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

**JOHN-044**. **CHRIST'S QUESTION TO EACH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Believest then this? She saith unto Him, Yea, Lord."*

*John 11:26, 27*

As each of these annual sermons which I have preached for so long comes round, I feel more solemnly the growing probability that it may be the last. Like a man nearing the end of his day's work, I want to make the most of the remaining moments. Whether this is the last sermon of the sort that I shall preach or not, it is certainly the last of the kind that some of you will hear from me, or possibly from any one.

So, dear friends, I have felt that neither you nor I can afford to waste this hour in considering subjects of secondary interest, appropriate as some of them might be. I wish to come to the main point at once, and to press upon you all, and especially on the younger portion of this audience, the question of your own personal religion.

The words of my text, as you will probably remember, were addressed by our Lord to Martha, as she was writhing in agony over her dead brother. Christ proclaims, with singular calmness and majesty, His character and work as the Resurrection and the Life, and then seeks to draw her from her absorbing sorrow to an effort of faith which shall grasp the truths He proclaims. He flashes out this sudden question, like the swift thrust of a gleaming dagger. It is a demand for credence to His assertion--on His bare word--tremendous as that assertion is. And nobly was the demand met by the as swift, unfaltering answer, Yea, Lord, I believe in Thee, and so I believe in Thy word.

Now, friends, Jesus Christ is putting the same question to each of us. And I pray that our answers may be Martha's.

**I. Note, first, the significance of the question.**

This. What is this? The answer will tell us what are the central essential facts, faith in which makes a Christian. Of course the form in which our Lord's previous utterance was cast was coloured by the circumstances under which He spoke, and was so shaped as to meet the momentary exigency. But whilst thus the form is determined by the fact that He was speaking to a heart wrung by separation, and as a preliminary to a mighty act of resurrection, the essential truths which are so expressed are those which, as I believe, constitute the fundamental truths of Christianity--the very core and heart of the Gospel.

Turn, then, but for a moment, to what immediately precedes my text. Our Lord says three things. First, He asserts His supernatural character and divine relation to life: I am the Resurrection and the Life. Next, He declares that it is possible for Him to communicate to dying and to dead men a life which triumphs over death, and laughs at change, and persists through the superficial experience which we christen by the name of Death, unaffected, undiminished, as some sweet spring might gush up in the heart of a salt, solitary sea. And then He declares that the condition on which He, the Life-giver, gives of His immortal life to dying men, is their trust in Him. These three--His character and work, the gifts of which His hands are full, and the way by which the gifts may be appropriated by us men--these three are, as I take it, the central facts of Christianity. Believest thou this?

The question comes to us all; and in these days of unsettlement it is well to have some clear understanding of what is the irreducible minimumof Christian teaching. I take it that it lies here. There are two opposite errors which, like all opposite errors, are bolted together, and revolve round a common centre. The one of them is the extreme conservative tendency which regards every pin and bolt of the tabernacle as if it were equally sacred with the altar and the ark. And the other is the tendency which christens itself liberal and progressive, and which is always ready to exchange old lamps, though they have burnt brightly in the past, for new ones that are as yet only glittering metal and untried. In these days, when it is a presumption against any opinion, that our fathers believed it (an error into which young people are most prone to fall), and when, by the energy of contradiction, that error has evoked, and is evoking, the opposite exaggeration that adheres to all that is traditional, to all that has been regarded as belonging to the essentials of the Christian faith, and so is fearful, trembling for the Ark of God when there is no need, let us fall back upon these great words of the Master, and see that the things which constitute the living heart of His message and gift to the world are neither more nor less than these three: the supernatural Christ, the life which He imparts, and the condition on which He bestows it. Believest thou this?If you do, you need take very little heed of the fluctuations of contemporary opinion as to other matters, valuable and important as these may be in their place; and may let men say what they will about disputed questions--about the method by which the vehicle of revelation has been created and preserved, about the regulation of the external forms of the Church, about a hundred other things that men often lose their tempers and spoil their Christianity by fighting for, and fall back upon the great central verity, a Christ from above, the Giver of Life to all that put their trust in Him.

