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

**JOHN-051**. **THE UNIVERSAL MAGNET by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I, if I be lifted up ... will draw all men unto Me."*

*John 12:32*

Never man spake like this Man, said the wondering Temple officials who were sent to apprehend Jesus. There are many aspects of our Lord's teaching in which it strikes one as unique; but perhaps none is more singular than the boundless boldness of His assertions of His importance to the world. Just think of such sayings as these: I am the Light of the world; I am the Bread of Life; I am the Door; A greater than Solomon is here; In this place is One greater than the Temple. We do not usually attach much importance to men's estimate of themselves; and gigantic claims such as these are generally met by incredulity or scorn. But the strange thing about Christ's loftiest assertions of His world-wide worth and personal sinlessness is that they provoke no contradiction, and that the world takes Him at His own valuation. So profound is the impression that He has made, that men assent when He says, I am meek and lowly in heart, and do not answer as they would to anybody else, If you were, you would never have said so.

Now there is no more startling utterance of this extraordinary self-consciousness of Jesus Christ than the words that I have used for my text. They go deep down into the secret of His power. They open a glimpse into His inmost thoughts about Himself which He very seldom shows us. And they come to each of us with a very touching and strong personal appeal as to what we are doing with, and how we individually are responding to, that universal appeal on which He says that He is exercising.

**I. So I wish to dwell on these words now, and ask you first to notice here our Lord's forecasting of the Cross.**

A handful of Greeks had come up to Jerusalem to the Passover, and they desired to see Jesus, perhaps only because they had heard about Him, and to gratify some fleeting curiosity; perhaps for some deeper and more sacred reason. But in that tiny incident our Lord sees the first green blade coming up above the ground which was the prophet of an abundant harvest; the first drop of a great abundance of rain. He recognises that He is beginning to pass out from Israel into the world. But the thought of His world-wide influence thus indicated and prophesied immediately brings along with it the thought of what must be gone through before that influence can be established. And he discerns that, like the corn of wheat that falls into the ground, the condition of fruitfulness for Him is death.

Now we are to remember that our Lord here is within a few hours of Gethsemane, and a few days of the Cross, and that events had so unfolded themselves that it needed no prophet to see that there could only be one end to the duel which he had deliberately brought about between Himself and the rulers of Israel. So that I build nothing upon the anticipation of the Cross, which comes out at this stage in our Lord's history, for any man in His position might have seen, as clearly as He did, that His path was blocked, and that very near at hand, by the grim instrument of death. But then remember that this same expression of my text occurs at a very much earlier period of our Lord's career, and that if we accept this Gospel of John, at the very beginning of it He said, As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; and that that was no mere passing thought is obvious from the fact that midway in His career, if we accept the testimony of the same Gospel, He used the same expression to cavilling opponents when He said: When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am He. And so at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of His career the same idea is cast into the same words, a witness of the hold that it had upon Him, and the continual presence of it to His consciousness.

I do not need to refer here to other illustrations and proofs of the same thing, only I desire to say, as plainly and strongly as I can, that modern ideas that Jesus Christ only recognised the necessity of His death at a late stage of His work, and that like other reformers, He began with buoyant hope, and thought that He had but to speak and the world would hear, and, like other reformers, was disenchanted by degrees, are, in my poor judgment, utterly baseless, and bluntly contradicted by the Gospel narratives. And so, dear brethren, this is the image that rises before us, and that ought to appeal to us all very plainly; a Christ who, from the first moment of His consciousness of Messiahship--and how early that consciousness was I am not here to inquire--was conscious likewise of the death that was to close it. He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and likewise for this end, to give His life a ransom for the many. That gracious, gentle life, full of all charities, and long-suffering, and sweet goodness, and patience, was not the life of a Man whose heart was at leisure from all anxiety about Himself, but the life of a Man before whom there stood, ever grim and distinct away on the horizon, the Cross and Himself upon it. You all remember a well-known picture that suggests the Shadow of Death, the shadow of the Cross falling, unseen by Him, but seen with open eyes of horror by His mother. But the reality is a far more pathetic one than that; it is this, that He came on purpose to die.

