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

**JOHN-030**. **THE FIFTH MIRACLE IN JOHN'S GOSPEL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. So when they had rowed about five-and-twenty or thirty furlongs, they see Jesus walking on the sea, and drawing nigh unto the ship: and they were afraid. 20. But He said unto them, It is I; be not afraid."*

*John 6:19-20*

There are none of our Lord's parables recorded in this Gospel, but all the miracles which it narrates are parables. Moral and religious truth is communicated by the outward event, as in the parable it is communicated by the story. The mere visible fact becomes more than semi-transparent. The analogy between the spiritual and the natural world which men instinctively apprehend, of which the poet and the orator and the religious teacher have always made abundant use, and which it has sometimes been attempted, unsuccessfully as I think, to elevate to the rank of a scientific truth, underlies the whole series of these miracles. It is the principal if not the only key to the meaning of this one before us.

The symbolism which regards life under the guise of a voyage, and its troubles and difficulties under the metaphor of storm and tempest, is especially natural to nations that take kindly to the water, like us Englishmen. I do not know that there is any instance, either in the Old or in the New Testament, of the use of that to us very familiar metaphor; but the emblem of the sea as the symbol of trouble, unrest, rebellious power, is very familiar to the writers of the Old Testament. And the picture of the divine path as in the waters, and of the divine prerogative as being to tread upon the heights of the sea, as Job has it, is by no means unknown. So the natural symbolism, and the Old Testament use of the expressions, blend together, as I think, in suggesting the one point of view from which this miracle is to be regarded.

It is found in two of the other Evangelists, and the condensed account of it which we have in this Gospel, by its omission of Peter's walking on the water, and of some other smaller but graphic details that the other Evangelists give us, serves to sharpen the symbolical meaning of the whole story, and to bring that as its great purpose and signification into prominence.

We shall, I think, then, best gain the lessons intended to be drawn if we simply follow the points of the narrative in their order as they stand here.

**I. We have here, first of all, then, the struggling toilers.**

The other Evangelists tell us that after the feeding of the five thousand our Lord constrainedHis disciples to get into the ship, and to pass over to the other side. The language implies unwillingness, to some extent, on their part, and the exercise of authority upon His. Our Evangelist, who does not mention the constraint, supplies us with the reason for it. The preceding miracle had worked up the excitement of the mob to a very dangerous point. Crowds are always the same, and this crowd thought, as any other crowd anywhere and in any age would have done, that the prophet that could make bread at will was the kind of prophet whom they wanted. So they determined to take Him by force, and make Him a king; and Christ, seeing the danger, and not desiring that His Kingdom should be furthered by such unclean hands and gross motives, determined to withdraw Himself into the loneliness of the bordering hills. It was wise to divide the little group; it would distract attention; it might lead some of the people, as we know it did lead them, to follow the boat when they found it was gone. It would save the Apostles from being affected by the coarse, smoky enthusiasm of the crowd. It would save them from revealing the place of His retirement. It might enable Him to steal away more securely unobserved; so they are sent across to the other side of the lake, some five or six miles. An hour or two might have done it, but for some unknown reason they seem to have lingered. Perhaps they had no special call for haste. The Paschal moon, nearly full, would be shining down upon the waters; their hearts and minds would be busy with the miracle which they had just seen. And so they may have drifted along, not caring much when they reached their destination. But suddenly one of the gusts of wind which are frequently found upon mountain lakes, especially towards nightfall, rose and soon became a gale with which they could not battle. Our Evangelist does not tell us how long it lasted, but we get a note of time from St. Mark, who says it was about the fourth watch of the night; that is between the hours of three and six in the morning of the subsequent day. So that for some seven or eight hours at least they had been tugging at the useless oars, or sitting shivering, wet and weary, in the boat.

Is it not the history of the Church in a nutshell? Is it not the symbol of life for us all? The solemn law under which we live demands persistent effort, and imposes continual antagonism upon us; there is no reason why we should regard that as evil, or think ourselves hardly used, because we are not fair-weather sailors. The end of life is to make men; the meaning of all events is to mould character. Anything that makes me stronger is a blessing, anything that develops my morale is the highest good that can come to me. If therefore antagonism mould in me

The wrestling thews that throw the world,

and give me good, strong muscles, and put tan and colour into my cheek, I need not mind the cold and the wet, nor care for the whistling of the wind in my face, nor the dash of the spray over the bows. Summer sailing in fair weather, amidst land-locked bays, in blue seas, and under calm skies, may be all very well for triflers, but

Blown seas and storming showers

are better if the purpose of the voyage be

to brace us and call out our powers.

And so be thankful if, when the boat is crossing the mouth of some glen that opens upon the lake, a sudden gust smites the sheets and sends you to the helm, and takes all your effort to keep you from sinking. Do not murmur, or think that God's Providence is strange, because many and many a time when it is dark, and Jesus is not yet come to us, the storm of wind comes down upon the lake and threatens to drive us from our course. Let us rather recognise Him as the Lord who, in love and kindness, sends all the different kinds of weather which, according to the old proverb, make up the full-summed year.