Let me expand this question for you. We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God--believest thou this?We must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ--believest thou this?God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish--believest thou this?The Son of Man came ... to give His life a ransom for many--believest thou this?Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ--believest thou this?Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept--believest thou this?I go to prepare a place for you--believest thou this?Where I am there shall also My servant be--believest thou this?So shall we ever be with the Lord--believest thou this?That is Christianity; and not theories about inspiration, and priesthood, and sacramental efficacy, or any of the other thorny questions which have, in the course of ages, started up. Here is the living centre; hold fast, I beseech you, by it.

Then, again, the significance of this question is in the direction of making clear for us the way by which men lay hold of these great truths. The truths are of such a sort as that merely to say, Oh yes, I believe it; it is quite true!is by no means sufficient. If a man tells me that two parallel lines produced ever so far will never meet, I say, Yes, I believe it; and there is nothing more to be done or said. If a man says to me, Two and two make four, I say, Yes; and there my assent ends. If a man says, It is right to do right, it is quite clear that the attitude of intellectual assent, which was quite enough for the other order of statements, is not enough for this one; and to merely say, Oh yes, it is right to do right, is by no means the only attitude which we ought to take in regard to such a truth. And if God comes to me and says, Thou art a sinful man, and Jesus Christ has died for thee; and if thou takest Him for thy Saviour thou shalt be saved in this life, and saved for ever, it is just as clear that no mere acceptance of the saying as a verity exhausts my proper attitude in reference to it. Or to come to plainer words, no man will really, and out and out, and adequately, believe this gospel unless he does a great deal more than assent to it or refrain from contradicting it.

So I desire to urge this form of the question on you now. Dear brethren, do you trust in this, which you say you believe? There is no greater enemy of the Christian faith than the ordinary lazy--what the philosophers call otiose, which is only a grand word for lazy--assent of the understanding, because men will not take the trouble to contradict it or think about it.

That is the sort of Christianity which is the Christianity of a good many church and chapel-goers. They do not care enough about the subject to contradict the ordinary run of belief. Of all impotent things there is nothing more impotent than a creed which lies idly in a man's head, and never has touched his heart or his will. Why, I should get on a great deal better if I were talking to people that had never heard anything about the gospel than I have any chance of getting on with you, who have been drenched with it all your days, till it goes over you and runs off like water off a duck's back. The shells that were hurled against the earthworks of Sebastopol broke away the front surface of the mounds, and then the rubbish protected the fortifications; and that is what happens with many of my hearers. You have heard the gospel so often that the debris of your old hearings is raised between you and me, and my words cannot get at you. Believest thou this?--not in the fashion in which people stand up in church or chapel and look about them and rattle off the Creed every Sunday of their lives, and attach not the ghost of an idea to a single clause of it; but in the sense that the conviction of these truths is so deep in your hearts that it moves your whole nature to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ as your Saviour and your all. That is the belief to which alone the life that is promised here will come. Oh! brethren, I have no business to ask you the question, and you have no need to answer it to me! Sometimes good, well-meaning people do a mint of harm by pushing such questions into the faces of people unprepared. But take the question into your own hearts, and remember what belief is, and what it is that you have to believe, and answer according to its true significance, and in the light of conscience, the solemn question that I press upon you.

**II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to think of what depends upon the answer.**

In the case before us--if I may look back to it for an instant--there is a very illuminative instance of what did depend upon it. Martha had to believe that Christ was the Resurrection and the Life as a condition precedent to her seeing that He was so. For, as He said Himself before He spoke the mighty word which raised Lazarus, Said I not unto thee that if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?and so her faith was the condition of her being able to verify the facts which her faith grasped. Well, let me put that into plainer words. It is just this--a man gets from Christ what he trusts Christ to give him, and there is no other way of proving the truth of His promises than by accepting His promises, and then they fulfil themselves. You cannot know that a medicine will cure you till you swallow it. You must first tastebefore you see that God is good. Faith verifies itself by the experience it brings.

And what does it bring? I said, all for which a man trusts Christ. All is summed up in that one favourite word of our Lord as revealed in this fourth Gospel, which includes in itself everything of blessedness and of righteousness--life, life eternal. Dear brethren, you and I, apart from Jesus Christ, are dead in trespasses and sins. The life that we live in the flesh is an apparent life, which covers over the true death of separation from God. And you young people, fix this in your minds at the beginning, it will save you many a heartache, and many an error--there is nothing worth calling life, except that which comes to a quiet heart submissive and enfranchised through faith in Jesus Christ. And if you will trust yourselves to Him, and answer this question with your ringing Yea, Lord!then you will get a life which will quicken you out of your deadness; a life which will mould you day by day into more entire beauty of character and conformity with Himself; a life which will shed sweetness and charm over dusty commonplaces, and make sudden verdure spring in dreary, herbless deserts; a life which will bring a solemn joy into sorrow, a strength for every duty; which will bring manna in the wilderness, honey from the rock, light in darkness, and a present God for your sufficient portion; a life which will run on into the dim glories of eternity, and know no change but advancement, through the millenniums of ages.

