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

**JOHN-015**. **THE DESTROYERS AND THE RESTORER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up."*

*John 2:19*

This is our Lord's answer to the Jewish request for a sign which should warrant His action in cleansing the Temple. There are two such cleansings recorded in the Gospels; this one His first public act, and another, omitted by John, but recorded in the other Gospels, which was almost His last public act.

It has been suggested that these are but two versions of one incident; and although there is no objection in principle to admitting the possibility of that explanation, yet in fact it appears to me insufficient and unnecessary. For each event is appropriate in its own place. In each there is a distinct difference in tone. The incident recorded in the present chapter has our Lord's commentary, Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise; in that recorded in the Synoptic Gospels the profanation is declared as greater, and the rebuke is more severe. The house of merchandisehas become, by their refusal to render to Him what was His, a den of thieves. In the later incident there is a reference in our Lord's quotation from the Old Testament to the entrance of the Gentiles into the Kingdom. There is no such reference here. In the other Gospels there is no record of this question which the Jews asked, nor of our Lord's significant answer, whilst yet a caricatured and mistaken version of that answer was known to the other Evangelists, and is put by them into the mouths of the false witnesses at our Lord's trial. They thus attest the accuracy of our narrative even while they seem not to have known of the incident.

All these things being taken into account, I think that we have to do with a double, of which there are several instances in the Gospels, the same event recurring under somewhat varied circumstances, and reflecting varied aspects of truth. But it is to our Lord's words in vindication of His right to cleanse the Temple rather than to the incident on which they are based that I wish to turn your attention now: Destroy this Temple, said our Lord, as His sufficient and only answer to the demand for a sign, and in three days I will raise it up.

Now these words, enigmatical as they are, seem to me to be very profound and significant; and I wish, on this Easter Sunday, to look at them as throwing a light upon the gladness of this day. They suggest to me three things: I find in them, first, an enigmatical forecast of our Lord's own history; second, a prophetic warning of Israel's; and last, a symbolical foreshadowing of His world-wide work as the Restorer of man's destructions. Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

**I. First then, I think, we see here an enigmatical forecast of our Lord's own history.**

Notice, first, that marvellous and unique consciousness of our Lord's as to His own dignity and nature. He spake of the temple of His body. Think that here is a man, apparently one of ourselves, walking amongst us, living the common life of humanity, who declares that in Him, in an altogether solitary and peculiar fashion, there abides the fulness of Deity. Think that there has been a Man who said, In this place is One greater than the Temple. And people have believed Him, and do believe Him, and have found that the tremendous audacity of the words is simple verity, and that Christ is, in inmost reality, all which the Temple was but in the poorest symbol. In it there had dwelt, though there dwelt no longer at the time when He was speaking, a material and symbolical brightness, the expression of something which, for want of a better name, we call the presence of God. But what was that flashing fire between the cherubim that brooded over the Mercy-seat, with a light that was lambent and lustrous as the light of love and of life--what was that to the glory, moulded in meekness and garbed in gentleness, the glory that shone, merciful and hospitable and inviting--a tempered flame on which the poorest, diseased, blind eyes could look, and not wince--from the face and from the character of Jesus Christ the Lord? He is greater than the Temple, for in Him, in no symbol but in reality, abode and abides the fulness of that unnameable Being whom we name Father and God. And not only does the fulness abide, but in Him that awful Remoteness becomes for us a merciful Presence; the infinite abyss and closed sea of the divine nature hath an outlet, and becomes a river of water of life. And as the ancient name of that Temple was the Tent of Meeting, the place where Israel and God, in symbolical and ceremonial form, met together, so, in inmost reality in Christ's nature, Manhood and Divinity cohere and unite, and in Him all of us, the weak, the sinful, the alien, the rebellious, may meet our Father. He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. In this place is One greater than the Temple.

And so this Jewish Peasant, at the very beginning of His earthly career, stands up there, in the presence of the ancestral sanctities and immemorial ceremonials which had been consecrated by all these ages and commanded by God Himself, and with autocratic hand sweeps them all on one side, as one that should draw a curtain that the statue might be seen, and remains poised Himself in the vacant place, that all eyes may look upon Him, and on Him alone. Destroy this Temple ... . He spake of the temple of His body.

