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

**JOHN-055**. **THE SERVANT MASTER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside His garments; and took a towel, and girded Himself. After that He poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded."*

*John 13:3-5*

It has been suggested that the dispute as to which was the greatest, which broke the sanctities of the upper chamber, was connected with the unwillingness of each of the Apostles to perform the menial office of washing the feet of his companions. They had come in from Bethany, and needed the service. But apparently it was omitted, and although we can scarcely suppose that the transcendent act which is recorded in my text was performed at the beginning of the meal, yet I think we shall not be wrong if we see in it a reference to the neglected service.

The Evangelist who tells us of the dispute, and does not tell us of the foot-washing, preserves a sentence which finds its true meaning only in this incident, I am among you as He that serveth. And although John is the only recorder of this pathetic incident, there are allusions in other parts of Scripture which seem to hint at it. As, for instance, when Paul speaks of taking upon Him the form of a servant; and still more strikingly when Peter employs the remarkable word, which he does employ in his exhortation, Be ye clothed with humility. For the word rendered there clothedoccurs only in that one place in Scripture, and means literally the putting on of a slave's costume. One can scarcely help, then, seeing in these three passages to which I have referred echoes of this incident which John alone preserves to us. And so we get at once a hint of the harmony and of the incompleteness of the Gospel records.

**I. Consider the motives of this act.**

Now that is ground upon which the Evangelists very seldom enter. They tell us what Christ did, but very rarely do they give us any glimpses into why He did it. But this section of the Gospel is remarkable for its full and careful analysis of what Christ's impelling motives were in the final acts of His life. How did John find out why Christ did this deed? Perhaps he who had leaned upon His bosom at supper, and was evidently very closely associated with Him, may, in some unrecorded hour of intimate communion during the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension, have heard from the Master the exposition of His motives. But more probably, I think, the long years of growing likeness to his Lord, and of meditation upon the depth of meaning in the smallest events that his faithful memory recalled, taught him to understand Christ's purpose and motives. The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and the liker we get to our Master and the more we are filled with His Spirit, the more easy will it be for us to divine the purpose and the motives of His actions, whether as they are recorded in the Scripture or as they come to us in the experience of daily life.

But, passing that point, I desire for a moment to fix your attention on the twofold key to our Lord's action which is given in this context. There is, first of all, in the first verse of the chapter, a general exposition of what was uppermost in His mind and heart during the whole of the period in the upper room. The act in our text, and the wonderful words which follow in the subsequent chapters, crowned by that great intercessory prayer, seem to me to be all explained for us by this first unveiling of His motives. When Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.

And then the words of my text, which apply more specifically to the single incident with which they are brought into connection, tell us in addition why this one manifestation of Christ's love was given. Knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God. There, then, are two explanations of motive, the one covering a wider area than the other, but both converging on the incident before us.

The first of these is just this--the consciousness of impending separation moved Christ to a more than ordinarily tender manifestation of His love. For the rendering which you will find in the margin of the Revised Version, He loved them to the uttermost, seems to me to be truer to the Evangelist's meaning than the other, He loved them unto the end. For it was more to John's purpose to tell us that the shadow of the Cross only brought to the surface in more blessed and wonderful representation the deep love of His heart, than simply to tell us that that shadow did not stop its flow. It is much to know that all through His sorrow He continued to love; it is far more to know that the sorrow sharpened its poignancy, and deepened its depth, and made more tender its tenderness.

How near to the man Christ that thought brings us! Do we not all know the impulse to make parting moments tender moments? The masks of use and wont drop off; the reticence which we, perhaps wisely, ordinarily cultivate in regard to our deepest feelings melts away. We yearn to condense all our unspoken love into some one word, act, look, or embrace, which it may afterwards be life to two hearts to remember. And Jesus Christ felt this. Because He was going away He could not but pour out Himself yet more completely than in the ordinary tenor of His life. The earthquake lays bare hidden veins of gold, and the heart opens itself out when separation impends. We shall never understand the works of Jesus Christ if we do as we are all apt to do, think of them as having only a didactic and doctrinal purpose. We must remember that there is in Him the true play of a human heart, and that it was to relieve His own love, as well as to teach these men their duty, that he rose from the supper, and prepared Himself to wash the disciples feet.

Then, on the other hand, the other motive which is brought by the Evangelists more immediately into connection with this incident is, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God.

