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

**JOHN-052**. **THE SON OF MAN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Who is this Son of Man?"*

*John 12:34*

I have thought that a useful sermon may be devoted to the consideration of the remarkable name which our Lord gives to Himself--the Son of Man. And I have selected this instance of its occurrence, rather than any other, because it brings out a point which is too frequently overlooked, viz. that the name was an entirely strange and enigmatical one to the people who heard it. This question of utter bewilderment distinctly shows us that, and negatives, as it seems to me, the supposition which is often made, that the name Son of Man, upon the lips of Jesus Christ, was equivalent to Messiah. Obviously there is no such significance attached to it by those who put this question. As obviously, for another reason, the two names do not cover the same ground; for our Lord sedulously avoided calling Himself the Christ, and habitually called Himself the Son of Man.

Now one thing to observe about this name is that it is never found upon the lips of any but Jesus Christ. No man ever called him the Son of Man whilst He was upon earth, and only once do we find it applied to Him in the rest of Scripture, and that is on the occasion on which the first martyr, Stephen, dying at the foot of the old wall, saw the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Two other apparent instances of the use of the expression occur, both of them in the Book of Revelation, both of them quotations from the Old Testament, and in both the more probable reading gives a Son of Man, not the Son of Man.

One more preliminary remark and I will pass to the title itself. The name has been often supposed to be taken from the remarkable prophecy in the Book of Daniel, of one like a son of man, who receives from the Ancient of Days an everlasting kingdom which triumphs over those kingdoms of brute force which the prophet had seen. No doubt there is a connection between the prophecy and our Lord's use of the name, but it is to be observed that what the prophet speaks of is not the Son, but one like a son of man; or in other words, that what the prophecy dwells upon is simply the manhood of the future King in contradistinction to the bestial forms of Lion and Leopard and Bear, whose kingdoms go down before him. Of course Christ fulfils that prediction, and is the One like a son of man, but we cannot say that the title is derived from the prophecy, in which, strictly speaking, it does not occur.

What, then, is the force of this name, as applied to Himself by our Lord?

First, we have in it Christ putting out His hand, if I may say so, to draw us to Himself--identifying Himself with us. Then we have, just as distinctly, Christ, by the use of this name, in a very real sense distinguishing Himself from us, and claiming to hold a unique and solitary relation to mankind. And then we have Christ, by the use of this name in its connection with the ancient prophecy, pointing us onward to a wonderful future.

**I. First then, Christ thereby identifies Himself with us.**

The name Son of Man, whatever more it means, declares the historical fact of His Incarnation, and the reality and genuineness, the completeness and fullness, of His assumption of humanity. And so it is significant to notice that the name is employed continually in the places in the Gospels where especial emphasis is to be placed, for some reason or other, upon our Lord's manhood, as, for instance, when He would bring into view the depth of His humiliation. It is this name that He uses when He says: Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head. The use of the term there is very significant and profound; He contrasts His homelessness, not with the homes of men that dwell in palaces, but with the homes of the inferior creatures. As if He would say, Not merely am I individually homeless and shelterless, but I am so because I am truly a man, the only creature that builds houses, and the only creature that has not a home. Foxes have holes, anywhere they can rest, the birds of the air have, not as our Bible gives it, nests, but roosting-places, any bough will do for them. All living creatures are at home in this material universe; I, as a Representative of humanity, wander a pilgrim and a sojourner. We are all restless and homeless; the creatures correspond to their environment. We have desires and longings, wild yearnings, and deep-seated needs, that wander through eternity; the Son of Man, the representative of manhood, hath not where to lay His head.

Then the same expression is employed on occasions when our Lord desires to emphasise the completeness of His participation in all our conditions. As, for instance, the Son of Man came eating and drinking, knowing the ordinary limitations and necessities of corporeal humanity; having the ordinary dependence upon external things; nor unwilling to taste, with pure and thankful lip, whatever gladness may be found in man's path through the supply of natural appetites.

And the name is employed habitually on occasions when He desires to emphasise His manhood as having truly taken upon itself the whole weight and weariness of man's sin, and the whole burden of man's guilt, and the whole tragicalness of the penalties thereof, as in the familiar passages, so numerous that I need only refer to them and need not attempt to quote them, in which we read of the Son of Man being betrayed into the hands of sinners; or in those words, for instance, which so marvellously blend the lowliness of the Man and the lofty consciousness of the mysterious relation which He bears to the whole world; The Son of Man came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for the many.

