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

**JOHN-047**. **CAIAPHAS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And one of them, named Caiaphas being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."*

*John 11:49, 50*

The resurrection of Lazarus had raised a wave of popular excitement. Any stir amongst the people was dangerous, especially at the Passover time, which was nigh at hand, when Jerusalem would be filled with crowds of men, ready to take fire from any spark that might fall amongst them. So a hasty meeting of the principal ecclesiastical council of the Jews was summoned, in order to dismiss the situation, and concert measures for repressing the nascent enthusiasm. One might have expected to find there some disposition to inquire honestly into the claims of a Teacher who had such a witness to His claims as a man alive that had been dead. But nothing of the sort appears in their ignoble calculations. Like all weak men, they feel that something must be doneand are perfectly unable to say what. They admit Christ's miracles: This man doeth many miracles, but they are not a bit the nearer to recognising His mission, being therein disobedient to their law and untrue to their office. They fear that any disturbance will bring Rome's heavy hand down on them, and lead to the loss of what national life they still possess. But even that fear is not patriotism nor religion. It is pure self-interest. They will take away our place--the Temple, probably--and our nation. The holy things were, in their eyes, their special property. And so, at this supreme moment, big with the fate of themselves and of their nation, their whole anxiety is about personal interests. They hesitate, and are at a loss what to do.

But however they may hesitate, there is one man who knows his own mind--Caiaphas, the high priest. He has no doubt as to what is the right thing to do. He has the advantage of a perfectly clear and single purpose, and no sort of restraint of conscience or delicacy keeps him from speaking it out. He is impatient at their vacillation, and he brushes it all aside with the brusque and contemptuous speech: Ye know nothing at all!The one point of view for us to take is that of our own interests. Let us have that clearly understood; when we once ask what is "expedient for us," there will be no doubt about the answer. This man must die. Never mind about His miracles, or His teaching, or the beauty of His character. His life is a perpetual danger to our prerogatives. I vote for death!And so he clashes his advice down into the middle of their waverings, like a piece of iron into yielding water; and the strong man, restrained by no conscience, and speaking out cynically the thought that is floating in all their minds, but which they dare not utter, is master of the situation, and the resolve is taken. From that day forththey determined to put Him to death.

But John regards this selfish, cruel advice as a prophecy. Caiaphas spoke wiser things than he knew. The Divine Spirit breathed in strange fashion through even such lips as his, and moulded his savage utterance into such a form as that it became a fit expression for the very deepest thought about the nature and the power of Christ's death. He did indeed die for that people--thinks the Evangelist--even though they have rejected Him, and the dreaded Romans have come and taken away our place and nation--but His death had a wider purpose, and was not for that nation only, but that also He should gather together in one the children of God that are scattered abroad.

Let us, then, take these two aspects of the man and his counsel: the unscrupulous priest and his savage advice; the unconscious prophet and his great prediction.

**I. First, then, let us take the former point of view, and think of this unscrupulous priest and his savage advice. It is expedient for us that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.**

Remember who he was, the high priest of the nation, with Aaron's mitre on his brow, and centuries of illustrious traditions embodied in his person; set by his very office to tend the sacred flame of their Messianic hopes, and with pure hands and heart to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people; the head and crown of the national religion, in whose heart justice and mercy should have found a sanctuary if they had fled from all others; whose ears ought to have been opened to the faintest whisper of the voice of God; whose lips should ever have been ready to witness for the truth.

And see what he is! A crafty schemer, as blind as a mole to the beauty of Christ's character and the greatness of His words; utterly unspiritual; undisguisedly selfish; rude as a boor; cruel as a cut-throat; and having reached that supreme height of wickedness in which he can dress his ugliest thought in the plainest words, and send them into the world unabashed. What a lesson this speech of Caiaphas, and the character disclosed by it, read to all persons who have a professional connection with religion!

