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

**JOHN-048**. **LOVE'S PRODIGALITY CENSURED AND VINDICATED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then Jesus, six days before the passover, came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom He raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with Him. Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Then saith one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray Him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein. Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of My burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but Me ye have not always. Much people of the Jews therefore knew that He was there: and they came not for Jesus sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom He had raised from the dead. But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus."*

*John 12:1-11*

Jesus came from Jericho, where He had left Zacchaeus rejoicing in the salvation that had come to his house, and whence Bartimaeus, rejoicing in His new power of vision, seems to have followed Him. A few hours brought Him to Bethany, and we know from other Evangelists what a tension of purpose marked Him, and awed the disciples, as He pressed on before them up the rocky way. His mind was full of the struggle and death which were so near. The modest village feast in the house of Simon the leper comes in strangely amid the gathering gloom; but, no doubt, Jesus accepted it, as He did everything, and entered into the spirit of the hour. He would not pain His hosts by self-absorbed aloofness at the table. The reason for the feast is obviously the raising of Lazarus, as is suggested by his being twice mentioned in verses 1 and 2.

Our Lord had withdrawn to Ephraim so immediately after the miracle that the opportunity of honouring Him had not occurred. It was a brave tribute to pay Him in the face of the Sanhedrim's commandment (ch. 11:57). This incident sets in sharpest contrast the two figures of Mary, the type of love which delights to give its best, and Judas, the type of selfishness which is only eager to get; and it shows us Jesus casting His shield over the uncalculating giver, and putting meaning into her deed.

**I.** In Eastern fashion, the guests seem to have all been males, no doubt the magnates of the village, and Jesus with His disciples. The former would have become accustomed to seeing Lazarus, but Christ's immediate followers would gaze curiously on him. And how he would gaze on Jesus, whom he had probably not seen since the napkin had been taken from his face. The two sisters were true to their respective characters. The bustling, practical Martha had perhaps not very fine or quickly moved emotions. She could not say graceful things to their benefactor, and probably she did not care to sit at His feet and drink in His teaching; but she loved Him with all her heart all the same, and showed it by serving. No doubt, she took care that the best dishes were carried to Jesus first, and, no doubt, as is the custom in those lands, she plied Him with invitations to partake. We do Martha less than justice if we do not honour her, and recognise that her kind of service is true service. She has many successors among Christ's true followers, who cannot gushnor rise to the heights of His loftiest teaching, but who have taken Him for their Lord, and can, at any rate, do humble, practical service in kitchen or workshop. Their more intellectualor poetically emotional brethren are tempted to look down on them, but Jesus is as ready to defend Martha against Mary, if she depreciates her, as He is to vindicate Mary's right to her kind of expression of love, if Martha should seek to force her own kind on her sister. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord.

Mary was one of the unpractical sort, whom Martha is very apt to consider supremely useless, and often to lose patience with. Could she not find something useful to do in all the bustle of the feast? Had she no hands that could carry a dish, and no common sense that could help things on? Apparently not. Every one else was occupied, and how should she show the love that welled up in her heart as she looked at Lazarus sitting there beside Jesus? She had one costly possession, the pound of perfume. Clearly it was her own, for she would not have taken it if Lazarus and Mary had been joint owners. So, without thinking of anything but the great burden of love which she blessedly bore, she poured it on His head(Mark) and on His feet, which the fashion of reclining at meals made accessible to her, standing behind Him, True love is profuse, not to say prodigal. It knows no better use for its best than to lavish it on the beloved, and can have no higher joy than that. It does not stay to calculate utility as seen by colder eyes. It has even a subtle delight in the very absence of practical results, for the expression of itself is the purer thereby. A basin of water and a towel would have done as well or better for washing Christ's feet, but not for relieving Mary's full heart. Do we know anything of that omnipotent impulse? Can we complacently set our givings beside Mary's?

**II.** Judas is the foil to Mary. His sullen, black selfishness, stretching out hands like talons in eagerness to get, makes more radiant, and is itself made darker by, her shining deed of love. Goodness always rouses evil to self-assertion, and the other Evangelists connect Mary's action with Judas's final treachery as part of its impelling cause. They also show that his specious objection, by its apparent common sense and charitableness, found assent in the disciples. Three hundred pence worth of good ointment wasted which might have helped so many poor! Yes, and how much poorer the world would have been if it had not had this story! Mary was more utilitarian than her censors. She served the highest good of all generations by her uncalculating profusion, by which the poor have gained more than some few of them might have lost.

Judas's criticism is still repeated. The world does not understand Christian self-sacrifice, for ends which seem to it shadowy as compared with the solid realities of helping material progress or satisfying material wants. A hundred critics, who do not do much for the poor themselves, will descant on the waste of money in religious enterprises, and smile condescendingly at the enthusiasts who are so unpractical. But love knows its own meaning, and need not be abashed by the censure of the unloving.

John flashes out into a moment's indignation at the greed of Judas, which was masquerading as benevolence. His scathing laying bare of Judas's mean and thievish motive is no mere suspicion, but he must have known instances of dishonesty. When a man has gone so far in selfish greed that he has left common honesty behind him, no wonder if the sight of utterly self-surrendering love looks to him folly. The world has no instruments by which it can measure the elevation of the godly life. Mary would not be Mary if Judas approved of her or understood her.

**III.** Jesus vindicates the act of His censured servant. His words fall into two parts, of which the former puts a meaning into Mary's act, of which she probably had not been aware, while the latter meets the carping criticism of Judas. That Jesus should see in the anointing a reference to His burying, pathetically indicates how that near end filled His thoughts, even while sharing in the simple feast. The clear vision of the Cross so close did not so absorb Him as to make Him indifferent either to Mary's love or to the villagershumble festivity. However weighed upon, His heart was always sufficiently at leisure from itself to care for His friends and to defend them. He accepts every offering that love brings, and, in accepting, gives it a significance beyond the offerer's thought. We know not what use He may make of our poor service; but we may be sure that, if that which we can see to is right--namely, its motive,--He will take care of what we cannot see to--namely, its effect,--and will find noble use for the sacrifices which unloving critics pronounce useless waste.

The poor always ye have with you. Opportunities for the exercise of brotherly liberality are ever present, and therefore the obligation to it is constant. But these permanent duties do not preclude the opportunities for such special forms of expressing special love to Jesus as Mary had shown, and as must soon end. The same sense of approaching separation as in the former clause gives pathos to that restrained not always. The fact of His being just about to leave them warranted extraordinary tokens of love, as all loving hearts know but too well. But, over and above the immediate reference of the words, they carry the wider lesson that, besides the customary duties of generous giving laid on us by the presence of ordinary poverty and distresses, there is room in Christian experience for extraordinary outflows from the fountain of a heart filled with love to Christ. The world may mock at it as useless prodigality, but Jesus sees that it is done for Him, and therefore He accepts it, and breathes meaning into it.

Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her. The Evangelist who records that promise does not mention Mary's name; John, who does mention the name, does not record the promise. It matters little whether our names are remembered, so long as Jesus beam them graven on His heart.