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

**JOHN-083**. **SHEEP AMONG WOLVES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept My saying, they will keep yours also."*

*John 15:18-20*

These words strike a discord in the midst of the sweet music to which we have been listening. The key-note of all that has preceded has been love--the love of Christ's friends to one another, and of all to Him, as an answer to His love to all. That love, which is one, whether it rise to Him or is diffused on the level of earth, is the result of that unity of life between the Vine and the branches, of which our Lord has been speaking such great and wonderful things. But that unity of life between Christians and Christ has another consequence than the spread of love. Just because it binds them to Him in a sacred community, it separates them from those who do not share in His life, and hence the hateof our context is the shadow of love; and there result two communities--to use the much-abused words that designate them--the Church and the World; and the antagonism between these is deep, fundamental, and perpetual.

Unquestionably, our Lord is here speaking with special reference to the Apostles, who, in a very tragic sense, were sent forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. If we may trust tradition, every one of that little company, Speaker as well as hearers, died a martyr's death, with the exception of John himself, who was preserved from it by a miracle. But, be that as it may, our Lord is here laying down a universal statement of the permanent condition of things; and there is no more reason for restricting the force of these words to the original hearers of them than there is for restricting the force of any of the rest of this wonderful discourse. The worldwill be in antagonism to the Church until the world ceases to be a world, because it obeys the King; and then, and not till then, will it cease to be hostile to His subjects.

**I. What makes this hostility inevitable?**

Our Lord here prepares His hearers for what is coming by putting it in the gentle form of an hypothesis. The frequency with which Ifoccurs in this section is very remarkable. He will not startle them by the bare, naked statement which they, in that hour of depression and agitation, were so little able to endure, but He puts it in the shape of a suppose that, not because there is any doubt, but in order to alleviate the pain of the impression which He desires to make. He says, If the world hates, not if the world hate; and the tense of the original shows that, whilst the form of the statement is hypothetical, the substance of it is prophetic.

Jesus points to two things, as you will observe, which make this hostility inevitable. If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you. And again, If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. The very language carries with it the implication of necessary and continual antagonism. For what is the world, in this context, but the aggregate of men, who have no share in the love and life that flow from Jesus Christ? Necessarily they constitute a unity, whatever diversities there may be amongst them, and necessarily, that unity in its banded phalanx is in antagonism, in some measure, to those who constitute the other unity, which holds by Christ, and has been drawn by Him from out of the world.

If we share Christ's life, we must, necessarily, in some measure, share His fate. It is the typical example of what the world thinks of, and does to, goodness. And all who have the Spirit of life which was in Jesus Christfor the animating principle of their lives, will, just in the measure in which they possess it, come under the same influences which carried Him to the Cross. In a world like this, it is impossible for a man to love righteousness and hate iniquity, and to order his life accordingly, without treading on somebody's corns; being a rebuke to the opposite course of conduct, either interfering with men's self-complacency or with their interests. From the beginning the blind world has repaid goodness by antagonism and contempt.

And then our Lord touches another, and yet closely-connected, cause when He speaks of His selecting the Apostles, and drawing them out of the world, as a reason for the world's hostility. There are two groups, and the fundamental principles that underlie each are in deadly antagonism. In the measure in which you and I are Christians we are in direct opposition to all the maxims which rule the world and make it a world. What we believe to be precious it regards as of no account. What we believe to be fundamental truth it passes by as of little importance. Much which we feel to be wrong it regards as good. Our jewels are its tinsel, and its jewels are our tinsel. We and it stand in diametrical opposition of thought about God, about self, about duty, about life, about death, about the future; and that opposition goes right down to the bottom of things. However it may be covered over, there is a gulf, as in some of those American canons: the towering cliffs may be very near--only a yard or two seems to separate them; but they go down for thousands and thousands of feet, and never are any nearer each other, and between them at the bottom a black, sullen river flows. If ye were of the world, the world would love its own. If it loves you, it is because ye are of it.