Still further, notice how here we have, at the very beginning of our Lord's career, His distinct prevision of how it was all going to end. People that are willing to honour Jesus Christ, and are not willing to recognise His death as the great purpose for which He came, tell us that, like as with other reformers and heroes and martyrs, His death was the result of the failure of His purpose. And some of them talk to us very glibly, in their so-called Lives of Jesus Christabout the alteration in Christ's plan which came when He saw that His message was not going to be received. I do not enter upon all the reasons why such a construction of Christ's work cannot hold water, but here is one--for any one who believes this story before us--that at the very beginning, before He had gone half a dozen steps in His public career, when the issues of the experiment, if it was a man that was making the experiment, were all untried; when, if it were merely a martyr-enthusiast that was beginning his struggle, some flickering light of hope that He would be received of His brethren must have shone, or He would never have ventured upon the path--that then, with no mistake, with no illusion, with no expectation of a welcome and a Hosanna, but with the clearest certitude of what lay before Him, our Lord beheld and accepted His Cross. Its shadow fell upon His path from the beginning, because the Cross was the purpose for which He came. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, said He--when the reality of it was almost within arm's length of Him--to bear witness to the Truth, and His bearing witness to the truth was perfected and accomplished on the Cross. Here, at the very commencement of His career, we have it distinctly set forth, the Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many.

And, brethren, that fact is important, not only because it helps us to understand that His death is the centre of His work, but also because it helps us to a loving and tender thought of Him, how all His life long, with that issue distinctly before Him, He journeyed towards it of His own loving will; how every step that He took on earth's flinty roads, taken with bleeding and pure feet, He took knowing whither He was going. This Isaac climbs the mountain to the place of sacrifice, with no illusions as to what He is going up the mountain for. He knows that He goes up to be the lamb of the offering, and knowing it, He goes. Therefore let us love Him with love as persistent as was His own, who discerning the end from the beginning, willed to be born and to live because He had resolved to die, for you and me and every man.

And then, further, we have here our Lord's claim to be Himself the Agent of His own resurrection. I will raise it up in three days. Of course, in Scripture, we more frequently find the Resurrection treated as being the result of the power of God the Father. We more ordinarily read that Christ was raised; but sometimes we read, as here, that Christ rises, and we have solemn words of His own, I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. Think of a man saying, I am going to bring My own body from the dust of death, and think of the man who said that doing it. If that is true, if this prediction was uttered, and being uttered was fulfilled--what then? I do not need to answer the question. My brother, this day declares that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Destroy this Temple--there is a challenge--and in three days I will raise it up; and He did it. And He is the Lord of the Temple as well as the Temple. Down on your knees before Him, with all your hearts and with all your confidence, and worship, and trust, and love for evermore the Second Man, who is the Lord from Heaven!

**II. Now let us turn to the other aspects of these words. I think we see here, in the next place, a prophetic warning of the history of the men to whom He was speaking.**

There must be a connection between the interpretation of the words which our Evangelist assures us is the correct one, and the interpretation which would naturally have occurred to a listener, that by this Templeour Lord really meant simply the literal building in which He spoke. There is such a connection, and though our Lord did not only mean the Temple, He did mean the Temple. To say so is not forcing double meanings in any fast and loose fashion upon Scripture, nor playing with ambiguities, nor indulging in any of the vices to which spiritualising interpretation of Scripture leads, but it is simply grasping the central idea of the words of my text. Rightly understood they lead us to this: The death of Christ was the destruction of the Jewish Temple and polity, and the raising again of Christ from the dead on the third day was the raising again of that destroyed Theocracy and Temple in a new and nobler fashion. Let us then look for a moment, and it shall only be for a moment, at these two thoughts.

If any one had said to any of that howling mob that stood round Christ at the judgment-seat of the High Priest, and fancied themselves condemning Him to death, because He had blasphemed the Temple: You, at this moment, are pulling down the holy and beautiful house in which your fathers praised; and what you are doing now is the destruction of your national worship and of yourselves, the words would have been received with incredulity; and yet they were simple truth. Christ's death destroyed that outward Temple. The veil was rent in twain from the top to the bottomat the moment He died; which was the declaration indeed that henceforward the Holiest of All was patent to the foot of every man, but was also the declaration that there was no more sanctity now within those courts, and that Temple, and priesthood, and sacrifice, and altar, and ceremonial and all, were antiquated. That which was perfect having come, Christ's death having realised all which Temple-worship symbolised, that which was the shadow was put away when the substance appeared.

And in another fashion, it is also true that the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, inflicted by Jewish hands, was the destruction of the Jewish worship, in the way of natural sequence and of divine chastisement. When the husbandmen rejected the Son who was sent last of all, there was nothing more for it but that they should be cast out of the vineyard, and the firebrand which the Roman soldier, forty years afterwards, tossed into the Holiest of All, and which burned the holy and beautiful house with fire, was lit on the day when Israel cried Crucify Him! Crucify Him!

