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

**JOHN-061**. **QUO VADIS? by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Peter said unto Him, Lord, why cannot I follow Thee now! I will lay down my life for Thy sake. Jesus answered him, Wilt thou lay down thy life for My sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied Me thrice."*

*John 13:37-38*

Peter's main characteristics are all in operation here; his eagerness to be in the front, his habit of blurting out his thoughts and feelings, his passionate love for his Master, and withal his inability to understand Him, and his self-confident arrogance. He has broken in upon Christ's solemn words, entirely deaf to their deep meaning, but blindly and blunderingly laying hold of one thought only, that Jesus is departing, and that he is to be left alone. So he asks the question, Lord! thither goest Thou?--not so much caring about that, as meaning by his question--tell me where, and then I will come too; pledging himself to follow faithfully, as a dog behind his master, wherever He went.

Our Lord answered the underlying meaning of the words, repeating with a personal application what He had just before said as a general principle--Whither I go thou canst not follow Me now, but thou shall follow Me afterwards. Then followed this noteworthy dialogue.

The whole significance of the incident is preserved for us in the beautiful legend which tells us how, near the city of Rome, on the Appian Way, as Peter was flying for his life, he met the Lord, and again said to Him: Lord, whither goest Thou?The words of the question, as given in the Vulgate, are the name of the site of the supposed interview, and of the little church which stands on it. The Master answered: I go to Rome, to be crucified again. The answer smote the heart of the Apostle, and turned the cowardly fugitive into a hero; and he followed his Lord, and went gladly to his death. For it was that death which had to be accomplished before Peter was able to follow his Lord.

Now, as to the words before us, I think we shall best gather their significance, and lay it upon our own hearts, if we simply follow the windings of the dialogue. There are three points: the audacious question, the rash vow, and the sad forecast.

**I. The audacious question.**

As Peter's first question, Lord, whither goest Thou?meant not so much what it said, as I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest; tell me, that I may; so the second question, in like manner, is really not so much a question, Why cannot I follow Thee now?as the nearest possible approach to a flat contradiction of our Lord. Peter puts his words into the shape of an interrogation; what he means is, Yes, I can follow Thee; and in proof thereof, I will lay down my life for Thy sake. The man's persistence, the man's love leading him to lack of reverence, came out in this (as I have ventured to call it) audacious question. Its underlying meaning was a refusal to believe the Master's word. But yet there was in it a nobility of resolution--broken afterwards, but never mind about that--to endure anything rather than to be separate from the Lord. Yet, though it was noble in its motive, but lacking in reverence in its form, there was a deeper error than that in it. Peter did not know what followingmeant, and he had to be taught that first. One of the main reasons why he could not follow was because he did not understand what was involved. It was something more than marching behind his Master, even to a Cross. There was a deeper discipline and a more strenuous effort needed than would have availed for such a kind of following.

Let us look a little onwards into his life. Recall that scene on the morning of the day by the banks of the lake, when he waded through the shallow water, and cast himself, dripping, at his Master's feet, and, having by his threefold confession obliterated his threefold denial, was taken back to his Lord's love, and received the permission for which he had hungered, and which he had been told, in the upper room, could not nowbe given: Jesus said to him, Follow thou Me. What a flood of remembrances must then have rushed over the penitent Peter! how he must have thought to himself, So soon, so soon is the "canst not" changed into a canst! So soon has the "afterwards" come to be the present!

And long years after that, when he was an old man, and experience had taught him what following meant, he shared his privilege with all the dispersed strangers to whom he wrote, and said to them, with a definite reference to this incident, and to the other after the Resurrection, leaving us an example, that we (not only, as I used to think, in my exuberant days of ignorance) should follow in His steps.

So, brethren, this blundering, loving, audacious question suggests to us that to follow Jesus Christ is the supreme direction for all conduct. Men of all creeds, men of no creed, admit that. The

Loveliness of perfect deeds,

More strong than all poetic thought,

which is set forth in that life constitutes the living law to which all conduct is to be conformed, and will be noble in proportion as it is conformed.

There is the great blessing, and solemn obligation, and lofty prerogative of Christian morality, that for obedience to a precept it substitutes following a Person, and instead of saying to men Be goodit says to them Be Christlike. It brings the conception of duty out of the region of abstractions into the region of living realities. For the cold statuesque ideal of perfection it substitutes a living Man, with a heart to love, and a hand to help us. Thereby the whole aspect of striving after the right is changed; for the work is made easier, and companionship comes in to aid morality, when Jesus Christ says to us, Be like Me; and then you will be good and blessed. Effort will be all but as blessed as attainment, and the sense of pressing hard after Him will be only less restful than the consciousness of having attained. To follow Him is bliss, to reach Him is heaven.

But in order that this following should be possible, there must be something done that had not been done when Peter asked, Why cannot I follow Thee now?One reason why he could not was, as I said, because he did not know yet what followingmeant, and because he was yet unfit for this assimilation of his character and of his conduct to the likeness of his Lord. And another reason was because the Cross still lay before the Lord, and until that death of infinite love and utter self-sacrifice for others had been accomplished, the pattern was not yet complete, nor the highest ideal of human life realised in life. Therefore the followingwas impossible. Christ must die before He has completed the example that we are to follow, and Christ must die before the impulse shall be given to us, which shall make us able to tread, however falteringly and far behind, in His footsteps.

