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

**JOHN-039**. **THE SIXTH MIRACLE IN JOHN'S GOSPEL - THE BLIND MADE TO SEE, AND THE SEEING MADE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"6. When Jesus had thus spoken, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, 7. And said unto him, Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent). He went his way, therefore, and washed, and came seeing."*

*John 9:6-7*

The proportionate length at which this miracle and its accompanying effects are recorded, indicates very clearly the Evangelist's idea of their relative importance. Two verses are given to the story of the miracle; all the rest of the chapter to its preface and its issues. It was a great thing to heal a man that was blind from his birth, but the story of the gradual illumination of his spirit until it came to the full light of the perception of Christ as the Son of God, was far more to the Evangelist, and ought to be far more to us than giving the outward eye power to discern the outward light.

The narrative has a prologue and an epilogue, and the true point of view from which to look at it is found in the solemn words with which our Lord closes the incident. For judgment am I come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind.

So then the mere sign, important as it is, is the least thing that we have to look at in our contemplations now.

**I. We have here our Lord unveiling His deepest motives for bestowing an unsought blessing.**

It is remarkable, I think, that out of the eight miracles recorded in this Gospel, there is only one in which our Lord responds to a request to manifest His miraculous power; the others are all spontaneous.

In the other Gospels He heals sometimes because of the pleading of the sufferer; sometimes because of the request of compassionate friends or bystanders; sometimes unasked, because His own heart went out to those that were in pain and sickness. But in John's Gospel, predominantly we have the Son of God, who acts throughout as moved by His own deep heart. That view of Christ reaches its climax in His own profound words about His own laying down of His life: I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father. So, not so much influenced by others as deriving motive and impulse and law from Himself, He moves upon earth a fountain and not a reservoir, the Originator and the Beginner of the blessings that He bears.

And that is the point of view from which most strikingly the prologue of our narrative sets forth His action in the miracle here. As Jesus passed by, says the story, He saw a man which was blind from his birth. He fixes His eye upon him. No cry from the blind man's lips draws Him. He sits there unconscious of the kind eyes that were fastened upon him. The disciples stand at Christ's side, and have no share in His feelings. They ask Him to do nothing. To them the blind man is--what? A theological problem. No trace of pity touches their hearts. They do not even seem to have reckoned upon or expected Christ's miraculous intervention. And that is a very remarkable feature in the Gospels. At all events, they evidently do not expect it here; but all that the sight of this lifelong sufferer does in them is to raise a question, Who did sin; he or his parents?Perhaps they do not quite see to the bottom of the alternative that they are suggesting; and we need not trouble ourselves to ask whether there was a full-blown notion of the pre-existence of the man's soul in their minds as they ask the question. Perhaps they remembered the impotent man to whom our Lord said, Go and sin no more lest a worse thing come unto thee. And they may have thought that they had His sanction to the doctrine--as old as Job's friends--that wherever there was great suffering there must first have been great sin.

That is all that the sight of sorrow does for some people. It leads to censorious judgments, or to mere idle and curious speculations. Christ lets us see what it did for Him, and what it is meant to do for us. Neither hath this man sinned nor his parents, but he is born blind that the works of God may be made manifest in him. That is to say, human sorrow is to be looked at by us as an opportunity for the manifestation through us of God's mercy in relieving and stanching the wounds through which the lifeblood is ebbing away. Do not stand coldly curious or uncharitably censorious. Do not make miserable men theological problems, but see in them a call for service. See in them an opportunity for letting the light of God, so much of it as is in you, shine from you, and your hands move in works of mercy.

And then the Master goes on to state still more distinctly the law which dominated His life, and which ought to dominate ours: I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work. Then poor men's misery is an occasion for the love of God manifesting itself. Yes. But the love of God manifests itself through human media, through persons; and if we adopt the reading of these words which you will find in the Revised Version, and instead of saying I must work, read We must work, then we have Christ extending the law which ruled over His own life to all His followers, and making it supremely obligatory and binding upon each of us. He for His part, as I have said, moves through this Gospel as the Son of God, whose mercy, and all whose doings are self-originated. But the other side of that is that He moves through this Gospel in the humble attitude of filial obedience, ever recognising that the Father's will is supreme in His life; and that He is bound, with an obligation in which He rejoices, to do the will of Him that sent Him. The consciousness of a mission, the sense of filial obedience, the joyful surrender and harmonising of the will of the Son with the will of the Father; these things were the secret of the Master's life.

