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

**JOHN-111**. **JOSEPH AND NICODEMUS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And after this Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; ... And there came also Nicodemus which at the first came to Jesus by night."*

*John 19:38-39*

While Christ lived, these two men had been unfaithful to their convictions; but His death, which terrified and paralysed and scattered His avowed disciples, seems to have shamed and stung them into courage. They came now, when they must have known that it was too late, to lavish honour and tears on the corpse of the Master whom they had been too cowardly to acknowledge, whilst acknowledgment might yet have availed. How keen an arrow of self-condemnation must have pierced their hearts as they moved in their offices of love, which they thought that He could never know, round His dead corpse!

They were both members of the Sanhedrim; the same motives, no doubt, had withheld each of them from confessing Christ; the same impulses united them in this too late confession of discipleship. Nicodemus had had the conviction, at the beginning of Christ's ministry, that He was at least a miraculously attested and God-sent Teacher. But the fear which made him steal to Jesus by night--the unenviable distinction which the Evangelist pitilessly reiterates at each mention of him--arrested his growth and kept him dumb when silence was treason. Joseph of Arimathea is described by two of the Evangelists as a disciple; by the other two as a devout Israelite, like Simeon and Anna, waiting for the Kingdom of God. Luke informs us that he had not concurred in the condemnation of Jesus, but leads us to believe that his dissent had been merely silent. Perhaps he was more fully convinced than Nicodemus, and at the same time even more timid in avowing his convictions.

We may take these two contrite cowards as they try to atone for their unfaithfulness to their living Master by their ministrations to Him dead, as examples of secret disciples, and see here the causes, the misery, and the cure of such.

**I. Let us look at them as illustrations of secret discipleship and its causes.**

They were restrained from the avowal of the Messiahship of Jesus by fear. There is nothing in the organisation of society at this day to make any man afraid of avowing the ordinary kind of Christianity which satisfies the most of us; rather it is the proper thing with the bulk of us middle-class people, to say that in some sense or other we are Christians. But when it comes to a real avowal, a real carrying out of a true discipleship, there are as many and as formidable, though very different, impediments in the way to-day, from those which blocked the path of these two cowards in our text. In all regions of life it is hard to work out into practice any moral conviction whatever. How many of us are there who have beliefs about social and moral questions which we are ashamed to avow in certain companies for fear of the finger of ridicule being pointed at us? It is not only in the Church, and in reference to purely religious belief, that we find the curse of secret discipleship, but it is everywhere. Wherever there are moral questions which are yet the subject of controversy, and have not been enthroned with the hallelujahs of all men, you get people that carry their convictions shut up in their own breasts, and lock their lips in silence, when there is most need of frank avowal. The political, social, and moral conflicts of this day have their secret disciples, who will only come out of their holes when the battle is over, and will then shout with the loudest.

But to turn to the more immediate subject before us, how many men and women, I wonder, are there who ought to be and are not, distinctly and openly united with the Christian community?

I do not mean to say--God forbid that I should--that connection with any existing church is the same as a connection with Jesus Christ, or that the neglect to be so associated is tantamount to secret discipleship; I know there are plenty of other ways of acknowledging Him than that, but I am quite sure that this is one department in which a large number of men, in all our congregations--and there are not a few in this congregation--need a very plain word of earnest remonstrance. It is one way of manifesting whose you are, that you should unite yourselves openly with those who belong to Him, and who try to serve Him. I do not dwell upon this matter, because I do not wish to be misunderstood, as if I supposed that union to a church is equivalent to union with Him; or that a connection with a church is the only, or even the principal way of making an open avowal of Christian principle; but I am certain that amongst us in this day there is a laxity in this matter which is doing harm both to the Church and to some of you. Therefore I say to you, dear friends, suffer the word of exhortation as to the duty of openly uniting yourselves with the Christian community.

But far higher and more important than that--do you ever say anyhow that you belong to Jesus Christ? In a society like ours, in which the influence of Christian morality affects a great many people who have no personal connection with Him, it is not always enough that the life should preach, because over a very large field of ordinary daily life the underground influence, so to speak, of Christian ethics has infiltrated and penetrated, so that many a tree bears a greener leaf because of the water that has found its way to it from the river, though it be planted far from its banks. Even those who are not Christians live outward lives largely regulated by Christian principle. The whole level of morality has been heaved up, as the coastline has sometimes been by hidden fires slowly working, by the imperceptible, gradual influence of the gospel.

So it needs sometimes that you should say I am a Christian, as well as that you should live like one. Ask yourselves, dear friends! whether you have buttoned your greatcoat over your uniform that nobody may know whose soldier you are. Ask yourselves whether you have sometimes held your tongues because you knew that if you spoke people would find out where you came from and what country you belonged to. Ask yourselves, Have you ever accompanied the witness of your lives with the commentary of your confession? Did you ever, anywhere but in a church, stand up and say, I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, my Lord?

And then ask yourselves another question: Have you ever dared to be singular? We are all of us in this world often thrust into circumstances in which it is needful that we should say, So do not I because of the fear of the Lord. Boys go to school; they used always to kneel down at their bedsides and say their prayers when they were at home. They do not like to do it with all those critical and cruel eyes--and there are no eyes more critical and more cruel than young eyes--fixed upon them, and so they give up prayer. A young man comes to Manchester, goes into a warehouse, pure of life, and with a tongue that has not blossomed into rank fruit of obscenity and blasphemy. And he hears, at the next desk there, words that first of all bring a blush to his cheek, and he is tempted into conduct that he knows to be a denial of his Master. And he covers up his principles, and goes with the tempters into the evil. I might sketch a dozen other cases, but I need not. In one form or other, we have all to go through the same ordeal. We have sometimes to dare to be in a minority of one, if we will not be untrue to our Master and to ourselves.