The essence of His life and of His death lies in the two things, entire suppression of personal will in obedience to the will of the Father, and entire self-sacrifice for the sake of humanity. And however there is--and God forbid that I should ever forget in my preaching that there is--a uniqueness in that sacrifice, in that life, and in that death, which beggars all imitation, and needs and tolerates no repetition whilst the world lasts, still along with this, there is that which is imitable in the life and imitable in the death of the Master. To follow Jesus is to live denying self for God, and to live sacrificing self for men. Nothing less than these are included in the solemn words, leaving us--even in the act and article of death when He suffered for us--an example that we should follow His steps.

The word rendered examplerefers to the headline which the writing-master gives his pupils to copy, line by line. We all know how clumsy the pothooks and hangers are, how blurred the page with many a blot. And yet there, at the top of it, stands the Master's fair writing, and though even the last line on the page will be blotted and blurred, when we turn it over and begin on the new leaf, the copy will be like the original, and we shall he like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Thou shalt follow Me afterwardsis a commandment; blessed be God, it is also a promise. For let us not forget that the followingends in an attaining; even as the Lord Himself has said in another connection, when He spake: If any man serve Me, let him follow Me, and where I am, there shall also My servant be. Of course, if we follow, we shall come to the same place one day. And so the great promise will be fulfilled; they shall follow the Lamb, in that higher life, whithersoever He goeth; and not as here imperfectly, and far behind, but close beside Him, and keeping step for step, being with Him first, and following Him afterwards.

But let us remember that with regard to that future following and its completeness, the same present incapacity applies, as clogs and mars the following, which is conforming our lives to His. For, as He Himself has said to us, I go to prepare a place for you, and until He had passed through death and into His glory, there was no standing-ground for human feet on the golden pavements, and heaven was inaccessible to man until Christ had died. Thus, as all life is changed when it is looked upon as being a following of Jesus, so death becomes altogether other when it is so regarded. The first martyr outside the city wall, bruised and battered by the cruel stones, remembered his Master's death, and shaped his own to be like it. As Jesus, when He died, had said: Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit, Stephen, dying, said: Lord Jesus, receive My spirit. As the Master had given His last breath to the prayer, Father, forgive them; they know not what they do, so Stephen shaped his last utterance to a conformity with his Lord's, in which the difference is as significant as the likeness, and said, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And then, as the record beautifully says, amidst all that wild hubbub and cruel assault, he fell on sleep, as a child on its mother's breast. Death is changed when it becomes the following of Christ.

**II. We have here a rash vow.**

I will lay down my life for Thy sake. What a strange inversion of parts is here! Lay down thy life for My sake--with Calvary less than four-and-twenty hours off, when Christ laid down His life for Peter's sake. Peter was guilty of an anachronism in the words, for the time did not come for the disciple to die for his Lord till after the Lord had died for His disciple. But he was right in feeling, though he felt it only in regard to an external and physical act, that to follow Jesus, it was necessary to be ready to die for Him. And that is the great truth which underlies and half redeems the rashness of this vow, and needs to be laid upon our hearts, if we are ever to be the true followers of the Master. Death for Christ is necessary if we are to follow Him. There is nothing that a man can do deeply and truly, in a manner worthy of a Christian, which has not underlying it, either the death of self-will and all the godless nature, or if need be the actual physical death, which is a much smaller matter. You cannot follow Christ except you die daily. No man has ever yet trodden in His footsteps except on condition of, moment by moment, slaying self, suppressing self, abjuring self, breaking the connection of self with the material world, and yielding up himself as a living sacrifice, in a living death, to the Lord of life and death. Do not think that following Christis a mere sentimental expression for so much morality as we can conveniently get into our daily life. But remember that here, with all his rashness, with all his ignorance, with all his superficiality, the Apostle has laid hold upon the great permanent, but alas! much-forgotten principle, that to die is essential to following Jesus.

This daily dying, which is a far harder thing to do than to go to a cross once, and have done with it--was impossible for Peter then, though he did not know it. His vow was a rash one, because the laying down of Christ's life, for Peter's sake and for ours, had not yet been accomplished. There is the motive-power by which, and by which alone, drawn in gratitude, and melted down from all our selfishness, we, too, in our measure and our turn, are able to yield ourselves, in daily crucifixion of our evil, and daily abnegation of self-trust, and self-pleasing, and self-will, to the Lord that has died for us. He must lay down His life for our sakes, and we must know He has done it, and rest upon Him as our great Sacrifice and our atoning Priest, or else we shall never be so loosed from the tyranny of self as to be ready to live by dying, and to die that we may live for His sake. I go to Rome to be crucified againwere the words in which the old legend braced the fugitive and made a hero of him, and sent him back to be crucified like his Lord and to offer up his physical life, as he had long since offered up his self-will and his arrogance to the Lord that had died for him.

O Lord our Father! help us, we beseech Thee, that we may be of the sheep that hear the Shepherd's voice and follow Him. Strengthen our faith in that dear Lord who has laid down His life for us, that we may daily, by self-denial and self-sacrifice, lay down our lives for Him, and follow Him here in all the footsteps of His love.