But now there is another point suggested by these remarkable words, and that is that our Lord regarded the Cross of shame as exaltation or lifting up. I do not believe that the use of this remarkable phrase in our text finds its explanation in the few inches of elevation above the surface of the ground to which the crucified victims were usually raised. That is there, of course, but there is something far deeper and more wonderful than that in the background, and it is this in part, that that Cross, to Christ's eyes, bore a double aspect. So far as the inflicters or the externals of it were concerned, it was ignominy, shame, agony, the very lowest point of humiliation. But there was another side to it. What in one aspect is the nadir, the lowest point beneath men's feet, is in another aspect the zenith, the very highest point in the bending heaven above us. So throughout this Gospel, and very emphatically in the text, we find that we have the complement of the Pauline view of the Cross, which is, that it was shame and agony. For our Lord says, Now the hour is come when the Son of Man shall be glorified. Whether it is glory or shame depends on what it was that bound Him there. The reason for His enduring it makes it the very climax and flaming summit of His flaming love. And, therefore, He is lifted up not merely because the Cross is elevated above the ground on the little elevation of Calvary, but that Cross is His throne, because there, in highest and sovereign fashion, are set forth His glories, the glories of His love, and of the grace and truthof which He was full.

So let us not forget this double aspect, and whilst we bow before Him who endured the Cross, despising the shame, let us also try to understand and to feel what He means when, in the vision of it, He said, the hour is come that the Son of Man shall be glorified. It was meant for mockery, but mockery veiled unsuspected truth when they twined round His pale brows the crown of thorns, thereby setting forth unconsciously the everlasting truth that sovereignty is won by suffering; and placed in His unresisting hand the sceptre of reed, thereby setting forth the deep truth of His kingdom, that dominion is exercised in gentleness. Mightier than all rods of iron, or sharp swords which conquerors wield, and more lustrous and splendid than tiaras of gold glistening with diamonds, are the sceptre of reed in the hands, and the crown of thorns on the head, of the exalted, because crucified, Man of Sorrows.

But there is still another aspect of Christ's vision of His Cross, for the lifting upon it necessarily draws after it the lifting up to the dominion of the heavens. And so the Apostle, using a word kindred with that of my text, but intensifying it by addition, says, He became obedient even unto the death of the Cross, wherefore God also hath highly lifted Him up.

So here we have Christ's own conception of His death, that it was inevitable, that it was exaltation even in the act of dying, and that it drew after it, of inevitable necessity, dominion exercised from the heavens over all the earth. He was lifted up on Calvary, and because He was lifted up He has carried our manhood into the place of glory, and sitteth at the right hand of the Majesty on high. So much for the first point to which I would desire to turn your attention.

**II. Now we have here our Lord disclosing the secret of His attractive power.**

I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me. That ifexpresses no doubt, it only sets forth the condition. The Christ lifted up on the Cross is the Christ that draws men. Now I would have you notice the fact that our Lord thus unveils, as it were, where His power to influence individuals and humanity chiefly resides. He speaks about His death in altogether a different fashion from that of other men, for He does not merely say, If I be lifted up from the earth, this story of the Cross will draw men, but He says, I willdo it; and thus contemplates, as I shall have to say in a moment, continuous personal influence all through the ages.

Now that is not how other people have to speak about their deaths, for all other men who have influenced the world for good or for evil, thinkers and benefactors, and reformers, social and religious, all of them come under the one law that their death is no part of their activity, but terminates their work, and that thereafter, with few exceptions, and for brief periods, their influence is a diminishing quantity. So one Apostle had to say, To abide in the flesh is more needful for you, and another had to say, I will endeavour that after my decease ye may keep in mind the things that I have told you; and all thinkers and teachers and helpers glide away further and further, and are wrapped about with thicker and thicker mists of oblivion, and their influence becomes less and less.

The best that history can say about any of them is, This man, having served his generation by the will of God, fell on sleep. But that other Man who was lifted on the Cross saw no corruption, and the death which puts a period to all other men's work was planted right in the centre of His, and was itself part of that work, and was followed by a new form of it which is to endure for ever.

The Cross is the magnet of Christianity. Jesus Christ draws men, but it is by His Cross mainly, and that He felt this profoundly is plain enough, not only from such utterances as this of my text, but, to go no further, from the fact that He has asked us to remember only one thing about Him, and has established that ordinance of the Communion or the Lord's Supper, which is to remind us always, and to bear witness to the world, of where is the centre of His work, and the fact which He most desires that men should keep in mind, not the graciousness of His words, not their wisdom, not the good deeds that He did, but This is My body broken for you ... this cup is the New Testament in My blood. A religion which has for its chief rite the symbol of a death, must enshrine that death in the very heart of the forces to which it trusts to renew the world, and to bless individual souls.

