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

**JOHN-025**. **THE SECOND MIRACLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"This is again the second miracle that Jesus did, when He was come out of Judaea into Galilee."*

*John 4:54*

The Evangelist evidently intends us to connect together the two miracles in Cana. His object may, possibly, be mainly chronological, and to mark the epochs in our Lord's ministry. But we cannot fail to see how remarkably these two miracles are contrasted. The one takes place at a wedding, a homely scene of rural festivity and gladness. But life has deeper things in it than gladness, and a Saviour who preferred the house of feasting to the house of mourning would be no Saviour for us. The second miracle, then, turns to the darker side of human experience. The happiest home has its saddened hours; the truest marriage joy has associated with it many a care and many an anxiety. Therefore, He who began by breathing blessing over wedded joy goes on to answer the piteous pleading of parental anxiety. It was fitting that the first miracle should deal with gladness, for that is God's purpose for His creatures, and that the second should deal with sicknesses and sorrows, which are additions to that purpose made needful by sin.

Again, the first miracle was wrought without intercession, as the outcome of Christ's own determination that His hour for working it was come. The second miracle was drawn from Him by the imperfect faith and the agonising pleading of the father.

But the great peculiarity of this second miracle in Cana is that it is moulded throughout so as to develop and perfect a weak faith. Notice how there are three words in the narrative, each of which indicates a stage in the history. Except ye see signs and wonders ye will not believe. ... The man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. ... Himself believed and his whole house.

We have here, then, Christ manifested as the Discerner, the Rebuker, the Answerer, and therefore the Strengthener, of a very insufficient and ignorant faith. It is a lovely example of the truth of that ancient prophecy, He will not quench the smoking flax. So these three stages, as it seems to me, are the three points to observe. We have, first of all, Christ lamenting over an imperfect faith. Then we have Him testing, and so strengthening, a growing faith. And then we have the absent Christ rewarding and crowning a tested faith. I think if we look at these three stages in the story we shall get the main points which the Evangelist intends us to observe.

**I. First, then, we have here our Lord lamenting over an ignorant and sensuous faith.**

At first sight His words, in response to the hurried, eager appeal of the father, seem to be strangely unfeeling, far away from the matter in hand. Think of how breathlessly, feeling that not an instant is to be lost, the poor man casts himself at the Master's feet, and pleads that his boy is at the point of death. And just think how, like a dash of cold water upon this hot impatience, must have come these strange words that seem to overleap his case altogether, and to be gazing beyond him--Except ye see signs and wonders ye will not believe. What has that to do with me and my dying boy, and my impatient agony of petition?It has everything to do with you.

It is the revelation, first of all, of Christ's singular calmness and majestic leisure, which befitted Him who needed not to hurry, because He was conscious of absolute power. As when the pleading message was sent to Him: He whom Thou lovest is sick, He abode still two days in the same place where He was; because He loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary; and just as when Jairus is hurrying Him to the bed where his child lies dead, He pauses on the way to attend to the petition of another sufferer; so, in like calmness of majestic leisure, He here puts aside the apparently pressing and urgent necessity in order to deal with a far deeper, more pressing one.

For in the words there is not only a revelation of our Lord's majestic leisure, but there is also an indication of what He thought of most importance in His dealing with men. It was worthy of His care to heal the boy; it was far more needful that He should train and lead the father to faith. The one can wait much better than the other.

And there is in the words, too, something like a sigh of profound sorrow. Christ is not so much rebuking as lamenting. It is His own pained heart that speaks; He sees in the man before Him more than the man's words indicated; reading his heart with that divine omniscience which pierces beyond the surface, and beholding in him the very same evil which affected all his countrymen. So He speaks to him as one of a class, and thus somewhat softens the rebuke even while the answer to the nobleman's petition seems thereby to become still less direct, and His own sorrowful gaze at the wide-reaching spirit of blindness seems thereby to become more absorbed and less conscious of the individual sufferer kneeling at His feet.

Christ had just come from Samaria, the scorn of the Jews, and there He had found people who needed no miracles, whose conception of the Messiah was not that of a mere wonder-worker, but of one who will tell us all things, and who believed on Him not because of the portents which He wrought, but because they heard Him themselves, and His words touched their consciences and stirred strange longings in their hearts. On the other hand, this Evangelist has carefully pointed out in the preceding chapters how such recognition as Christ had thus far received in His own countryhad been entirely owing to His miracles, and had been therefore regarded by Christ Himself as quite unreliable (chap. 2:23-25), while even Nicodemus, the Pharisee, had seen no better reason for regarding Him as a divinely sent Teacher than these miracles that Thou doest. And now here He is no sooner across the border again than the same spirit meets Him. He hears it even in the pleading, tearful tones of the father's voice, and that so clearly that it is for a moment more prominent even to His pity than the agony and the prayer. And over that Christ sorrows. Why? Because, to their own impoverishing, the nobleman and his fellows were blind to all the beauty of His character. The graciousness of His nature was nothing to them. They had no eyes for His tenderness and no ears for His wisdom; but if some vulgar sign had been wrought before them, then they would have run after Him with their worthless faith. And that struck a painful chord in Christ's heart when He thought of how all the lavishing of His love, all the grace and truth which shone radiant and lambent in His life, fell upon blind eyes, incapable of beholding His beauty; and of how the manifest revelation of a Godlike character had no power to do what could be done by a mere outward wonder.