The consciousness of the highest dignity impels to the lowliest submission. All things given into His hands, means universal and absolute dominion. That He was come from God, means pre-existence, voluntary incarnation, an eternal divine nature, and unbroken communion with the Father. That He went to God, means a voluntary departure from this low world, and a return to His own calm home, His habitation from eternity.

And, gathered all together, the phrases imply His absolute consciousness of His divine nature. It was that that sent Him with the towel round His loins to wash the foul feet of the pedestrians who had come by the dusty and hot way from Bethany, and through all the abominations of an Eastern city, into the upper chamber.

This was He who from the beginning was with God, and was God. This was He who was the Lord of Death, Victor over the grave. This was He who by His own power ascended up on high, and reigns on the throne of the universe to-day. This was He whose breast the same Evangelist had seen before he wrote his Gospel, girded with the golden girdleof priesthood and of sovereignty; and holding, in the hands that had laid the towel on the disciplesfeet, the seven stars.

Oh, brethren! if we believed our creeds, how our hearts would melt with wonder and awe that He who was so high stooped so low! Knowing that He came from God, and went to God, and that even when He was kneeling there before these men, the Father had given all things into His hands, what did He do? Triumph? Show His majesty? Flash His power? Demand service? Girded Himself with a towel and washed His disciples' feet!

The consciousness of loftiness does not alone avail to explain the transcendent lowliness. You need the former motive to be joined with it, because it is only love which bends loftiness to service, and turns the consciousness of superiority into yearning to divest oneself of the superiorities that separate, and to emphasise the emotions which unite.

**II. The detailed completeness of the act.**

The remarkable particularity of the account of the stages of the humiliation suggests the eye-witness. John carried them all in his mind ineffaceably, and long, long years after that memorable hour we hear him recalling each detail of the scene. We can see the little group startled by the disturbance of the order of the meal as He rose from the table, and the hushed wonder and the open-lipped expectation with which they watched to see what the next step would be. He rises from the table and divests Himself of the upper garments which impeded movement. What will He do next?He takes the basin, standing there to be ready for washing the apostle's feet, but unused, and not even filled with water. He fills it Himself, asking none to help Him. He girds the towel round Him; and then, perhaps, begins with the betrayer; at any rate, not with Peter.

Cannot you see them, as they look? Do not you feel the solemnity of the detailed particular account of each step?

And may we not also say that all is a parable, or illustration, on a lower level, of the very same principles which were at work in the mightier fact of the greater condescension of His becoming flesh and dwelling among us? He rose from the table, as He rose from His place in the bosom of the Father. He disturbed the meal as He broke the festivities of the heavens. He divested Himself of His garments, as He thought not equality with God a thing to be worn eagerly; and He girded Himself with the towel, as He put on the weakness of flesh. Himself He filled the basin, by His own work providing the means of cleansing; and Himself applied the cleansing to the feet of those who were with Him. It is all a working out of the same double motive which drew Him downwards to our earth. The reason why He stooped, with His hands to wash the disciple's feet, is the same as the reason why He had hands to wash with--viz., that knowing Himself to be high over all, and loving all, He chose to become one with us, that we might become like unto Him. So the details of the act are a parable of His incarnation and death.

**III. And then, still further, note the purpose of the deed.**

Now although I have said that we never rightly understand our Lord's actions if we are always looking for dogmatic or doctrinal purposes, and thinking of them rather as being lectures, and sometimes rebukes in act, than as being the outgush of His emotions and His human-divine nature, yet we have also to take into account their moral and spiritual lessons. His acts are words and His words are acts. And although the main and primary purpose of this incident, in so far as it had any other purpose than to relieve Christ's own love by manifesting itself, and to comfort the disciple's hearts by the tender manifestation, was to teach them their duty, as we shall presently see, yet the special aspect of cleansing, which comes out so emphatically and prominently in the episode of Peter's refusal, is to be carried all along through the interpretation of the incident. This was the reason why Jesus Christ came from heaven and assumed flesh, and this was the reason why Jesus Christ, assuming flesh, bowed Himself to this menial office--to make men clean.

