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

**JOHN-106**. **AN EYE WITNESS'S ACCOUNT OF THE CRUCIFIXION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And He bearing His cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha: Where they crucified Him, and two other with Him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst. And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin. Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that He said, I am King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written I have written. Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also His coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted My raiment among them, and for My vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did. Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple standing by, whom He loved, He saith unto His mother, Woman, behold Thy Son! Then saith He to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a spunge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to His mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, He said, It is finished: and He bowed His head, and gave up the ghost."*

*John 19:17-30*

In great and small matters John's account adds much to the narrative of the crucifixion. He alone tells of the attempt to have the title on the Cross altered, of the tender entrusting of the Virgin to his care, and of the two wordsI thirstand It is finished. He gives details which had been burned into his memory, such as Christ's position in the midstof the two robbers, and the jar of vinegarstanding by the crosses. He says little about the act of fixing Jesus to the Cross, but enlarges what the other Evangelists tell as to the soldiers casting lots. He had heard what they said to one another. He alone distinctly tells that when He went forth, Jesus was bearing the Cross which afterwards Simon of Cyrene had to carry, probably because our Lord's strength failed.

Who appointed the two robbers to be crucified at the same time? Not the rulers, who had no such power but probably Pilate, as one more shaft of sarcasm which was all the sharper both because it seemed to put Jesus in the same class as they, and because they were of the same class as the man of the Jewschoice, Barabbas, and possibly were two of his gang. Jesus was in the midst, where He always is, completely identified with the transgressors, but central to all things and all men. As He was in the midst on the Cross, with a penitent on one hand and a rejecter on the other, He is still in the midst of humanity, and His judgment-seat will be as central as His Cross was.

All the Evangelists give the title written over the Cross, but John alone tells that it was Pilate's malicious invention. He thought that he was having a final fling at the priests, and little knew how truly his title, which was meant as a bitter jest, was a fact. He had it put into the three tongues in use--Hebrew, the national tongue; Greek, the common medium of intercourse between varying nationalities; and Latinthe official language. He did not know that he was proclaiming the universal dominion of Jesus, and prophesying that wisdom as represented by Greece, law and imperial power as represented by Rome, and all previous revelation as represented by Israel, would yet bow before the Crucified, and recognise that His Cross was His throne.

The high-priestswinced, and would fain have had the title altered. Their wish once more denied Jesus, and added to their condemnation, but it did not move Pilate. It would have been well for him if he had been as firm in carrying out his convictions of justice as in abiding by his bitter jest. He was obstinate in the wrong place, partly because he was angry with the rulers, and partly to recover his self-respect, which had been damaged by his vacillation. But his stiff-necked speech had a more tragic meaning than he knew, for what he had writtenon his own life-page on that day could never be erased, and will confront him. We are all writing an imperishable record, and we shall have to read it out hereafter, and acknowledge our handwriting.

John next sets in strong contrast the two groups round the Cross--the stolid soldiers and the sad friends. The four legionaries went through their work as a very ordinary piece of military duty. They were well accustomed to crucify rebel Jews, and saw no difference between these three and former prisoners. They watched the pangs without a touch of pity, and only wished that death might come soon, and let them get back to their barracks. How blind men may be to what they are gazing at! If knowledge measures guilt, how slight the culpability of the soldiers! They were scarcely more guilty than the mallet and nails which they used. The Sufferer's clothes were their perquisite, and their division was conducted on cool business principles, and with utter disregard of the solemn nearness of death. Could callous indifference go further than to cast lots for the robe at the very foot of the Cross?

But the thing that most concerns us here is that Jesus submitted to that extremity of shame and humiliation, and hung there naked for all these hours, gazed on, while the light lasted, by a mocking crowd. He had set the perfect Pattern of lowly self-abnegation when, amid the disciples in the upper room, He had laid aside His garments, but now He humbles Himself yet more, being clothed only with shame. Therefore should we clothe Him with heartslove. Therefore God has clothed Him with the robes of imperial majesty.

