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

**JOHN-016**. **TEACHER OR SAVIOUR? by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him."*

*John 3:2*

The connection in which the Evangelist introduces the story of Nicodemus throws great light on the aspect under which we are to regard it. He has just been saying that upon our Lord's first visit to Jerusalem at the Passover there was a considerable amount of interest excited, and a kind of imperfect faith in Him drawn out, based solely on His miracles. He adds that this faith was regarded by Christ as unreliable; and he goes on to explain that our Lord exercised great reserve in His dealings with the persons who professed it, for the reason that He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

Now, if you note that reiteration of the word man, you will understand the description which is given of the person who is next introduced. He knew what was in man. There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. It would have been enough to have said, There was a Pharisee. When John says a man of the Pharisees, he is not merely carried away by the echo in his ears of his own last words, but it is as if he had said, Now, here is one illustration of the sort of thing that I have been speaking about; one specimen of an imperfect faith built upon miracles; and one illustration of the way in which Jesus Christ dealt with it.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. That tells us the school to which he belonged, and the general drift of his thought. He was a ruler of the Jews. That tells us that he held an official position in the supreme court of the nation, to which the Romans had left some considerable shadow of power in ecclesiastical matters. And this man comes to Christ and acknowledges Him. Christ deals with him in a very suggestive fashion. His confession, and the way in which our Lord received it, are what I desire to consider briefly in this sermon.

**I. Note then, first, this imperfect confession.**

Everything about it, pretty nearly, is wrong. He came to Jesus by night, half-ashamed and wholly afraid of speaking out the conviction that was working in him. He was a man in position. He could not compromise himself in the eyes of his co-Sanhedrists. It would be a grave thing for a man like me to be found in converse with this new Rabbi and apparent Prophet. I must go cautiously, and have regard to my reputation and my standing in the world; and shall steal to Him by night. There is something wrong with any convictions about Jesus Christ which let themselves be huddled up in secret. The true apprehension of Him is like a fire in a man's bones, that makes him weary of forbearingwhen he locks his lips, and forces him to speak. If Christians can be dumb, there is something dreadfully wrong with their Christianity. If they do not regard Jesus Christ in such an aspect as to oblige them to stand out in the world and say, Whatever anybody says or thinks about it, I am Christ's man, then be sure that they do not yet know Him as they ought to do.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, and therein condemned himself. He said, Rabbi, we know. There is more than a soupcon of patronage in that. He is giving Jesus Christ a certificate, duly signed and sealed by Rabbinical authority. He evidently thinks that it is no small matter that he and some of his fellows should have been disposed to look with favour upon this new Teacher. And so he comes, if not patronising the young man, at all events extremely conscious of his own condescension in recognising Him with his We know.

Had he the right to speak for any of his colleagues? If so, then at that very early stage of our Lord's ministry there was a conviction beginning to work in that body of ecclesiastics which casts a very lurid light on their subsequent proceedings. It was a good long while after, when Jesus Christ's attitude towards them had been a little more clearly made out than it was at the beginning, that they said officially, As for this fellow, we know not whence He is. They knewwhen He did not seem to be trenching on their prerogatives, or driving His Ithuriel-spear through their traditional professions of orthodoxy and punctilious casuistries. But when He trod on their toes, when He ripped up their pretensions, when He began to show His antagonism to their formalism and traditionalism, then they did not know where He came from. And there are many of us who are very polite to Jesus Christ as long as He does not interfere with us, and who begin to doubt His authority when He begins to rebuke our sins.

The man that said We know, and then proceeded to tell Christ the grounds upon which He was accepted by him, was not in the position which becomes sinful men drawing near to their Saviour. We know that Thou art a Teacher--contrast that, with its ring of complacency, and, if not superior, at least co-ordinate, authority, with Jesus! Master! have mercy on me, or with Lord! save or I perish, and you get the difference between the way in which a formalist, conceited of his knowledge, and a poor, perishing sinner, conscious of his ignorance and need, go to the Saviour.