And then notice how, in this first picture of our text, the symbolism so naturally lends itself to spiritual meanings, not only in regard to the tempest that caught the unthinking voyagers, but also in regard to other points; such as the darkness amidst which they had to fight the tempest, and the absence of the Master. Once before, they had been caught in a similar storm on the lake, but it was daylight then, and Jesus was with them, and that made all the difference. This time it was night, and they looked up in vain to the green Eastern hills, and wondered where in their folds He was lurking, so far from their help. Mark gives us one sweet touch when he tells us that Christ on the hillside there saw them toiling in rowing, but they did not see Him. No doubt they felt themselves deserted, and sent many a wistful glance of longing towards the shore where He was. Hard thoughts of Him may have been in some of their minds. Master, carest Thou not?would be springing to some of their lips with more apparent reason than in the other storm on the lake. But His calm and loving gaze looked down pitying on all their fear and toil. The darkness did not hide from Him, nor His own security on the steadfast land make Him forget, nor his communion with the Father so absorb Him as to exclude thoughts of them.

It is a parable and a prophecy of the perpetual relation between the absent Lord and the toiling Church. He is on the mountain while we are on the sea. The stable eternity of the Heavens holds Him; we are tossed on the restless mutability of time, over which we toil at His command. He is there interceding for us. Whilst He prays He beholds, and He beholds that He may help us by His prayer. The solitary crew were not so solitary as they thought. That little dancing speck on the waters, which held so much blind love and so much fear and trouble, was in His sight, as on the calm mountain-top He communed with God. No wonder that weary hearts and lonely ones, groping amidst the darkness, and fighting with the tempests and the sorrows of lift, have ever found in our story a symbol that comes to them with a prophecy of hope and an assurance of help, and have rejoiced to know that they on the sea are beheld of the Christ in the sky, and that the darkness hideth not fromHis loving eye.

**II. And now turn to the next stage of the story before us. We have the approaching Christ.**

When they had rowed about five-and-twenty or thirty furlongs, and so were just about the middle of the lake, they see Jesus walking on the sea and drawing nigh unto the ship. They were about half-way across the lake. We do not know at what hour in the fourth watch the Master came. But probably it was towards daybreak. Toiling had endured for a night. It would be in accordance with the symbolism that joy and help should come with the morning.

If we look for a moment at the miraculous fact, apart from the symbolism, we have a revelation here of Christ as the Lord of the material universe, a kingdom wider in its range and profounder in its authority than that which that shouting crowd had sought to force upon Him. His will consolidated the yielding wave, or sustained His material body on the tossing surges. Whether we suppose the miracle as wrought on the one or the other, makes no difference to its value as a manifestation of the glory of Christ, and of His power over the physical order of things. In the latter case there would, perhaps, be a hint of a power residing in His material frame, of which we possibly have other phases, as in the Transfiguration, which may be a prophecy of what lordship over nature is possible to a sinless manhood. However that may be, we have here a wonderful picture which is true for all ages of the mighty Christ, to whose gentle footfall the unquiet surges are as a marble pavement; and who draws near in the purposes of His love, unhindered by antagonism, and using even opposing forces as the path for His triumphant progress. Two lessons may be drawn from this. One is that in His marvellous providence Christ uses all the tumults and unrest, the opposition and tempests which surround the ship that bears His followers, as the means of achieving His purposes. We stand before a mystery to which we have no key when we think of these two certain facts; first, the Omnipotent redeeming will of God in Christ; and, second, the human antagonism which is able to rear itself against that. And we stand in the presence of another mystery, most blessed, and yet which we cannot unthread, when we think, as we most assuredly may, that in some mysterious fashion He works His purposes by the very antagonism to His purposes, making even head-winds fill the sails, and planting His foot on the white crests of the angry and changeful billows. How often in the world's history has this scene repeated itself, and by a divine irony the enemies have become the helpers of Christ's cause, and what they plotted for destruction has turned out rather to the furtherance of the Gospel! He maketh the wrath of man to praise Him, and with the residue thereof He girdeth Himself.

Another lesson for our individual lives is this, that Christ, in His sweetness and His gentle sustaining help, comes near to us all across the sea of sorrow and trouble. A more tender, a more gracious sense of His nearness to us is ever granted to us in the time of our darkness and our grief than is possible to us in the sunny hours of joy. It is always the stormy sea that Christ comes across, to draw near to us; and they who have never experienced the tempest have yet to learn the inmost sweetness of His presence. When it is night, and it is dark, at the hour which is the keystone of night's black arch, Christ comes to us, striding across the stormy waters. Sorrow brings Him near to us. Do you see that sorrow does not drive you away from Him!