**II. And so note, secondly, how this hostility is masked and modified.**

There are a great many other bonds that unite men together besides the bonds of religious life or their absence. There are the domestic ties, there are the associations of commerce and neighbourhood, there are surface identities of opinion about many important things. The greater portion of our lives moves on this surface, whore all men are alike. If you tickle us, do we not laugh; if you wound us, do we not bleed?We have all the same affections and needs, pursue the same avocations, do the same sort of things, and a large portion of every one's life is under the dominion of habit and custom, and determined by external circumstances. So there is a film of roofing thrown over the gulf. You can make up a crack in a wall with plaster after a fashion, and it will hide the solution of continuity that lies beneath. But let bad weather come, and soon the bricks gape apart as before. And so, as soon as we get down below the surface of things and grapple with the real, deep-lying, and formative principles of a life, we come to antagonism, just as they used to come to it long ago, though the form of it has become quite different.

Then there are other causes modifying this hostility. The world has got a dash of Christianity into it since Jesus Christ spoke. We cannot say that it is half Christianised, but some of the issues and remoter consequences of Christianity have permeated the general conscience, and the ethics of the Gospel are largely diffused in such a land as this. Thus Christian men and others have, to a large extent, a common code of morality, as long as they keep on the surface; and they not only do a good many things exactly alike, but do a great many things from substantially the same motives, and have the same way of looking at much. Thus the gulf is partly bridged over; and the hostility takes another form. We do not wrap Christians in pitch and stick them up for candles in the Emperor's garden nowadays, but the same thing can be done in different ways. Newspaper articles, the light laugh of scorn, the whoop of exultation over the failures or faults of any prominent man that has stood out boldly on Christ's side; all these indicate what lies below the surface, and sometimes not so very far below. Many a young man in a Manchester warehouse, trying to live a godly life, many a workman at his bench, many a commercial traveller in the inn or on the road, many a student on the college benches, has to find out that there is a great gulf between him and the man who sits next to him, and that he cannot be faithful to his Lord, and at the same time, down to the depths of his being, a friend of one who has no friendship to his Master.

Still another fact masks the antagonism, and that is, that after all, the world, meaning thereby the aggregate of godless men, has a conscience that responds to goodness, though grumblingly and reluctantly. After all, men do know that it is better to be good, that it is better and wiser to be like Christ, that it is nobler to live for Him than for self, and that consciousness cannot but modify to some extent the manifestations of the hostility, but it is there all the same, and whosoever will be a Christian after Christ's pattern will find out that it is there.

Let a man for Christ's sake avow unpopular beliefs, let him try honestly to act out the New Testament, let him boldly seek to apply Christian principles to the fashionable and popular sins of his class or of his country, let him in any way be ahead of the conscience of the majority, and what a chorus will be yelping at his heels! Dear brethren, the law still remains, If any man will be a friend of the world he is at enmity with God.

**III. Thirdly, note how you may escape the hostility.**

A half-Christianised world and a more than half-secularised Church get on well together. When they do agree, their agreement is wonderful. And it is a miserable thing to reflect that about the average Christianity of this generation there is so very little that does deserve the antagonism of the world. Why should the world care to hate or trouble itself about a professing Church, large parts of which are only a bit of the world under another name? There is no need whatever that there should be any antagonism at all between a godless world and hosts of professing Christians. If you want to escape the hostility drop your flag, button your coat over the badge that shows that you belong to Christ, and do the things that the people round about you do, and you will have a perfectly easy and undisturbed life.

Of course, in the bad old slavery days, a Christianity that had not a word to say about the sin of slave-holding ran no risk of being tarred and feathered. Of course a Christianity in Manchester that winks hard at commercial immoralities is very welcome on the Exchange. Of course a Christianity that lets beer barrels alone may reckon upon having publicans for its adherents. Of course a Christianity that blesses flags and sings Te Deums over victories will get its share of the spoil. Why should the world hate, or persecute, or do anything but despise a Christianity like that, any more than a man need to care for a tame tiger that has had its claws pared? If the world can put a hook in the nostrils of leviathan, and make him play with its maidens, it will substitute good-nature, half contemptuous, for the hostility which our Master here predicts. It was out-and-out Christians that He said the world would hate; the world likes Christians that are like itself. Christian men and women! be you sure that you deserve the hostility which my text predicts.