And coupled with them, even in Him there was the consciousness that time was short; and although beyond the Cross and the grave there stretched for Him an eternity in which He would work for the blessing of the world, yet the special work which He had to do, while wearing the veil and weakness of flesh, had but few days and hours in which it could be done. Therefore, as we ought to do, He worked under the limitations of mortality, and recognised in the brevity of life another call to eager and continuous service.

These were His motives which, in common with Him, we may share. But He adds another in which we have no share; and declares the unique consciousness which ever stirred Him to His self-manifesting and God-manifesting acts: As long as I am in the world I am the Light of the world.

Thus, moved by sorrow, recognising in man's misery the dumb cry for help, seeing in it the opportunity for the manifestation of the higher mercy of God; taking all evil to be the occasion for a brighter display of the love and the good which are divine; feeling that His one purpose upon earth was to crowd the moments with obedience to the will, and with the doing of the works of Him that sent Him; and possessing the sole and strange consciousness that from His person streams out all the light which illuminates the world--the Christ pauses before the unconscious blind man, and looking upon the poor, useless eyeballs, unaware how near light and sight stood, obeys the impulse that shapes His whole life, and when He had spoken thus, proceeds to the strange cure.

**II. So we come, in the next place, to consider Christ as veiling His power under material means.**

There is only one other instance in the Gospels where a miracle is wrought in the singular fashion which is here employed, namely, the healing of the deaf-mute recorded in Mark's Gospel, where, in like manner, our Lord makes clay of the spittle, and anoints the ears of the deaf man with the clay. The variety of method in our Lord's miracles serves important purposes, as teaching us that the methods are nothing, and that He moved freely amongst them all, the real cause in every case being one and the same, the bare forth-putting of His will; and teaching us further that in each specific case there were reasons in the moral and religious condition of the persons operated upon for the adoption of the specific means employed, which we of course have no means of discovering. There is here, first then, healing by material means. The clay had no power of healing; the water of Siloam had no power of healing. The thing that healed was Christ's will, but He uses these externals to help the poor blind man to believe that he is going to be healed. He condescends to drape and veil His power in order that the dim eye, unaccustomed to the light, may look upon that shadowed representation of it when it could not gaze upon the pure brightness; as an eye may look upon a shaded lamp which could not bear its brilliance unsoftened and naked.

This healing by material means in order to accommodate Himself to the weak faith which He seeks to evoke, and to strengthen thereby, is parallel, in principle, to His own Incarnation, and to His appointment of external rites and ordinances. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, a visible Church, outward means of worship, and so on, all these come under that same category. There is no life nor power in them except His will works through them, but they are crutches and helps for a weak and sense-bound faith to climb to the apprehension of the spiritual reality. It is not the clay, it is not the water, it is not the Church, the ordinances, the outward worship, the form of prayer, the sacrament--it is none of these things that have the healing and the grace in them. They are only ladders by which we may ascend to Him. So let us neither presumptuously antedate the time when we shall be able to do without them--the Heaven in which there is no Temple--nor grovellingly and superstitiously elevate them to a place of importance and of power in the Christian life which Christ never meant them to fill. He heals through material means; the true source of healing is His own loving will.

Further, He heals at a distance. We have here a parallel with the story of the nobleman's son at Capernaum, which we have already considered. There, too, we have the same phenomenon, the healing power sent forth from the Master, and operating far away from His corporeal personal presence. This was a test of faith, as the use of the clay had been a help to faith. Still He works His healing from afar, because to Him there is neither near nor far. In His divine ubiquity, that Son of Man, who in His glorified manhood is at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, is here and everywhere where there are weakness and suffering that turn to Him; ready to help, ready to bless and heal. Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

Our Evangelist sees in the very name of that fountain in which the man washed, a symbol which is not to be passed by. Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam, which, says John, is by interpretation, Sent. We have heard already about the Pool of Siloam in this section of the Gospel. In Chapter vii. we read, In the last day, that great day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said, "If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink."These words were probably spoken on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, on which one part of the ceremonial was the drawing, with exuberant rejoicing, of water from the Pool of Siloam, and bearing it up to the Temple. In these words Christ pointed to that fountain which rises fast by the oracles of God, and wells up from beneath the hill, that on which the Temple is built, as being a symbol of Himself.