Now if we gather all these instances together (and they are only specimens culled almost at random), and meditate for a moment on the Name as illuminated by such words as these, they suggest to us, first, how truly and how blessedly He is bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh. All our human joys were His. He knew all human sorrow. The ordinary wants of human nature belonged to Him; He hungered, He thirsted, and was weary; He ate and drank and slept. The ordinary wants of the human heart He knew; He was hurt by hatred, stung by ingratitude, yearned for love; His spirit expanded amongst friends, and was pained when they fell away. He fought and toiled, and sorrowed and enjoyed. He had to pray, to trust, and to weep. He was a Son of Man, a true man among men. His life was brief; we have but fragmentary records of it for three short years. In outward form it covers but a narrow area of human experience, and large tracts of human life seem to be unrepresented in it. Yet all ages and classes of men, in all circumstances, however unlike those of the peasant Rabbi who died when he was just entering mature manhood, may feel that this man comes closer to them than all beside. Whether for stimulus for duty, or for grace and patience in sorrow, or for restraint in enjoyment, or for the hallowing of all circumstances and all tasks, the presence and example of the Son of Man are sufficient. Wherever we go, we may track His footsteps by the drops of His blood upon the sharp flints that we have to tread. In all narrow passes, where the briars tear the wool of the flock, we may see, left there on the thorns, what they rent from the pure fleece of the Lamb of God that went before. The Son of Man is our Brother and our Example.

And is it not beautiful, and does it not speak to us touchingly and sweetly of our Lord's earnest desire to get very near us and to bring us very near to Him, that this name, which emphasises humiliation and weakness and the likeness to ourselves, should be the name that is always upon His lips? Just as, if I may compare great things with small, some teacher or philanthropist, that went away from civilised into savage life, might leave behind him the name by which he was known in Europe, and adopt some barbarous designation that was significant in the language of the savage tribe to whom he was sent, and say to them: That is my name now, call me by that, so this great Leader of our souls, who has landed upon our coasts with His hands full of blessings, His heart full of love, has taken a name that makes Him one of ourselves, and is never wearied of speaking to our hearts, and telling us that it is that by which He chooses to be known. It is a touch of the same infinite condescension which prompted His coming, that makes Him choose as His favourite and habitual designation the name of weakness and identification, the name Son of Man.

**II. But now turn to what is equally distinct and clear in this title. Here we have our Lord distinguishing Himself from us, and plainly claiming a unique relationship to the whole world.**

Just fancy how absurd it would be for one of us to be perpetually insisting on the fact that he was a man, to be taking that as his continual description of himself, and pressing it upon people's attention as if there was something strange about it. The idea is preposterous; and the very frequency and emphasis with which the name comes from our Lord's lips, lead one to suspect that there is something lying behind it more than appears on the surface. That impression is confirmed and made a conviction, if you mark the article which is prefixed, the Son of Man. A Son of man is a very different idea. When He says the Son of ManHe seems to declare that in Himself there are gathered up all the qualities that constitute humanity; that He is, to use modern language, the realised Ideal of manhood, the typical Man, in whom is everything that belongs to manhood, and who stands forth as complete and perfect. Appropriately, then, the name is continually used with suggestions of authority and dignity contrasting with those of humiliation. The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath, The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sinsand the like. So that you cannot get away from this, that this Man whom the whole world has conspired to profess to admire for His gentleness, and His meekness, and His lowliness, and His religious sanity, stood forward and said: I am complete and perfect, and everything that belongs to manhood you will find in Me.

And it is very significant in this connection that the designation occurs more frequently in the first three Gospels than in the fourth; which is alleged to present higher notions of the nature and personality of Jesus Christ than are found in the other three. There are more instances in Matthew's Gospel in which our Lord calls Himself the Son of Man, with all the implication of uniqueness and completeness which that name carries; there are more even in the Gospel of the Servant, the Gospel according to Mark, than in the Gospel of the Word of God, the Gospel according to John. And so I think we are entitled to say that by this name, which the testimony of all our four Gospels makes it certain, even to the most suspicious reader, that Christ applied to Himself, He declared His humanity, His absolutely perfect and complete humanity.

In substance He is claiming the same thing for Himself that Paul claimed for Him when he called Him the second Adam. There have been two men in the world, says Paul, the fallen Adam, with his infantile and undeveloped perfections, and the Christ, with His full and complete humanity. All other men are fragments, He is the entire and perfect chrysolite. As one of our epigrammatic seventeenth-century divines has it, Aristotle is but the rubbish of an Adam, and Adam is but the dim outline sketch of a Jesus. Between these two there has been none. The one Man as God meant him, the type of man, the perfect humanity, the realised ideal, the home of all the powers of manhood, is He who Himself claimed that place for Himself, and stepped into it with the strange words upon His lips, I am meek and lowly of heart.

Who is this Son of Man?Ah, brethren! who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one. A perfect Son of Man, born of a woman, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, must be more than a Son of Man. And that moral completeness and that ideal perfection in all the faculties and parts of His nature which drove the betrayer to clash down the thirty pieces of silver in the sanctuary in despair that he had betrayed innocent blood; which made Pilate wash his hands of the blood of this just person; which stopped the mouths of the adversaries when He challenged them to convince Him of sin, and which all the world ever since has recognised and honoured, ought surely to lead us to ask the question, Who is this Son of Man?and to answer it, as I pray we all may answer it, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!