**IV. And now, lastly, note how to meet this antagonism.**

Reckon it as a sign and test of true union with Jesus Christ. And so, if ever, by reason of our passing at the call of duty or benevolence outside the circle of those who sympathise with our faith and fundamental ideas, we encounter it more manifestly than when we dwell among our own people, let us count the reproach of Christas a treasure to be proud of, and to be guarded.

Be sure that it is your goodness and not your evils or your weakness, that men dislike. The world has a very keen eye for the inconsistencies and the faults of professing Christians, and it is a good thing that it has. The loftier your profession the sharper the judgment that is applied to you. Many well-meaning Christian people, by an injudicious use of Christian phraseology in the wrong place, and by the glaring contradiction between their prayers and their talks and their daily life, bring down a great deal of deserved hostility upon themselves and of discredit upon Christianity; and then they comfort themselves and say they are bearing the reproach of the Cross. Not a bit of it! They are bearing the natural results of their own failings and faults. And it is for us to see to it that what provokes, if it does provoke, hostile judgments and uncharitable criticisms, insulting speeches and sarcasms, and the sense of our belonging to another regiment and having other objects, is our cleaving to Jesus Christ, and not the imperfections and the sins with which we so often spoil that cleaving. Be you careful for this, that it is Christ in you that men turn from, and not you yourself and your weakness and sin.

Meet this antagonism by not dropping your standard one inch. Keep the flag right at the masthead. If you begin to haul it down, where are you going to stop? Nowhere, until you have got it draggling in the mud at the foot. It is of no use to try to conciliate by compromise. All that we shall gain by that will be, as I have said, indifference and contempt; all that we shall gain will be a loss to the cause. A great deal is said in this day, and many efforts are being made--I cannot but think mistaken efforts--by Christian people to bridge over this gulf in the wrong way--that is, by trying to make out that Christianity in its fundamental principles does approximate a great deal more closely to the things that the world goes by than it really does. It is all vain, and the only issue of it will be that we shall have a decaying Christianity and a dying spiritual life. Keep the flag up; emphasise and accentuate the things that the world disbelieves and denies, not pushing them to the falsehood of extremes, but not by one jot diminishing the clearness of our testimony by reason of the world's unwillingness to receive it. Our victory is to be won only through absolute faithfulness to Christ's ideal.

And, lastly, meet hostility with unmoved, patient, Christlike, and Christ-derived love and sympathy. The patient sunshine pours upon the glaciers and melts the thick-ribbed ice at last into sweet water. The patient sunshine beats upon the mist-cloud and breaks up its edges and scatters it at the last. And our Lord here tells us that our experience, if we are faithful to Him, will be like His experience, in that some will hearken to our word though others will persecute, and to some our testimony will come as a message from God that draws them to the Lord Himself. These are our only weapons, brethren! The only conqueror of the world is the love that was in Christ breathed through us; the only victory over suspicion, contempt, alienation, is pleading, persistent, long-suffering, self-denying love. The only way to overcome the world's hostility is by turning the world into a church, and that can only be done when Christ's servants oppose pity to wrath, love to hate, and in the strength of His life who has won us all by the same process, seek to win the world for Him by the manifestation of His victorious love in our patient love.

Dear brethren, to which army do you belong? Which community is yours? Are you in Christ's ranks, or are you in the world's? Do you love Him back again, or do you meet His open heart with a closed one, and His hand, laden with blessings, with hands clenched in refusal? To which class do I belong?--it is the question of questions for us all; and I pray that you and I, won from our hatred by His love, and wooed out of our death by His life, and made partakers of His life by His death, may yield our hearts to Him, and so pass from out of the hostility and mistrust of a godless world into the friendships and peace of the sheltering Vine. And then we shall esteem the reproach of Christif it fall upon our heads, in however modified and mild a form, greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, and have respect unto the recompense of the reward.

May it be so with us all!