But, dear brethren, whilst thus, on condition of their faith, the door into all divine and endless blessedness and progress is flung wide open for men, do not forget the other side of the issues which depend on this question. For if it is true that Jesus Christ is Life, and the Source of it, and that faith in Him is the way by which you and I get it, then there is no escape from the solemn conclusion that to be out of Christ, and not to be exercising faith in Him, is to be infected with death, and to be shut up in a charnel-house. I dare not suppress the plain teaching of Jesus Christ Himself: He that hath the Son hath life; he that hath not the Son hath not life. The issues that depend upon the answer to this question of my text may be summed up, if I may venture to say so, by taking the words of our Lord Himself and converting them into their opposite. He said, He that believeth ... though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on Me shall never die. That implies, He that believeth not in Christ, though he were living, yet shall he die, and whosoever liveth and believeth not shall never live. These are the issues--the alternative issues--that depend on your answer to this question.

**III. And now, lastly, let me ask you to think of the direct personal appeal to every soul that lies in this question.**

I have dwelt upon two out of the three words of which the question is composed--believest thou this?Let me dwell for a moment on the third of them--believest thou?

Now that suggests the thought on which I do not need to dwell, but which I seek briefly to lay upon your hearts and consciences--viz., the intensely personal act of your own faith, by which alone Jesus Christ can be of any use to you. Do not be led away by any vague notions which people have about the benefits of a Church or its ordinances. Do not suppose that any sacraments or any priest can do for you what you have to do in the awful solitude of your own determining will--put out your hand and grasp Jesus Christ. Can any person or thing be the condition or channel of spiritual blessing to you, except in so far as your own individual act of trust comes into play? You must take the bread with your own hands, you must masticate it with your own teeth, you must digest it with your own organs, before it can minister nourishment to your blood and force to your life. And there is only one way by which any man can come into any vital and life-giving connection with Jesus Christ, and that is, by the exercise of his own personal faith.

And remember, too, that as the exercise of uniting trust in Jesus Christ is exclusively your own affair, so exclusively your own affair is the responsibility of answering this question. To you alone is it addressed. You, and only you, have to answer it.

There was once a poor woman who went after Jesus Christ, and put out a pale, wasted, tremulous finger to touch the hem of His garment. His fine sensitiveness detected the light pressure of that petitioning finger, and allowed virtue to go out, though the crowd surged about Him and thronged Him. No crowds come between you and Jesus Christ. You and He, the two of you, have, so to speak, the world to yourselves, and straight to you comes this question, Believest thou?

Ah! brethren, that habit of skulking into the middle of the multitude, and letting the most earnest appeal from the pulpit go diffused over the audience is the reason why you sit there quiet, complacent, perhaps wholly unaffected by what I am trying to make a pointed, individual address. Suppose all the other people in this place of worship were away but you and I, would not the word that I am trying to speak come with more force to your hearts than it does now? Well, think away the world and all its millions, and realise the fact that you stand in Christ's presence, with all His regard concentrated upon you, and that to thee individually this question comes from a gracious, loving heart, which longs that you answer, Yea, Lord, I believe!

Why should you not? Suppose you said to Him, No, Lord, I do not; and suppose He said, Why do you not?what do you think you would say then? You will have to answer it one day, in very solemn circumstances, when all the crowds will fall away, as they do from a soldier called out of the ranks to go up and answer for mutiny to his commanding officer. Every one of us shall give an account of himself, and the lips that said so lovingly at the grave of Lazarus, Believest thou this?and are saying it again, dear friend, to you, even through my poor words, will ask it once more. For this is the question the answer to which settles whether we shall stand at His right hand or at His left. Say now, with humble faith, Yea, Lord!and you will have the blessing of them who have not seen, and yet have believed.

[This Sermon was preached especially for the Young.]