This fact of His absolute completeness invests His work with an altogether unique relationship to the rest of mankind. And so we find the name employed upon His own lips in connections in which He desires to set Himself forth as the single and solitary medium of all blessing and salvation to the world--as, for instance, The Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for the many; Ye shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. He is what the ladder was in the vision to the patriarch, with his head upon the stone and the Syrian sky over him--the Medium of all communication between earth and heaven. And that ladder which joins heaven to earth, and brings all angels down on the solitary watchers, comes straight down, as the sunbeams do, to every man wherever he is. Each of us sees the shortest line from his own standing-place to the central light, and its beams come straight to the apple of each man's eye. So because Christ is more than a man, because He is the Man, His blessings come to each of us direct and straight, as if they had been launched from the throne with a purpose and a message to us alone. Thus He who is in Himself perfect manhood touches all men, and all men touch Him, and the Son of Man, whom God hath sealed, will give to every one of us the bread from heaven. The unique relationship which brings Him into connection with every soul of man upon earth, and makes Him the Saviour, Helper, and Friend of us all, is expressed when He calls Himself the Son of Man.

**III. And now one last word in regard to the predictive character of this designation.**

Even if we cannot regard it as being actually a quotation of the prophecy in the Book of Daniel, there is an evident allusion to that prophecy, and to the whole circle of ideas presented by it, of an everlasting dominion, which shall destroy all antagonistic power, and of a solemn coming for judgment of One like a Son of Man.

We find, then, the name occurring on our Lord's lips very frequently in that class of passages with which we are so familiar, and which are so numerous that I need not quote them to you; in which He speaks of the second coming of the Son of Man; as, for instance, that one which connects itself most distinctly with the Book of Daniel, the words of high solemn import before the tribunal of the High Priest. Hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming in the glories of heaven; or as when He says, He hath given Him authority to execute judgment also because He is the Son of Man; or as when the proto-martyr, with his last words, declared in sudden burst of surprise and thrill of gladness, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Two thoughts are all that I can touch on here. The name carries with it a blessed message of the present activity and perpetual manhood of the risen Lord. Stephen does not see Him as all the rest of Scripture paints Him, sitting at the right hand of God, but standing there. The emblem of His sitting at the right hand of God represents triumphant calmness in the undisturbed confidence of victory. It declares the completeness of the work that He has done upon earth, and that all the history of the future is but the unfolding of the consequences of that work which by His own testimony waa finished when He bowed His head and died. But the dying martyr sees him standing, as if He had sprung to His feet in response to the cry of faith from the first of the long train of sufferers. It is as if the Emperor upon His seat, looking down upon the arena where the gladiators are contending to the death, could not sit quiet amongst the flashing axes of the lictors and the purple curtains of His throne, and see their death-struggles, but must spring to His feet to help them, or at least bend down with the look and with the reality of sympathy. So Christ, the Son of Man, bearing His manhood with Him,

Still bends on earth a Brother's eye,

and is the ever-present Helper of all struggling souls that put their trust in Him.

Then as to the other and main thought here in view--the second coming of that perfect Manhood to be our Judge. It is too solemn a subject for human lips to say much about. It has been vulgarised, and the power taken out of it by many well-meant attempts to impress it upon men's hearts. But that coming is certain. That manhood could not end its relationship to us with the Cross, nor yet with the slow, solemn, upward progress which bore Him, pouring down blessings, up into the same bright cloud that had dwelt between the cherubim and had received Him into its mysterious recesses at the Transfiguration. That He should come again is the only possible completion of His work.

That Judge is our Brother. So in the deepest sense we are tried by our Peer. Man's knowledge at its highest cannot tell the moral desert of anything that any man does. You may judge action, you may sentence for breaches of law, you may declare a man clear of any blame for such, but for any one to read the secrets of another heart is beyond human power; and if He that is the Judge were only a man there would be wild work, and many a blunder in the sentences that were given. But when we think that it is the Son of Man that is our Judge, then we know that the Omniscience of divinity, that ponders the hearts and reads the motives, will be all blended with the tenderness and sympathy of humanity; that we shall be judged by One who knows all our frame, not only with the knowledge of a Maker, if I may so say, as from outside, but with the knowledge of a possessor, as from within; that we shall be judged by One who has fought and conquered in all temptations; and most blessed of all, that we shall be judged by One with whom we have only to plead His own work and His own love and His Cross that we may stand acquitted before His throne.

So, brethren, in that one mighty Name all the past, present, and future are gathered and blended together. In the past His Cross fills the retrospect: for the future there rises up, white and solemn, His judgment throne. The Son of Man is come to give His life a ransom for the many; that is the centre point of all history. The Son of Man shall come to judge the world; that is the one thought that fills the future. Let us lay hold by true faith on the mighty work which He has done on the Cross, then we shall rejoice to see our Brother on the throne, when the judgment is set and the books are opened. Oh, friends, cleave to Him ever in trust and love, in communion and imitation, in obedience and confession, that ye may be accounted worthy to stand before the Son of Manin that day!