, faith and sight, faith and progress. Believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.

First, here is light thrown upon the relation between faith and discipleship. It is clear that our Lord here uses the word for the first time in the full Christian sense, that He regards the exercise of faith as being practically synonymous with being a disciple, that from the very first, believers were disciples, and disciples were believers.

Then, notice still further that our Lord here employs the word beliefwithout any definition of what or whom it is that they were to believe. He Himself, and not certain thoughts about Him, is the true object of a man's faith. We may believe a proposition, but faith must grasp a person. Even when the person is made known to us by a proposition which we have to believe before we can trust the person, still the essence of faith is not the intellectual process of laying hold upon a certain thought, and acquiescing in it, but the moral process of casting myself in full confidence upon the Being that is revealed to me by the thought,--of laying my hand, and leaning my weight, on the Man about whom it tells me. And so faith, which is discipleship, has in it for its very essence the personal element of trust in Jesus Christ.

Then, further, notice how widely different from our creed was Nathanael's creed, and yet how identical with our faith, if we are Christians, was Nathanael's faith. He knew nothing about the very heart of Christ's work, His atoning death. He knew nothing about the highest glory of Christ's person, His divine Sonship, in its unique and lofty sense. These lay unrevealed, and were amongst the greater things which he was yet to see; but though thus his knowledge was imperfect, and his creed incomplete as compared with ours, his faith was the very same. He laid hold upon Christ, he clave to Him with all his heart, he was ready to accept His teaching, he was willing to do His will, and as for the rest--Thou shalt see greater things than these. So, dear brethren, from these words of my text here, from the unhesitating attribution of the lofty notion of faith to this man, from the way in which our Lord uses the word, are gathered these three points that I beseech you to ponder: there is no discipleship without faith; faith is the personal grasp of Christ Himself; the contents of creeds may differ whilst the element of faith remains the same. I beseech you let Christ come to you with the question of my text, and as He looks you in the eyes, hear Him say to you, Believest thou?

Secondly, notice how in this great promise to the new disciples there is light thrown upon another subject, viz. the connection between faith and sight. There is a great deal about seeing in this context. Christ said to the first two that followed Him, Come and see. Philip met Nathanael's thin film of prejudice with the same words, Come and see. Christ greeted the approaching Nathanael with When thou wast under the fig tree I saw thee. And now His promise is cast into the same metaphor: Thou shalt see greater things than these.

There is a double antithesis here. I saw thee, Thou shalt see Me. Thou wast convinced because thou didst feel that thou wert the passive object of My vision. Thou shalt be still more convinced when illuminated by Me. Thou shalt see even as thou art seen. I saw thee, and that bound thee to Me; thou shalt see Me, and that will confirm the bond.

There is another antithesis, namely--between believing and seeing. Thou believest--that is thy present; thou shalt see, that is thy hope for the future. Now I have already explained that, in the proper primary meaning and application of the words, the sight which is here promised is simply the observance with the outward eye of the historical facts of our Lord's life which were yet to be learned. But still we may gather a truth from this antithesis which will be of use to us. Thou believest--thou shalt see; that is to say, in the loftiest region of spiritual experience you must believe first, in order that you may see.

I do not mean, as is sometimes meant, by that statement that a man has to try to force his understanding into the attitude of accepting religious truth, in order that he may have an experience which will convince him that it is true. I mean a very much simpler thing than that, and a very much truer one, viz. this, that unless we trust to Christ and take our illumination from Him, we shall never behold a whole set of truths which, when once we trust Him, are all plain and clear to us. It is no mysticism to say that. What do you know about God?--I put emphasis upon the word know--What do you know about Him, however much you may argue and speculate and think probable, and fear, and hope, and question, about Him? What do you know about Him apart from Jesus Christ? What do you know about human duty, apart from Him? What do you know of all that dim region that lies beyond the grave, apart from Him? If you trust Him, if you fall at His feet and say Rabbi! Thou art my Teacher and mine illumination, then you will see. You will see God, man, yourselves, duty; you will see light upon a thousand complications and perplexities; and you will have a brightness above that of the noonday sun, streaming into the thickest darkness of death and the grave and the awful hereafter. Christ is the Light. In that Light shall we see light. And just as it needs the sun to rise in order that my eye may behold the outer world, so it needs that I shall have Christ shining in my heaven to illuminate the whole universe, in order that I may see clearly. Believe and thou shalt see. For only when we trust Him do the mightiest truths that affect humanity stand plain and clear before us.