Another point emphasised by John is the fulfilment of prophecy in this act. The seamless robe, probably woven by loving hands, perhaps by some of the weeping women who stood there, was too valuable to divide, and it would be a moment's pastime to cast lots for it. John saw, in the expedient naturally suggested to four rough men, who all wanted the robe but did not want to quarrel over it, a fulfilment of the cry of the ancient sufferer, who had lamented that his enemies made so sure of his death that they divided his garments and cast lots for his vesture. But he was wiser than he knew, and, while his words were to his own apprehension but a vivid metaphor expressing his desperate condition, the Spirit which was inhim did signifyby them the sufferings of Christ. Theories of prophecy or sacrifice which deny the correctness of John's interpretation have the New Testament against them, and assume to know more about the workings of inspiration than is either modest or scientific.

What a contrast the other group presents! John's enumeration of the women may be read so as to mention four or three, according as His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, is taken to mean one woman or two. The latter is the more probable supposition, and it is also probable that the unnamed sister of our Lord's mother was no other than Salome, John's own mother. If so, entrusting Mary to John's care would be the more natural. Tender care, joined with consciousness that henceforth the relation of son and mother was to be supplanted, not merely by Death's separating fingers, but by faith's uniting bond, breathed through the word, so loving yet so removing, Woman, behold thy son!Dying trust in the humble friend, which would go far to make the friend worthy of it, breathed in the charge, to which no form of address corresponding to Womanis prefixed. Jesus had nothing else to give as a parting gift, but He gave these two to each other, and enriched both. He showed His own loving heart, and implied His faithful discharge of all filial duties hitherto. And He taught us the lesson, which many of us have proved to be true, that losses are best made up when we hear Him pointing us by them to new offices of help to others, and that, if we will let Him, He will point us too to what will fill empty places in our hearts and homes.

The second of the words on the Cross which we owe to John is that pathetic expression, I thirst. Most significant is the insight into our Lord's consciousness which John, here as elsewhere, ventures to give. Not till He knew that all things were accomplisheddid He give heed to the pangs of thirst, which made so terrible a part of the torture of crucifixion. The strong will kept back the bodily cravings so long as any unfulfilled duty remained. Now Jesus had nothing to do but to die, and before He died He let flesh have one little alleviation. He had refused the stupefying draught which would have lessened suffering by dulling consciousness, but He asked for the draught which would momentarily slake the agony of parched lips and burning throat.

The words of verse 28 are not to be taken as meaning that Jesus said I thirstwith the mere intention of fulfilling the Scripture. His utterance was the plaint of a real need, not a performance to fill a part. But it is John who sees in that wholly natural cry the fulfilment of the psalm (Ps. lxix. 21). All Christ's bodily sufferings may be said to be summed up in this one word, the only one in which they found utterance. The same lips that said, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink, said this. Infinitely pathetic in itself, that cry becomes almost awful in its appeal to us when we remember who uttered it, and why He bore these pangs. The very Fountain of living waterknew the pang of thirst that every one that thirsteth might come to the waters, and might drink, not water only, but wine and milk, without money or price.

John's last contribution to our knowledge of our Lord's words on the Cross is that triumphant It is finished, wherein there spoke, not only the common dying consciousness of life being ended, but the certitude, which He alone of all who have died, or will die, had the right to feel and utter, that every task was completed, that all God's will was accomplished, all Messiah's work done, all prophecy fulfilled, redemption secured, God and man reconciled. He looked back over all His life and saw no failure, no falling below the demands of the occasion, nothing that could have been bettered, nothing that should not have been there. He looked upwards, and even at that moment He heard in His soul the voice of the Father saying, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!

Christ's work is finished. It needs no supplement. It can never be repeated or imitated while the world lasts, and will not lose its power through the ages. Let us trust to it as complete for all our needs, and not seek to strengthen the sure foundationwhich it has laid by any shifting, uncertain additions of our own. But we may remember, too, that while Christ's work is, in one aspect, finished, when He bowed His head, and by His own will gave up the ghost, in another aspect His work is not finished, nor will be, until the whole benefits of His incarnation and death are diffused through, and appropriated by, the world. He is working to-day, and long ages have yet to pass, in all probability, before the voice of Him that sitteth on the throne shall say It is done!