Oh, brethren! What a lesson it is to us all of how blind even so-called religious zeal may be; how often it is true that men in their madness and their ignorance destroy the very institutions which they are trying to conserve! How it warns us to beware lest we, unknowing what we are about, and thinking that we are fighting for the honour of God, may really all the while be but serving ourselves and rejecting His message and His Messenger!

And then let me remind you that another thing is also true, that just as the Jewish rejection of Christ was their own rejection as the people of God, and their attempted destruction of Christ the destruction of the Jewish Temple, so the other side of the truth is also here, viz. that His rising again is the restoration of the destroyed Temple in nobler and fairer form. Of course the one real Temple is the body of Jesus Christ, as we have said, where sacrifice is offered, where God dwells, where men meet with God. But in a secondary and derivative sense, in the place of the Jewish Temple has come the Christian Church, which is, in a far deeper and more inward fashion, what that ancient system aspired to be.

Christ has builded up the Church on His Resurrection. On His Resurrection, I say, for there is nothing else on which it could rest. If men ask me what is the great evidence of Christ's Resurrection, my answer is--the existence in the world of a Church. Where did it come from? How is it possible to conceive that without the Resurrection of Jesus Christ such a structure as the Christian society should have been built upon a dead man's grave? It would have gone to pieces, as all similar associations would have gone. What had happened after that moment of depression which scattered them every man to his own, and led some of them to say, with pathetic use of the past tense to describe their vanished expectations, We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel? What was the force that instead of driving them asunder drew them together? What was the power that, instead of quenching their almost dead hopes, caused them to flame up with renewed vigour heaven-high? How came it that that band of cowardly, dispirited Jewish peasants, who scattered in selfish fear and heart-sick disappointment, were in a few days found bearding all antagonism, and convinced that their hopes had only erred by being too faint and dim? The only answer is in their own message, which explained it all: Him hath God raised from the dead, whereof we are all witnesses.

The destroyed Temple disappears, and out of the dust and smoke of the vanishing ruins there rises, beautiful and serene, though incomplete and fragmentary and defaced with many a stain, the fairer reality, the Church of the living Christ. Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

**III. Lastly, we have here a foreshadowing of our Lord's world-wide work as the Restorer of man's destructions.**

Man's folly, godlessness, worldliness, lust, sin, are ever working to the destruction of all that is sacred in humanity and in life, and to the desecrating of every shrine. We ourselves, in regard to our own hearts, which are made to be the temples of the living God, are ever, by our sins, shortcomings, and selfishness, bringing pollution into the holiest of all; breaking down the carved work thereof with axes and hammers, and setting up the abomination of desolation in the holy places of our hearts. We pollute them all--conscience, imagination, memory, will, intellect. How many a man listening to me now has his nature like the facade of some of our cathedrals, with the empty niches and broken statues proclaiming that wanton desecration and destruction have been busy there?

My brother! what have you done with your heart? Destroy this temple. Christ spoke to men who did not know what they were doing; and He speaks to you. It is the inmost meaning of the life of many of you. Hour by hour, day by day, action by action, you are devastating and profaning the sanctities of your nature, and the sacred places there where God ought to live.

Listen to His confident promise. He knows that in me He is able to restore to more than pristine beauty all which I, by my sin, have destroyed; to reconsecrate all which I, by my profanity, have polluted; to cast out the evil deities that desecrate and deform the shrine; and to make my poor heart, if only I will let Him come in to the ruined chamber, a fairer temple and dwelling-place of God.

In three days, does He do it? In one sense--Yes! Thank God! the power that hallows and restores the desecrated and cast-down temple in a man's heart, was lodged in the world in those three days of death and resurrection. The fact that He died for our sins, the fact that He was raised again for our justification, are the plastic and architectonic powers which will build up any character into a temple of God.

And yet more than forty and six yearswill that temple have to be in building. It is a lifelong task till the top-stone be brought forth. Only let us remember this: Christ, who is Architect and Builder, Foundation and Top-stone; ay! and Deity indwelling in the temple, and building it by His indwelling--this Christ is not one of those who begin to build and are not able to finish. He realises all His plans. There are no ruined edifices in the City; nor any half-finished fanes of worship within the walls of that great Jerusalem whose builder and maker is Christ.

If you will put yourselves in His hands, and trust yourselves to Him, He will take away all your incompleteness, and will make you body, soul, and spirit, temples of the Lord God; as far above the loftiest beauty and whitest sanctity of any Christian character here on earth as is the building of God, the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, above the earthly house of this tabernacle.

He will perfect this restoring work at the last, when His Word to His servant Death, as He points him to us, shall be Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up.