Further, this imperfect confession was of secondary value, because it was built altogether upon miraculous evidence. Now, there has been a great deal of exaggeration about the value of the evidence of miracle. The undue elevation to which it was lifted in the apologetic literature of the eighteenth century, when it was almost made out as if there was no other proof that Jesus came from God than that He wrought miracles, has naturally led, in this generation and in the last one, to an equally exaggerated undervaluing of its worth. Jesus Christ did appeal to signs; He did also most distinctly place faith that rested merely upon miracle as second best; when He said, for instance, If ye believe not Me, yet believe the works. Nicodemus says, We know that Thou art a Teacher sent from God, because no man can do these miracles except God be with him. Ah! Nicodemus! did not the substance of the teaching reveal the source of the teaching even more completely than the miracles that accompanied it? Surely, if I may use an old illustration, the bell that rings in to the sermon (which is the miracles) is less conclusive as to the divine source of the teaching than is the sermon itself. Christ Himself is His own best evidence, and His words shine in their own light, and need no signs in order to authenticate their source. The signs are there, and are precious in my eyes less as credentials of His authority than as revelations of His character and His work. They are wonders; that is much. They are proofs; as I believe. But, high above both of these characteristics, they are signs of the spiritual work that He does, and manifestations of His redeeming power. And so a faith that had no ears for the ring of the divine voice in the words, and no eyes for the beauty and perfection of the character, was vulgar and low and unreliable, inasmuch as it could give no better reason for itself than that Jesus had wrought miracles,

I need not remind you of how noticeable it is that at this very early stage in our Lord's ministry there were a sufficient number of miracles done to be qualified by the Evangelist as many, and to have been a very powerful factor in bringing about this real, though imperfect, faith. John has only told us of one miracle prior to this; and the other Evangelists do not touch upon these early days of our Lord's ministry at all. So that we are to think of a whole series of works of power and supernatural grace which have found no record in these short narratives. How much more Jesus Christ was, and did, and said, than any book can ever tell! These are but parts of His ways; a whisper of His power. The fulness of it remains unrevealed after all revelation.

But the central deficiency of this confession lies in the altogether inadequate conception of Jesus Christ and His work which it embodies. We know that Thou art a Teacher, a miracle-worker, a man sent from God, and in communion with Him. These are large recognitions, far too large to be spoken of any but a select few of the sons of men. But they fall miserably beneath the grandeur, and do not even approach within sight of the central characteristic, of Christ and of His work. Nicodemus is the type of large numbers of men nowadays. All the people that have a kind of loose, superficial connection with Christianity re-echo substantially his words. They compliment Jesus Christ out of His divinity and out of His redeeming work, and seem to think that they are rather conferring an honour upon Christianity when they condescend to say, We, the learned pundits of literature; we, the arbiters of taste; we, the guides of opinion; we, the writers in newspapers and magazines and periodicals; we, the leaders in social and philanthropic movements--we recognise that Thou art a Teacher. Yes, brethren, and the recognition is utterly inadequate to the facts of the case, and is insult, and not recognition.

**II. Let me ask you to look now, in the next place, at the way in which Jesus Christ deals with this imperfect confession.**

It was a great thing for a young Rabbi from Nazareth, who had no certificate from the authorities, to find an opening thus into the very centre of the Sanhedrim. There is nothing in life, to an ardent young soul, at the beginning of his career--especially if he feels that he has a burden laid upon him to deliver to his fellows--half so sweet as the early recognition by some man of wisdom and weight and influence, that he too is a messenger from God. In later years praise and acknowledgment cloy. And one might have expected some passing word from the Master that would have expressed such a feeling as that, if He had been only a young Teacher seeking for recognition. I remember that in that strange medley of beauty and absurdity, the Koran, somewhere or other, there is an outpouring of Mahomet's heart about the blessedness of his first finding a soul that would believe in him. And it is strange that Jesus Christ had no more welcome for this man than the story tells that He had. For He meets him without a word of encouragement; without a word that seemed to recognise even a growing and a groping confidence, and yet He would not quench the smoking flax. Yes! sometimes the kindest way to deal with an imperfect conception is to show unsparingly why it is imperfect; and sometimes the apparent repelling of a partial faith is truly the drawing to Himself by the Christ of the man, though his faith be not approved.

So, notice how our Lord meets the imperfections of this acknowledgment. He begins by pointing out what is the deepest and universal need of men. Nicodemus had said, Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God. And Christ says, Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye must be born again. What has that to do with Nicodemus's acknowledgment? Apparently nothing; really everything. For, if you will think for a moment, you will see how it meets it precisely, and forces the Rabbi to deepen his conception of the Lord. The first thing that you and I want, for our participation in the Kingdom of God, is a radical out-and-out change in our whole character and nature. Ye must be born again; now, whatever more that means, it means, at all events, this--a thorough-going renovation and metamorphosis of a man's nature, as the sorest need that the world and all the individuals that make up the world have.

The deepest ground of that necessity lies in the fact of sin. Brother, we can only verify our Lord's assertion by honestly searching the depths of our own hearts, and looking at ourselves in the light of God. Think what is meant when we say, He is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all. Think of that absolute purity, that, to us, awful aversion from all that is evil, from all that is sinful. Think of what sort of men they must be who can see the Lord. And then look at yourself. Are we fit to pass that threshold? Are we fit to gaze into that Face? Is it possible that we should have fellowship with Him? Oh, brethren, if we rightly meditate upon two facts, the holiness of God and our own characters, I think we shall feel that Jesus Christ has truly stated the case when He says, Ye must be born again. Unless you and I can get ourselves radically changed, there is no Heaven for us; there is no fellowship with God for us. We must stand before Him, and feel that a great gulf is fixed between us and Him.