And here the Evangelist would have us suppose that, in like manner, the very name which the fountain bore (whether as being an outgush from beneath the Temple rock, or whether as being the gift of God) as applicable to Himself. The lesson to be learned is that the fountain in which we have to be cleansed from sin and from uncleanness, whose waters are the lotion that will give eyesight to the blind, the true fountain of perpetual youth, which men have sought for in every land, is Christ Himself. In Him we have the welling forth of the heart of God, the water of life, the water of gladness, the immortal stream of which whoso drinketh shall never thirst, and which, touching the blind eyeballs, washes away obscuration and gives new power of vision.

**III. Then, still further, we have here our Lord suspending healing on obedience.**

Go and wash. As He said to the impotent man: Stretch forth thine hand; as He said to the paralytic in this Gospel: Take up thy bed and walk; so here He says, Go and wash. And some friendly hand being stretched out to the blind man, or he himself feeling his way over the familiar path, he comes to the pool and washes, and returns seeing.

There is a double lesson there, on which I have no need to dwell. There is, first, the general truth that healing is suspended by Christ on compliance with His conditions. He does not simply say to any man, Be whole. He could and did say so sometimes in regard to bodily healing. But He cannot do so as regards the cure of our blind souls. To the sin-sick and sin-blinded man He says, Thou shalt be whole, if--or I will make thee whole, provided that--what?--provided that thou goest to the fountain where He has lodged the healing power. The condition on which sight comes to the blind is compliance with Christ's invitation, Come to Me; trust in Me; and thou shalt be whole.

Then there is a special lesson here, and that is, Obedience brings sight. If any man will do His will he shall know of the doctrine. Are there any of you groping in darkness, compassed about with theological perplexities and religious doubts? Obey what you know. Do what you see clearly you ought to do. Bow your wills to the recognised truth. He who has turned all his knowledge into action will get more knowledge as soon as he needs it. Go and wash; and he went, and came seeing.

**IV. And now, lastly, we have here our Lord shadowing His highest work as the Healer of blind souls.**

It is impossible for me to enter upon that wonderfully dramatic and instructive narrative which follows the account of the miracle, and describe the controversies between the sturdy, quick-witted, candid, blind man, and the narrow, bitter Pharisees. But just notice one or two points.

The two parties are evidently represented as types of two contrasted classes. The blind man stands for an example of honest ignorance, knowing itself ignorant, and not to be coaxed or frightened or in any way provoked to pretending to knowledge which it does not possess; firmly holding by what it does know, and because conscious of its little knowledge, therefore waiting for light and willing to be led. Hence he is at once humble and sturdy, docile and independent, ready to listen to any voice which can really teach, and formidably quick to prick with wholesome sarcasm the inflated claims of mere official pretenders. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are sure that they know everything that can be known about anything in the region of religion and morality, and in their absolute confidence of their absolute possession of the truth, in their blank unconsciousness that it was more than their official property and stock-in-trade, in their complete incapacity to discern the glory of a miracle which contravened ecclesiastical proprieties and conventionalities, in their contempt for the ignorance which they were responsible for and never thought of enlightening, in their cruel taunt directed against the man's calamity, and in their swift resort to the weapon of excommunication of one whom it was much easier to cast out than to answer, are but too plain a type of a character which is as ready to corrupt the teachers of the Church as of the synagogue.