He can take one point of view only, in regard to the mightiest spiritual revelation that the world ever saw; and that is, its bearing upon his own miserable personal interests, and the interests of the order to which he belongs. And so, whatever may be the wisdom, or miracles, or goodness of Jesus, because He threatens the prerogatives of the priesthood, He must die and be got out of the way.

This is only an extreme case of a temper and a tendency which is perennial. Popes and inquisitors and priests of all Churches have done the same, in their degree, in all ages. They have always been tempted to look upon religion and religious truth and religious organisations as existing somehow for their personal advantage. And so the Church is in danger!generally means my position is threatened, and heretics are got rid of, because their teaching is inconvenient for the prerogatives of a priesthood, and new truth is fought against, because officials do not see how it harmonises with their pre-eminence.

It is not popes and priests and inquisitors only that are examples of the tendency. The warning is needed by every man who stands in such a position as mine, whose business it is professionally to handle sacred things, and to administer Christian institutions and Christian ritual. All such men are tempted to look upon the truth as their stock-in-trade, and to fight against innovations, and to array themselves instinctively against progress, and frown down new aspects and new teachers of truth, simply because they threaten, or appear to threaten, the position and prerogatives of the teachers that be. Caiaphas's sin is possible, and Caiaphas's temptation is actual, for every man whose profession it is to handle the oracles of God.

But the lessons of this speech and character are for us all. Caiaphas's sentence is an undisguised, unblushing avowal of a purely selfish standpoint. It is not a common depth of degradation to stand up, and without a blush to say: I look at all claims of revelation, at all professedly spiritual truth, and at everything else, from one delightfully simple point of view--I ask myself, how does it bear upon what I think to be to my advantage?What a deal of perplexity a man is saved if he takes up that position! Yes! and how he has damned himself in the very act of doing it! For, look what this absorbing and exclusive self-regard does in the illustration before us, and let us learn what it will do to ourselves.

This selfish consideration of our own interests will make us as blind as bats to the most radiant beauty of truth; aye, and to Christ Himself, if the recognition of Him and of His message seems to threaten any of these. They tell us that fishes which live in the water of caverns come to lose their eyesight; and men that are always living in the dark holes of their own selfishly absorbed natures, they, too, lose their spiritual sight; and the fairest, loftiest, truest, and most radiant visions (which are realities) pass before their eyes, and they see them not. When you put on regard for yourselves as they do blinkers upon horses, you have no longer the power of wide, comprehensive vision, but only see straight forward upon the narrow line which you fancy to be marked out by your own interests. If ever there comes into the selfish man's mind a truth, or an aspect of Christ's mission, which may seem to cut against some of his practices or interests, how blind he is to it! When Lord Nelson was at Copenhagen, and they hoisted the signal of recall, he put his telescope up to his blind eye and said, I do not see it!And that is exactly what this self-absorbed regard to our own interests does with hundreds of men who do not in the least degree know it. It blinds them to the plain will of the Commander-in-chief flying there at the masthead. There are none so blind as those who will not see; and there are none who so certainly will not see as those who have an uneasy suspicion that if they do see they will have to change their tack. So I say, look at the instance before us, and learn the lesson of the blindness to truth and beauty which are Christ Himself, which comes of a regard to one's own interests.

Then again, this same self-regard may bring a man down to any kind and degree of wrongdoing. Caiaphas was brought down by it, being the supreme judge of his nation, to be an assassin and an accomplice of murderers. And it is only a question of accident and of circumstances how far that man will descend who once yields himself up to the guidance of such a disposition and tendency. We have all of us to fight against the developed selfishness which takes the form of this, that, and the other sin; and we have all of us, if we are wise, to fight against the undeveloped sin which lies in all selfishness. Remember that if you begin with laying down as the canon of your conduct, It is expedient for me, you have got upon an inclined plane that tilts at a very sharp angle, and is very sufficiently greased, and ends away down yonder in the depths of darkness and of death, and it is only a question of time how far and how fast, how deep and irrevocable, will be your descent.