This is not to disparage the miraculous evidence. It is only to put in its proper place the spirit, which was blind to the self-attesting glory of His character, which beheld it and did not recognise it as the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father.

That very same blindness to the divine which is in Jesus Christ, because material things alone occupy the heart and appeal to the mind, is still the disease of humanity. It still drives a knife into the loving heart of the pitying and helpful Christ. The special form which it takes in such a story as this before us is long since gone. The sense-bound people of this generation do not ask for signs. Miracles are rather a hindrance than a help to the reception of Christianity in many quarters. People are more willing to admire, after a fashion, the beauty of Christ's character, and the exalted purity of His teaching (meaning thereby, generally, the parts of it which are not exclusively His), than to accept His miracles. So far round has the turn in the wheel gone in these days.

But although the form is entirely different the spirit still remains. Are there not plenty of us to whom sense is the only certitude? We think that the only knowledge is the knowledge that comes to us from that which we can see and touch and handle, and the inferences that we may draw from these; and to many all that world of thought and beauty, all those divine manifestations of tenderness and grace, are but mist and cloudland. Intellectually, though in a somewhat modified sense, this generation has to take the rebuke: Except ye see, ye will not believe.

And practically do not the great mass of men regard the material world as all-important, and work done or progress achieved there as alone deserving the name of workor progress, while all the glories of a loving Christ are dim and unreal to their sense-bound eyes? Is it not true to-day, as it was in the old time, that if a man would come among you, and bring you material good, that would be the prophet for you? True wisdom, beauty, elevating thoughts, divine revelations; all these go over your heads. But when a man comes and multiplies loaves, then you say, This is of a truth the prophet that should come into the world. Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.

And on the other side, is it not sadly true about those of us who have the purest and the loftiest faith, that we feel often as if it was very hard, almost impossible, to keep firm our grasp of One who never is manifested to our sense? Do we not often feel, O that I could for once, for once only, hear a voice that would speak to my outward ear, or see some movement of a divine hand? The loftiest faith still leans towards, and has an hankering after, some external and visible manifestation, and we need to subject ourselves to the illuminating rebuke of the Master who says, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe, and, therefore, your faith that craves the support of some outward thing, and often painfully feels that it is feeble without it, is as yet but very imperfect and rudimentary.

**II. And so we have here, as the next stage of the narrative, our Lord testing, and thus strengthening, a growing faith.**

The nobleman's answer to our Lord's strange words sounds, at first sight, as if these had passed over him, producing no effect at all. Sir, come down ere my child die; it is almost as if he had said, Do not talk to me about these things at present. Come and heal my boy. That is what I want; and we will speak of other matters some other time. But it is not exactly that. Clearly enough, at all events, he did not read in Christ's words a reluctance to yield to his request, still less a refusal of it. Clearly he did not misunderstand the sad rebuke which they conveyed, else he would not have ventured to reiterate his petition. He does not pretend to anything more than he has, he does not seek to disclaim the condemnation that Christ brings against him, nor to assume that he has a loftier degree or a purer kind of faith than he possesses. He holds fast by so much of Christ's character as he can apprehend; and that is the beginning of all progress. What he knows he knows. He has sore need; that is something. He has come to the Helper; that is more. He is only groping after Him, but he will not say a word beyond what he knows and feels; and, therefore, there is something in him to work upon; and faith is already beginning to bud and blossom. And so his prayer is his best answer to Christ's word: Sir, come down ere my child die.

Ah! dear brethren, any true man who has ever truly gone to Christ with a sense even of some outward and temporal need, and has ever really prayed at all, has often to pass through this experience, that the first result of his agonising cry shall be only the revelation to him of the unworthiness and imperfection of his own faith, and that there shall seem to be strange delay in the coming of the blessing so longed for. And the true attitude for a man to take when there is unveiled before him, in his consciousness, in answer to his cry for help, the startling revelation of his own unworthiness and imperfection--the true answer to such dealing is simply to reiterate the cry. And then the Master bends to the petition, and because He sees that the second prayer has in it less of sensuousness than the first, and that some little germ of a higher faith is beginning to open, He yields, and yet He does not yield. Sir, come down ere my child die. Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way, thy son liveth.

Why did He not go with the suppliant? Why, in the act of granting, does He refuse? For the suppliant's sake. The whole force and beauty of the story come out yet more vividly if we take the contrast between it and the other narrative, which presents some points of similarity with it--that of the healing of the centurion's servant at Capernaum. There the centurion prays that Christ would but speak, and Christ says, I will come. There the centurion does not feel that His presence is necessary, but that His word is enough. Here the nobleman says Come, because it has never entered his mind that Christ can do anything unless He stands like a doctor by the boy's bed. And he says, too, Come, ere my child die, because it has never entered his mind that Christ can do anything if his boy has once passed the dark threshold.