**III. Then, still further, we note in the story before us the terror and the recognition.**

St. John does not tell us why they were afraid. There is no need to tell us. They see, possibly in the chill uncertain light of the grey dawn breaking over the Eastern hills, a Thing coming to them across the water there. They had fought gallantly with the storm, but this questionable shape freezes their heart's blood, and a cry, that is audible above even the howling of the wind and the dash of the waves, gives sign of the superstitious terror that crept round the hearts of those commonplace, rude men.

I do not dwell upon the fact that the average man, if he fancies that anything from out of the Unseen is near him, shrinks in fear. I do not ask you whether that is not a sign and indication of the deep conviction that lies in men's souls, of a discord between themselves and the unseen world; but I ask you if we do not often mistake the coming Master, and tremble before Him when we ought to be glad?

We are often so absorbed with our work, so busy tugging at the oar, so anxiously watching the set of current, so engaged in keeping the helm right, that we have no time and no eyes to look across the ocean and see who it is that is coming to us through all the hurly-burly. Our tears fill our eyes, and weave a veil between us and the Master. And when we do see that there is Something there, we are often afraid of it, and shrink from it. And sometimes when a gentle whisper of consolation, or some light air, as it were, of consciousness of His presence, breathes through our souls, we think that it is only a phantasm of our own making, and that the coming Christ is nothing more than the play of our thoughts and imaginations.

Oh, brethren, let no absorption in cares and duties, let no unchildlike murmurings, let no selfish abandonment to sorrow, blind you to the Lord who always comes near troubled hearts, if they will only look and see! Let no reluctance to entertain religious ideas, no fear of contact with the Unseen, no shrinking from the thought of Christ as a Kill-joy keep you from seeing Him as He draws near to you in your troubles. And let no sly, mocking Mephistopheles of doubt, nor any poisonous air, blowing off the foul and stagnant marshes of present materialism, make you fancy that the living Reality, treading on the flood there, is a dream or a fancy or the projection of your own imagination on to the void of space. He is real, whatever may be phenomenal and surface. The storm is not so real as the Christ, the waves not so substantial as He who stands upon them. They will pass and quieten, He will abide for ever. Lift up your hearts and be glad, because the Lord comes to you across the waters, and hearken to His voice: It is I! Be not afraid.

The encouragement not to fear follows the proclamation, It is I!What a thrill of glad confidence must have poured itself into their hearts, when once they rose to the height of that wondrous fact!

Well roars the storm to those who hear

A deeper voice across the storm.

There is no fear in the consciousness of His presence. It is His old word: Be not afraid!And He breathes it whithersoever He comes; for His coming is the banishment of danger and the exorcism of dread. So that if only you and I, in the midst of all storm and terror, can say It is the Lord, then we may catch up the grand triumphant chorus of the old psalm, and say: Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, and the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea, yet I will not fear. The Lord is with us; the everlasting Christ is our Helper, our Refuge, and our Strength.

**IV. So, lastly, we have here in this story the end of the tempest and of the voyage.**

Our Evangelist does not record, as the others do, that the storm ceased upon Christ's being welcomed into the little boat. The other Evangelists do not record, as he does, the completion of the voyage. Immediately the ship was at the land whither they went. The two things are cause and effect. I do not suppose, as many do, that a subordinate miracle is to be seen in that last clause of our text, or that the immediatelyis to be taken as if it meant that without one moment's delay, or interval, the voyage was completed; but only, which I think is all that is needful, that the falling of the tempest and the calming of the waters which followed upon the Master's entrance into the vessel made the remainder of the voyage comparatively brief and swift.

It is not always true, it is very seldom true, that when Christ comes on board opposition ends, and the haven is reached. But it is always true that when Christ comes on board a new spirit enters into the men who have Him for their companion, and are conscious that they have. It makes their work easy, and makes them more than conquerorsover what yet remains. With what a different spirit the weary men would bend their backs to the oars once more when they had the Master on board, and with what a different spirit you and I will set ourselves to our work if we are sure of His presence. The worst of trouble is gone when Christ shares it with us. There is a wonderful charm to stay His rough wind in the assurance that in all our affliction He is afflicted. If we feel that we are following in His footsteps, we feel that He stands between us and the blast, a refuge from the storm and a covert from the tempest. And if still, as no doubt will be the case, we have our share of trouble and storm and sorrow and difficulty, yet the worst of the gale will be passed, and though a long swell may still heave, the terror and the danger will have gone with the night, and hope and courage and gladness revive as the morning's sun breaks over the still unquiet waves, and shows us our Master with us and the white walls of the port glinting in the level beams.

Friends, life is a voyage, anyhow, with plenty of storm and danger and difficulty and weariness and exposure and anxiety and dread and sorrow, for every soul of man. But if you will take Christ on board, it will be a very different thing from what it will be if you cross the wan waters alone. Without Him you will make shipwreck of yourselves; with Him your voyage may seem perilous and be tempestuous, but He will make the storm a calm, and will bring you to the haven of your desire.