And lastly, this same way of looking at things which takes It is expedientas the determining consideration, has in it an awful power of so twisting and searing a man's conscience as that he comes to look at evil and never to know that there is anything wrong in it. This cynical high priest in our text had no conception that he was doing anything but obeying the plainest dictates of the most natural self-preservation when he gave his opinion that they had better kill Christ than have any danger to their priesthood. The crime of the actual crucifixion was diminished because the doers were so unconscious that it was a crime; but the crime of the process by which they had come to be unconscious--Oh how that was increased and deepened! So, if we fix our eyes sharply and exclusively on what makes for our own advantage, and take that as the point of view from which we determine our conduct, we may, and we shall, bring ourselves into such a condition as that our consciences will cease to be sensitive to right and wrong; and we shall do all manner of bad things, and never know it. We shall wipe our mouths and say: "I have done no harm."So, I beseech you, remember this, that to live for self is hell, and that the only antagonist of such selfishness, which leads to blindness, crime, and a seared conscience, is to yield ourselves to the love of God in Jesus Christ and to say: I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.

**II. And now turn briefly to the second aspect of this saying, into which the former, if I may so say, melts away. We have the unconscious prophet and his great prediction.**

The Evangelist conceives that the man who filled the office of high priest, being the head of the theocratic community, was naturally the medium of a divine oracle. When he says, being the high priest that year, Caiaphas prophesied, he does not imply that the high priestly office was annual, but simply desires to mark the fateful importance of that year for the history of the world and the priesthood. In that yearthe great High Priest for evercame and stood for a moment by the side of the earthly high priest--the Substance by the shadow--and by His offering of Himself as the one Sacrifice for sin for ever, deprived priesthood and sacrifice henceforward of all their validity. So that Caiaphas was in reality the last of the high priests, and those that succeeded him for something less than half a century were but like ghosts that walked after cock-crow. And what the Evangelist would mark is the importance of that year, as making Caiaphas ever memorable to us. Solemn and strange that the long line of Aaron's priesthood ended in such a man--the river in a putrid morass--and that of all the years in the history of the nation, in that yearshould such a person fill such an office!

Being high priest he prophesied. And was there anything strange in a bad man's prophesying? Did not the Spirit of God breathe through Balaam of old? Is there anything incredible in a man's prophesying unconsciously? Did not Pilate do so, when he nailed over the Cross, This is the King of the Jews, and wrote it in Hebrew, and in Greek, and in Latin, conceiving himself to be perpetrating a rude jest, while he was proclaiming an everlasting truth? When the Pharisees stood at the foot of the Cross and taunted Him, He saved others, Himself He cannot save, did they not, too, speak deeper things than they knew? And were not the lips of this unworthy, selfish, unspiritual, unscrupulous, cruel priest so used as that, all unconsciously, his words lent themselves to the proclamation of the glorious central truth of Christianity, that Christ died for the nation that slew Him and rejected Him, nor for them alone, but for all the world? Look, though but for a moment, at the thoughts that come from this new view of the words which we have been considering.

They suggest to us, first of all, the twofold aspect of Christ's death. From the human point of view it was a savage murder by forms of law for political ends: Caiaphas and the priests slaying Him to avoid a popular tumult that might threaten their prerogatives, Pilate consenting to His death to avoid the unpopularity that might follow a refusal. From the divine point of view it is God's great sacrifice for the sin of the world. It is the most signal instance of that solemn law of Providence which runs all through the history of the world, whereby bad men's bad deeds, strained through the fine network, as it were, of the divine providence, lose their poison and become nutritious and fertilising. Thou makest the wrath of men to praise Thee; with the residue thereof Thou girdest Thyself. The greatest crime ever done in the world is the greatest blessing ever given to the world. Man's sin works out the loftiest divine purpose, even as the coral insects blindly build up the reef that keeps back the waters, or as the sea in its wild, impotent rage, seeking to overwhelm the land, only throws upon the beach a barrier that confines its waves and curbs their fury.