And so when a man comes with his poor little Thou art a Teacher, no words are wanted in order to set in glaring light the utter inadequacy of such a conception as that. What the world wants is not a Teacher, it is a Life-giver. What men want is not to be told the truth; they know it already. What they want is not to be told their duty; they know that too. What they want is some power that shall turn them clean round. And what each of us wants before we can see the Lord is that, if it may be, something shall lay hold of us, and utterly change our natures, and express from our hearts the black drop that lies there tainting everything.

Now, this necessity is met in Jesus Christ. For there were two mustsin His talk with Nicodemus, and both of them bore directly on the one purpose of deepening Nicodemus's inadequate conception of what He was and what He did. He said, Ye must be born again, in order that his hearer, and we, might lay to heart this, that we need something more than a Teacher, even a Life-giver; and He said, The Son of Man must be lifted up, in order that we might all know that in Him the necessity is met, and that the Son of Man, who came down from Heaven, and is in Heaven, even whilst He is on earth, is the sole ladder by which men can ascend into Heaven and gaze upon God.

Thus it is Christ's work as Redeemer, Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, Christ's power as bringing to the world a new and holy life, and breathing it into all that trust in Him, which make the very centre of His work. Set by the side of that this other, Thou art a Teacher sent from God. Ah, brethren, that will not do; it will not do for you and me! We want something a great deal deeper than that. The secret of Jesus is not disclosed until we have passed into the inner shrine, where we learn that He is the Sacrifice for the world, and the Source and Fountain of a new life. I beseech you, take Christ's way of dealing with this certificate of His character given by the Rabbi who did not know his own necessities, and ponder it.

Mark the underlying principle which is here--viz. if you want to understand Christ you must understand sin; and whoever thinks lightly of it will think meanly of Him. An underestimate of the reality, the universality, the gravity of the fact of sin lands men in the superficial and wholly impotent conception, Rabbi! Thou art a Teacher sent from God. A true knowledge of myself as a sinful man, of my need of pardon, of my need of cleansing, of my need of a new nature, which must be given from above, and cannot be evolved from within, leads me, and I pray it may lead you, to cast yourself down before Him, with no complaisant words of intellectual recognition upon your lips, but with the old cry, Lord! be merciful to me a sinner.

**III. And now, dear friends, one last word. Notice when and where this imperfect disciple was transformed into a courageous confessor.**

We do not know what came immediately of this conversation. We only know that some considerable time after, Nicodemus had not screwed himself up to the point of acknowledging out and out, like a brave man, that he was Christ's follower; but that he timidly ventured in the Sanhedrim to slip in a remonstrance ingeniously devised to conceal his own opinions, and yet to do some benefit to Christ, when he said, Does our law judge any man before it hear him?And, of course, the timid remonstrance was swept aside, as it deserved to be, by the ferocious antagonism of his co-Sanhedrists.

But when the Cross came, and it had become more dangerous to avow discipleship, he plucked up courage, or rather courage flowed into him from that Cross, and he went boldly and craved the body of Jesus, and got it, and buried it. No doubt when he looked at Jesus hanging on the Cross, he remembered that night in Jerusalem when the Lord had said, The Son of Man must be lifted up, and he remembered how He had spoken about the serpent lifted in the wilderness, and a great light blazed in upon him, which for ever ended all hesitation and timidity for him. And so he was ready to be a martyr, or anything else, for the sake of Him whom he now found to be far more than a Teacher, even the Sacrifice by whose stripes he was healed.

Dear brethren, I bring that Cross to you now, and pray you to see there Christ's real work for us, and for the world. He has taught us, but He has done more. He has not only spoken, He has died. He has not only shown us the path on which to walk, He has made it possible for us to walk in it. He is not merely one amongst the noble band that have guided and inspired and instructed humanity, but He stands alone--not a Teacher, but the Redeemer, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world.

If He is a Teacher, take His teachings, and what are they? These, that He is the Son of God; that He came from God; that He went to God; that He gives His life a ransom for many; that He is to be the Judge of mankind; that if we trust in Him, our sins are forgiven and our nature is renewed. Do not go picking and choosing amongst His teachings, for these which I have named are as surely His as Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them, or any other of the moral teachings which the world professes to admire. Take the whole teachings of the whole Christ, and you will confess Him to be the Redeemer of your souls, and the Life-giver by whom, and by whom alone, we enter the Kingdom of God.