And besides that, if we trust Christ, we get a living experience of a multitude of facts and principles which are all mist and darkness to men except through their faith; an experience which is so vivid and brings such certitude as that it may well be called vision. The world says, Seeing is believing. So it is about the coarse things that you can handle, but about everything that is higher than these invert the proverb, and you get the truth. Seeing is believing. Yes, in regard to outward things. Believing is seeing in regard to God and spiritual truth. Believest thou? thou shalt see.

Then, thirdly, there is light here about another matter, the connection between faith and progress. Thou shalt see greater things than these. A wise teacher stimulates his scholars from the beginning, by giving them glimpses of how much there is ahead to be learnt. That does not drive them to despair; it braces all their powers. And so Christ, as His first lesson to these men, substantially says, You have learnt nothing yet, you are only beginning. That is true about us all. Faith at first, both in regard to its contents and its quality, is very rudimentary and infantile. A man when he is first converted--perhaps suddenly--knows after a fashion that he himself is a very sinful, wretched, poor creature, and he knows that Jesus Christ has died for him, and is his Saviour, and his heart goes out to Him, in confidence and love and obedience. But he is only standing at the door and peeping in as yet. He has only mastered the alphabet. He is but on the frontier of the promised land. His faith has brought him into contact with infinite power, and what will be the end of that? He will indefinitely grow. His faith has started him on a course to which there is no natural end. As long as it keeps alive he will be growing and growing, and getting nearer and nearer to the great centre of all.

So here is a grand possibility opened out in these simple words, a possibility which alone meets what you need, and what you are craving for, whether you know it or not, namely, something that will give you ever new powers and acquirements; something which will ensure your closer and ever closer approach to an absolute object of joy and truth; something that will ensure you against stagnation and guarantee unceasing progress. Everything else gets worn out, sooner or later; if not in this world, then in another. There is one course on which a man can enter with the certainty that there is no end to it, that it will open out, and out, and out as he advances--with the certainty that, come life, come death, it is all the same.

When the plant grows too tall for the greenhouse they lift the roof, and it grows higher still. Whether you have your growth in this lower world, or whether you have your top up in the brightness and the blue of heaven, the growth is in one direction. There is a way that secures endless progress, and here lies the secret of it: Thou believest! thou shalt see greater things than these.

Now, brethren, that is a grand possibility, and it is a solemn lesson for some of you. You professing Christian people, are you any taller than you were when you were born? Have you grown at all? Are you growing now? Have you seen any further into the depths of Jesus Christ than you did on that first day when you fell at His feet and said, Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel? His promise to you then was, Thou believest, thou shalt see greater things. If you have not seen greater things it is because your faith has broken down, if it has not expired.

**II. Now let me turn to the second thought which lies in these great words.**

We have here, as I said, our Lord crowning Himself by His own witness to His own dignity. Hereafter ye shall see the heavens opened. Mark how, with superbly autocratic lips, He bases this great utterance upon nothing else but His own word. Prophets ever said, Thus saith the Lord. Christ ever said: Verily, verily, I say unto you. Because He could swear by no greater, He sware by Himself. He puts His own assurance instead of all argument and of all support to His words.