If, then, that is true, if Jesus Christ was not all wrong when He spoke as He did in my text, then the question arises, what is it about His death that makes it the magnet that will draw all men? Men are drawn by cords of love. They may be driven by other means, but they are drawn only by love. And what is it that makes Christ's death the highest and noblest and most wonderful and transcendent manifestation of love that the world has ever seen, or ever can see? No doubt you will think me very narrow and old-fashioned when I answer the question, with the profoundest conviction of my own mind, and, I hope, the trust of my own heart. The one thing that entitles men to interpret Christ's death as the supreme manifestation of love is that it was a death voluntarily undertaken for a world's sins.

If you do not believe that, will you tell me what claim on your heart Christ has because He died? Has Socrates any claim on your heart? And are there not hundreds and thousands of martyrs who have just as much right to be regarded with reverence and affection as this Galilean carpenter's Son has, unless, when He died, He died as the Sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and for yours and mine? I know all the pathetic beauty of the story. I know how many men's hearts are moved in some degree by the life and death of our Lord, who yet would hesitate to adopt the full-toned utterance which I have now been giving. But I would beseech you, dear friends, to lay this question seriously to heart, whether there is any legitimate reason for the reverence, the love, the worship, which the world is giving to this Galilean young man, if you strike out the thought that it was because He loved the world that He chose to die to loose it from the bands of its sin. It may be, it is, a most pathetic and lovely story, but it has not power to draw all men, unless it deals with that which all men need, and unless it is the self-surrender of the Son of God for the whole world.

**III. And now, lastly, we have here our Lord anticipating continuous and universal influence.**

I have already drawn attention to the peculiar fullness of the form of expression in my text, which, fairly interpreted, does certainly imply that our Lord at that supreme moment looked forward, as I have already said, to His death, not as putting a period to His work, but as being the transition from one form of influence operating upon a very narrow circle, to another form of influence which would one day flood the world. I do not need to dwell upon that thought, beyond seeking to emphasise this truth, that one ought to feel that Jesus Christ has a living connection now with each of us. It is not merely that the story of the Cross is left to work its results, but, as I for my part believe, that the dear Lord, who, before He became Man, was the Light of the World, and enlightened every man that came into it, after His death is yet more the Light of the World, and is exercising influence all over the earth, not only by conscience and the light that is within us, nor only through the effects of the record of His past, but by the continuous operations of His Spirit. I do not dwell upon that thought further than to say that I beseech you to think of Jesus Christ, not as One who died for our sins only, but as one who lives to-day, and to-day, in no rhetorical exaggeration but in simple and profound truth, is ready to help and to bless and to be with every one of us. It is Christ that died, yea, rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

But, beyond that, mark His confidence of universal influence: I will draw all men. I need not dwell upon the distinct adaptation of Christian truth, and of that sacrifice on the Cross, to the needs of all men. It is the universal remedy, for it goes direct to the universal epidemic. The thing that men and women want most, the thing that you want most, is that your relation with God shall be set right, and that you shall be delivered from the guilt of past sin, from the exposure to its power in the present and in the future. Whatever diversities of climate, civilisation, culture, character the world holds, every man is like every other man in this, that he has sinned and come short of the glory of God. And it is because Christ's Cross goes direct to deal with that condition of things that the preaching of it is a gospel, not for this phase of society or that type of men or the other stage of culture, but that it is meant for, and is able to deliver and to bless, every man.

So, brethren, a universal attraction is raying out from Christ's Cross, and from Himself to each of us. But that universal attraction can be resisted. If a man plants his feet firmly and wide apart, and holds on with both hands to some staple or holdfast, then the drawing cannot draw. There is the attraction, but he is not attracted. You demagnetise Christianity, as all history shows, if you strike out the death on the Cross for a world's sin. What is left is not a magnet, but a bit of scrap iron. And you can take yourself away from the influence of the attraction if you will, some of us by active resistance, some of us by mere negligence, as a cord cast over some slippery body with the purpose of drawing it, may slip off, and the thing lie there unmoved.

And so I come to you now, dear friends, with the plain question, What are you doing in response to Christ's drawing of you? He has died for you on the Cross; does that not draw? He lives to bless you; does that not draw? He loves you with love changeless as a God, with love warm and emotional as a man; does that not draw? He speaks to you, I venture to say, through my poor words, and says, Come unto Me, and I will give you rest; does that not draw? We are all in the bog. He stands on firm ground, and puts out a hand. If you like to clutch it, by the pledge of the nail-prints on the palm, He will lift you from the horrible pit and the miry clay, and set your feet upon a rock. God grant that all of us may say, Draw us, and we will run after Thee!