One cannot but notice how constantly the phrase We knowoccurs. The parents of the man use it thrice. The Pharisees have it on their lips in their first interview with him: We know that this man is a sinner. He answers, declining to affirm anything about the character of the Man Jesus, because he, for his part, knows not, but standing firmly by the solid reality which he knows, in a very solid fashion, that his eyes have been opened. So we have the first encounter between knowledge which is ignorant, and ignorance which knows, to the manifest victory of the latter. Again, in the second round, they try to overbear the man's cool sarcasm with their vehement assertion of knowledge that God spake to Moses, but by the admission that even their knowledge did not reach to the determination of the question of the origin of Jesusmission, lay themselves open to the sudden thrust of keen-eyed, honest humility's sharp rapier-like retort. Herein is a marvellous thing, that you Know-alls, whose business it is to know where a professed miracle-worker comes from, know not from whence He is, and yet He hath opened mine eyes. Now we know(to use your own words) that God heareth not sinners, but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth His will, him He heareth.

Then observe how, on both sides, a process is going on. The man is getting more and more light at each step. He begins with a Man which is called Jesus. Then he gets to a prophet, then he comes to a worshipper of God, and one that does His will. Then he comes to, If this man were not of God, in some very special sense, He could do nothing. These are his own reflections, the working out of the impression made by the fact on an honest mind; and because he had so used the light which he had, therefore Jesus gives him more, and finds him with the question, Dost thou believe on the Son of God?Then the man who had shown himself so strong in his own convictions, so independent, and hard to cajole or coerce, shows himself now all docile and submissive, and ready to accept whatever Jesus says: Lord, who is He, that I might believe on Him?That was not credulity. He already knew enough of Christ to know that he ought to trust Him. And to his docility there is given the full revelation; and he hears the words which Pharisees and unrighteous men were not worthy to hear: Thou hast both seen it is He that talketh with thee. Then intellectual conviction, moral reliance, and the utter prostration and devotion of the whole man bow him at Christ's feet. Lord, I believe; and He worshipped Him.

There is the story of the progress of an honest, ignorant soul that knew itself blind, into the illumination of perfect vision.

And as he went upwards, so steadily and tragically, downwards went the others. For they had light and they would not look at it; and it blasted and blinded them. They had the manifestation of Christ, and they scoffed and jeered at it, and turned their backs upon it, and it became a curse to them; falling not like dew but like vitriol on their spirits, blistering, not refreshing.

Therefore Christ pronounces their fate, and sums up the story in the solemn two-edged sentence: For judgment am I come into the world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind.

The purpose of His coming is not to judge, but to save. But if men will not let Him save, the effect of His coming will be to harm. Therefore, His coming will separate men into two parts, as a magnet will draw all the iron filings out of a heap and leave the brass. He comes not to judge, but His coming does judge. He is set for the rise or for the fall of men, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Light has a twofold effect. It is torture to the diseased eye; it is gladdening to the sound one. Christ is the light, as He is also both the power of seeing and the thing seen. Therefore, it cannot but be that His shining upon men's hearts shall judge them, and shall either enlighten or darken.

We all have eyes--the organs by which we may see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. We have all blinded ourselves by our sin. Christ is come to show us God, to be the light by which we see God, and to strengthen and restore our faculty of seeing Him. If you welcome Him, and take Him into your hearts, He will be at once light and eyesight to you. But if you turn away from Him He will be blindness and darkness to you. He comes to pour eyesight on the blind, but He comes therefore also, most assuredly, to make still blinder those who do not know themselves to be blind, and conceit themselves to be clear-sighted. I thank Thee, Father, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

They who see themselves to be blind, who know themselves to be ignorant, the lowly who recognise their sinfulness and misery and helplessness, and turn in their sore need to Christ, will be led by paths of growing knowledge and blessedness to the perfect day where their strengthened vision will be able to see light in the blaze which to us now is darkness. They who say I see, and know not that they are miserable and blind, nor hearken to His counsel to anoint their eyes with eye salve that they may see, will have yet another film drawn over their eyes by the shining of the light which they reject, and will pass into darkness where only enough of light and of eyesight remain to make guilt. Jesus Christ is for us light and vision. Trust to Him, and your eyes will be blessed because they see God. Turn from Him and Egyptian darkness will settle on your soul. To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away.