And because his faith is thus feeble, Christ refuses its request, because He knows that so to refuse is to strengthen. Asked but to speakby a strong faith, He rewards it by more than it prays, and offers to come. Asked to comeby a weak faith, He rewards it by less, which yet is more, than it had requested; and refuses to come, that He may heal at a distance; and thus manifests still more wondrously His power and His grace.

His gentle and wise treatment is telling; and he who was so sense-bound that unless he saw signs and wonders he would not believe, turns and goes away, bearing the blessing, as he trusts, in his hands, while yet there is no sign whatever that he has received it.

Think of what a change had passed upon that man in the few moments of his contact with Christ. When he ran to His feet, all hot and breathless and impatient, with his eager plea, he sought only for the deliverance of his boy, and sought it at the moment, and cared for nothing else. When he goes away from Him, a little while afterwards, he has risen to this height, that he believes the bare word, and turns his back upon the Healer, and sets his face to Capernaum in the confidence that he possesses the unseen gift. So has his faith grown.

And that is what you and I have to do. We have Christ's bare word, and no more, to trust to for everything. We must be content to go out of the presence-chamber of the King with only His promise, and to cleave to that. A feeble faith requires the support of something sensuous and visible, as some poor trailing plant needs a prop round which it may twist its tendrils. A stronger faith strides away from the Master, happy and peaceful in its assured possession of a blessing for which it has nothing to rely upon but a simple bare word. That is the faith that we have to exercise. Christ has spoken. That was enough for this man, who from the babyhood of Christian experience sprang at once to its maturity. Is it enough for you? Are you content to say, Thy word, Thy naked word, is all that I need, for Thou hast spoken, and Thou wilt do it?

Go thy way; thy son liveth. What a test! Suppose the father had not gone his way, would his son have lived? No! The son's life and the father's reception from Christ of what he asked were suspended upon that one moment. Will he trust Him, or will he not? Will he linger, or will he depart? He departs, and in the act of trusting he gets the blessing, and his boy is saved.

And look how the narrative hints to us of the perfect confidence of the father now. Cana was only a few miles from Capernaum. The road from the little city upon the hill down to where the waters of the lake flashed in the sunshine by the quays of Capernaum was only a matter of a few hours; but it was the next day, and well on into the next day, before he met the servants that came to him with the news of his boy's recovery. So sure was he that his petition was answered that he did not hurry to return home, but leisurely and quietly went onwards the next day to his child. Think of the difference between the breathless rush up to Cana, and the quiet return from it. He that believeth shall not make haste.

**III. And so, lastly, we have here the absent Christ crowning and rewarding the faith which has been tested.**

We have the picture of the father's return. The servants meet him. Their message, which they deliver before he has time to speak, is singularly a verbal repetition of the promise of the Master, Thy son liveth. His faith, though it be strong, has not yet reached to the whole height of the blessing, for he inquires at what hour he began to amend, expecting some slow and gradual recovery; and he is told that at the seventh hour, the hour when the Master spoke, the fever left him, and all at once and completely was he cured. So, more than his faith had expected is given to him; and Christ, when he lays His hand upon a man, does His work thoroughly, though not always at once.

Why was the miracle wrought in that strange fashion? Why did our Lord fling out His power as from a distance rather than go and stand at the boy's bedside? We have already seen the reason in the peculiar condition of the father's mind; but now notice what it was that he had learned by such a method of healing, not only the fact of Christ's healing power, but also the fact that the bare utterance of His will, whether He were present or absent, had power. And so a loftier conception of Christ would begin to dawn on him.

And for us that working of Christ at a distance is prophetic. It represents to us His action to-day. Still He answers our cries that He would come down to our help by sending forth from the city on the hills, the city of the wedding feast, His healing power to descend upon the sick-beds and the sorrows and the sins that afflict the villages beneath. He sendeth forth His commandment upon earth, His word runneth very swiftly.

This new experience enlarged and confirmed the man's faith. The second stage to which he had been led by Christ's treatment was simply belief in our Lord's specific promise, an immense advance on his first position of belief which needed sight as its basis.

But he had not yet come to the full belief of, and reliance upon, that Healer recognised as Messiah. But the experience which he now has had, though it be an experience based upon miracle, is the parent of a faith which is not merely the child of wonder, nor the result of beholding an outward sign. And so we read:--So the father knew that it was at the same hour in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth. And himself believed and his whole house.

A partial faith brings experience which confirms and enlarges faith; and they who dimly apprehend Him, and yet humbly love Him, and imperfectly trust Him, will receive into their bosoms such large gifts of His love and gracious Spirit that their faith will be strengthened, and they will grow into the full stature of peaceful confidence.

The way to increase faith is to exercise faith. And the true parent of perfect faith is the experience of the blessings that come from the crudest, rudest, narrowest, blindest, feeblest faith that a man can exercise. Trust Him as you can, do not be afraid of inadequate conceptions, or of a feeble grasp. Trust Him as you can, and He will give you so much more than you expected that you will trust Him more, and be able to say: Now I believe, because I have heard Him myself, and know that this is the Christ, the Saviour of the world.