Hereafter. A word which is possibly not genuine, and is omitted, as you will observe, in the Revised Version. If it is to be retained it must be translated, not hereafter, as if it were pointing to some indefinite period in the future, but from henceforth, as if asserting that the opening heavens and the descending angels began to be manifested from that first hour of His official work. Ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending. That is an allusion from the story of Jacob at Bethel. We have found reference to Jacob's history already in the conversation with Nathanael, An Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile. And here is an unmistakable reference to that story, when the fugitive, with his head on the stony pillow, and the violet Syrian sky, with all its stars, rounding itself above him, beheld the ladder on which the angels of God ascended and descended. So, says Christ, you shall see, in no vision of the night, in no transitory appearance, but in a practical waking reality, that ladder come down again, and the angels of God moving upon it in their errands of mercy.

And who, or what, is this ladder? Christ. Do not read these words as meaning that the angels of God were to come down on Him to help, and to honour, and to succour Him as they did once or twice in His life, but as meaning that they are to ascend and descend by Him for the help and blessing of the whole world.

That is to say, to put it into plain words, Christ is the sole medium of communication between heaven and earth, the ladder with its foot upon the earth in His humanity, and its top in the heavens. No man hath ascended up into heaven save He which came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven.

My time will not allow me to expand these thoughts as I would have done; let me put them in the briefest outline. Christ is the medium of all communication between heaven and earth, inasmuch as He is the medium of all revelation. I have spoken incidentally about that in the former part of this sermon, so I do not dwell on it now. Christ is the ladder between heaven and earth, inasmuch as in Him the sense of separation, and the reality of separation, are swept away. Sin has shut heaven; there comes down from it many a blessing upon unthankful heads, but between it in its purity and the earth in its muddy foulness there is a great gulf fixed. It is not because God is great and I am small, or because He is Infinite and I am a mere pin-point as against a great continent, it is not because He lives for ever, and my life is but a hand-breadth, it is not because of the difference between His Omniscience and my ignorance, His strength and my weakness, that I am parted from Him. Your sins have separated between you and your God, and no man, build he Babels ever so high, can reach thither. There is one means by which the separation is at an end, and by which all objective hindrances to union, and all subjective hindrances, are alike swept away. Christ has come, and in Him the heavens have bended down to touch, and touching to bless, this low earth, and man and God are at one once more.

He is the ladder, or sole medium of communication, inasmuch as by Him all divine blessings, grace, helps, and favours, come down angel-like, into our weak and needy hearts. Every strength, every mercy, every spiritual power, consolation in every sorrow, fitness for duty, illumination in darkness, all gifts that any of us can need, come to us down on that one shining way, the mediation and the work of the Divine-Human Christ, the Lord.

He is the ladder, the sole medium of communication between heaven and earth, inasmuch as by Him my poor desires and prayers and intercessions, my wishes, my sighs, my confessions rise to God. No man cometh to the Father but by Me. He is the ladder, the means of all communication between heaven and earth, inasmuch as at the last, if ever we enter there at all, we shall enter through Him and through Him alone, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Ah, dear brethren! men are telling us now that there is no connection between earth and heaven except such as telescopes and spectroscopes can make out. We are told that there is no ladder, that there are no angels, that possibly there is no God, or if that there be, we have nothing to do with Him nor He with us; that our prayers cannot get to His ears, if He have ears, nor His hand be stretched out to help us, if He have a hand. I do not know how this cultivated generation is to he brought back again to faith in God and delivered from that ghastly doubt which empties heaven and saddens earth to its victims, but by giving heed to the word which Christ spoke to the whole race while He addressed Nathanael, Ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. If He be the Son of God, then all these heavenly messengers reach the earth by Him. If He be the Son of Man, then every man may share in the gifts which through Him are brought into the world, and His Manhood, which evermore dwelt in heaven, even while on earth, and was ever girt about by angel presences, is at once the measure of what each of us may become, and the power by which we may become it.

One thing is needful for this wonderful consummation, even our faith. And oh! how blessed it will be if in waste solitudes we can see the open heaven, and in the blackest night the blaze of the glory of a present Christ, and hear the soft rustle of angelswings filling the air, and find in every place a house of God and a gate of heaven, because He is there. All that may be yours on one condition: Believest thou? Thou shalt see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.