I venture to say that we never understand Jesus Christ and His work until we recognise this as its prominent purpose, to cleanse us from sin. An inadequate conception of what we need, shallow, superficial views of the gravity and universality and obstinacy of the fact of sin, are an impenetrable veil between us and all real understanding of Jesus Christ. There is no adequate motive for such an astounding fact as the incarnation and sacrifice of the Son of God, except the purpose of redeeming the world. If you do not believe that you--you individually, and all of us your brethren--need to be cleansed, you will find it hard to believe in the divinity and atonement of Jesus Christ. If you have been down into the depths of your own heart, and found out what tremendous, diabolic power your own evil nature and sin have upon you, then you will not be content with anything less than the incarnate God who stoops from heaven to bear the burden of your sin, and to take it all away. If you want to understand why He laid aside His garments and took the servile form of our manhood, the appeal of man's sin to His love and the answer of His Divine condescension are the only explanation.

Again, let me remind you that there is no cleansing without Christ. Can you do it for yourselves, do you think? There is an old proverb, One hand washes the other. That is true about stains on the flesh. It is not true about stains on our spirits. Nobody can do it for us but Jesus Christ alone. He kneels before us, having the right and the power to wash us because He has died for us. Kings of England used to touch for the king's evil, and lay their pure fingers upon feculent masses of corruption. Our King's touch is sovereign for the corruption and incipient putrefaction of our sin; and there is no power in heaven or earth that will make a man clean except the power of Jesus Christ. It is either Jesus Christ or filthiness.

If I might pass from my text for one moment, I would remind you of the episode which immediately follows, and suggest that if Jesus Christ is not cleansing us He is nothing to us. If I wash thee not, thou hast no part in Me. I know, of course, that it is possible to have partial, rudimentary, and sometimes reverent conceptions of that Lord without recognising in Him the great Fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness. But I am sure of this, that there is no real, living possession of Jesus Christ such as men's souls need, and such as will outlast the disintegrating influences of death, unless it be such a possession of Him as appropriates for its own, primarily, His cleansing power. First of all He must cleanse, and then all other aspects of His glory, and gifts of His grace, will pour into our hearts.

No understanding of Christ, then, without the recognition that cleansing is the purpose and the vindication of His incarnation and sacrifice; no cleansing without Christ; no Christ worth calling by the name without cleansing.

**IV. And so, lastly, note the pattern in this act.**

You will remember that it is followed by solemn words spoken after He had taken His garments and resumed His place at the table, in which there blended, in the most wonderful fashion, the consciousness of authority, both as Teacher of truth and as Guide of life, and the sweetest and most loving lowliness. In them Jesus prescribed the wonderful act of His condescending love and cleansing power as the law of the Christian life. There are too many of us who profess to be quite willing to trust to Jesus Christ as the Cleanser of our souls who are not nearly so willing to accept His Example as the pattern for our lives; and I would have you note, as an extremely remarkable point, that all the New Testament references to our Lord as being our Example are given in immediate connection with His passion. The very part of His life which we generally regard as being most absolutely unique and inimitable is the fact in His life which Apostles and Evangelists select as the one to set before us for our example.

Do you ask if any man can copy the sufferings of Jesus Christ? In regard to their virtue and efficacy, No. In regard to their motive--in one aspect, No; in another aspect, Yes. In regard to the spirit that impelled Him we may copy Him. The smallest trickle of water down a city gutter will carve out of the mud at its side little banks and cliffs, and exhibit all the phenomena of erosion on the largest scale, as the Mississippi does over half a continent, and the tiniest little wave in a basin will fall into the same curves as the billows of mid-ocean. You and I, in our little lives, may even aspire to do as I have done to you.

The true use of superiority is service. Noblesse oblige! Bank, wealth, capacity, talents, all things are given to us that we may use them to the last particle for our fellows. Only when the world and society have awakened to that great truth which the towel-girded, kneeling Christ has taught us, will society be organised on the principles that God meant.

But, further, the highest form of service is to cleanse. Cleansing is always dirty work for the cleaners, as every housemaid knows. You cannot make people clean by scolding them, by lecturing them, by patronising them. You have to go down into the filth if you mean to lift them out of it; and leave your smelling-bottles behind; and think nothing repulsive if your stooping to it may save a brother.

The only way by which we can imitate that example is by, first of all, participating in it for ourselves. We must, first of all, have the Cross as our trust, before it can become our pattern and our law. We must first say, Lord! not my feet only, but also my hands and my head, and then, in the measure in which we ourselves have received the cleansing benediction, we shall be impelled and able to lay our gentle hands on foulness and leprosy; and to say to all the impure, Jesus Christ, who hath cleansed me, makes thee clean.