Then, again, this second aspect of the counsel of Caiaphas suggests for us the twofold consequences of that death on the nation itself. This Gospel of John was probably written after the destruction of Jerusalem. By the time that our Evangelist penned these words, the Romans had come and taken away their place and their nation. The catastrophe that Caiaphas and his party had, by their short-sighted policy, tried to prevent, had been brought about by the very deed itself. For Christ's death was practically the reason for the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth. When the husbandmen said, Come! let us kill Him, and seize on the inheritance, which is simply putting Caiaphas's counsel into other language, they thereby deprived themselves of the inheritance. And so Christ's death was the destruction and not the salvation of the nation.

And yet, it was true that He died for that people, for every man of them, for Caiaphas as truly as for John, for Judas as truly as for Peter, for all the Scribes and the Pharisees that mocked round His Cross, as truly as for the women that stood silently weeping there. He died for them all, and John, looking back upon the destruction of his nation, can yet say, He died for that people. Yes! and just because He did, and because they rejected Him, His death, which they would not let be their salvation, became their destruction and their ruin. Oh! brethren, it is always so! He is either a savour of life unto life, or a savour of death unto death!Behold! I lay in Zion for a foundation, a tried Stone. Build upon it and you are safe. If you do not build upon it, that Stone becomes a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. You must either build upon Christ or fall over Him; you must either build upon Christ, or be crushed to powder under Him. Make your choice! The twofold effect is wrought ever, but we can choose which of the two shall be wrought upon us.

**III. Lastly, we have here the twofold sphere in which our Lord's mighty death works its effects.**

I have already said that this Gospel was written after the fall of Jerusalem. The whole tone of it shows that the conception of the Church as quite separate from Judaism was firmly established. The narrower national system had been shivered, and from out of the dust and hideous ruin of its crushing fall had emerged the fairer reality of a Church as wide as the world. The Temple on Zion--which was but a small building after all--had been burned with fire. It was their place, as Caiaphas called it. But the clearing away of the narrower edifice had revealed the rising walls of the great temple, the Christian Church, whose roof overarches every land, and in whose courts all men may stand and praise the Lord. So John, in his home in Ephesus, surrounded by flourishing churches in which Jews formed a small and ever-decreasing element, recognised how far the dove with the olive-branch In its mouth flew, and how certainly that nation was only a little fragment of the many for whom Christ died.

The children of God that were scattered abroadwere all to be united round that Cross. Yes! the only thing that unites men together is their common relation to a Divine Redeemer. That bond is deeper than all national bonds, than all blood-bonds, than community of race, than family, than friendship, than social ties, than community of opinion, than community of purpose and action. It is destined to absorb them all. All these are transitory and they are imperfect; men wander isolated notwithstanding them all. But if we are knit to Christ, we are knit to all who are also knit to Him. One life animates all the limbs, and one life's blood circulates through all the veins. So also is Christ. We are one in Him, in whom all the body fitly joined together maketh increase, and in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth. If we have yielded to the power of that Cross which draws us to itself, we shall have been more utterly alone, in our penitence and in our conscious surrender to Christ, than ever we were before. But He sets the solitary in families, and that solemn experience of being alone with our Judge and our Saviour will be followed by the blessed sense that we are no more solitary, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.

That death brings men into the family of God. He will gather into one the scattered children of God. They are called children by anticipation. For surely nothing can be clearer than that the doctrine of all John's writings is that men are not children of God by virtue of their humanity, except in the inferior sense of being made by Him, and in His image as creatures with spirit and will, but become children of God through faith in the Son of God, which brings about that new birth, whereby we become partakers of the Divine nature. To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.

So I beseech you, turn yourselves to that dear Christ who has died for us all, for us each, for me and for thee, and put your confidence in His great sacrifice. You will find that you pass from isolation into society, from death into life, from the death of selfishness into the life of God. Listen to Him, who says: Other sheep I have which are not of this fold, them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice: and there shall be one flockbecause there is one Shepherd.