Now the reasons for this unfaithfulness to conviction and to Christ, are put by the Apostle here in a very blunt fashion--For fear of the Jews. That is not what we say to ourselves; some of us say, Oh! I have got beyond outward organisations. I find it enough to be united to Christ. The Christian communities are very imperfect. There is not any of them that I quite see eye to eye with. So I stand apart, contemplating all, and happy in my unsectarianism. Yes, I quite admit the faults, and suppose that as long as men think at all they will not find any Church which is entirely to their mind; and I rejoice to think that some day we shall all outgrow visible organisations--when we get there where the seer saw no temple therein. Admitting all that, I also know that isolation is always weakness, and that if a man stand apart from the wholesome friction of his brethren, he will get to be a great diseased mass of oddities, of very little use either to himself, or to men, or to God. It is not a good thing, on the whole, that people should fight for their own hands, and the wisest thing any of us can do is, preserving our freedom of opinion, to link ourselves with some body of Christian people, and to find in them our shelter and our home.

But these two in our text were moved by fear. They dreaded ridicule, the loss of position, the expulsion from Sanhedrim and synagogue, social ostracism, and all the armoury of offensive weapons which would have been used against them by their colleagues. So, ignobly they kept their thumb on their convictions, and the two of them sat dumb in the council when the scornful question was asked, Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on Him?when they ought to have started to their feet and said Yes, we have!And when Nicodemus ventured a feeble remonstrance, which he carefully divested of all appearance of personal sympathy, and put upon the mere abstract ground of fair play--Doth our law judge any man before it hear him?--one contemptuous question was enough to reduce him to silence. Art thou also of Galilee?was enough to cow him into dropping his timid plea for Him whom in his heart he believed to be the Messiah.

So with us, the fear of loss of position comes into play. I have heard of people who settled the congregation which they should honour by their presence from the consideration of the social advantages which it offered. I have heard of their saying, Oh! we cannot attach ourselves to such and such a community; there is no society for the children. Then many of us are very much afraid of being laughed at. Ridicule, I think, to sensitive people in a generation like ours, is pretty nearly as bad as the old rack and the physical torments of martyrdom. We have all got so nervous and high-strung nowadays, and depend so much upon other people's good opinion, that it is a dreadful thing to be ridiculed. Timid people do not come to the front and say what they believe, and take up unpopular causes, because they cannot bear to be pointed at and pelted with the abundant epithets of disparagement, which are always flung at earnest people who will not worship at the appointed shrines, and have sturdy convictions of their own.

Ridicule breaks no bones. It has no power if you make up your mind that it shall not have. Face it, and it will only be unpleasant for a moment at first. When a child goes into the sea to bathe, he is uncomfortable till his head has been fairly under water, and then after that he is all right. So it is with the ridicule which out-and-out Christian faithfulness may bring on us. It only hurts at the beginning, and people very soon get tired. Face your fears and they will pass away. It is not perhaps a good advice to give unconditionally, but it is a very good one in regard of all moral questions--always do what you are afraid to do. In nine cases out of ten it will be the right thing to do. If people would only discount the fear of men which bringeth a snareby making up their minds to neglect it, there would be fewer dumb dogsand secret discipleshaunting and weakening the Church of Christ.

**II. I have spent too much time upon this part of my subject, and I must deal briefly with the following. Let me say a word about the illustrations that we have in this text of the miseries of this secret discipleship.**

How much these two men lost--all those three years of communion with the Master; all His teaching, all the stimulus of His example, all the joy of fellowship with Him! They might have had a treasure in their memories that would have enriched them for all their days, and they had flung it all away because they were afraid of the curled lip of a long-bearded Pharisee or two.

And so it always is; the secret disciple diminishes his communion with his Master. It is the valleys which lay their bosoms open to the sun that rejoice in the light and warmth; the narrow clefts in the rocks that shut themselves grudgingly up against the light, are all dank and dark and dismal. And it is the men that come and avow their discipleship that will have the truest communion with their Lord. Any neglected duty puts a film between a man and his Saviour; any conscious neglect of duty piles up a wall between you and Christ. Be sure of this, that if from cowardly or from selfish regard to position and advantages, or any other motive, we stand apart from Him, and have our lips locked when we ought to speak, there will steal over our hearts a coldness, His face will be averted from us, and our eyes will not dare to seek, with the same confidence and joy, the light of His countenance.

What you lose by unfaithful wrapping of your convictions in a napkin and burying them in the ground is the joyful use of the convictions, the deeper hold of the truth by which you live, and before which you bow, and the true fellowship with the Master whom you acknowledge and confess. And when these men came for Christ's corpse and bore it away, what a sharp pang went through their hearts! They woke at last to know what cowardly traitors they had been. If you are a disciple at all, and a secret one, you will awake to know what you have been doing, and the pang will be a sharp one. If you do not awake in this life, then the distance between you and your Lord will become greater and greater; if you do, then it will be a sad reflection that there are years of treason lying behind you. Nicodemus and Joseph had the veil torn away by the contemplation of their dead Master. You may have the veil torn away from your eyes by the sight of the throned Lord; and when you pass into the heavens may even there have some sharp pang of condemnation when you reflect how unfaithful you have been.

Blessed be His name! The assurance is firm that if a man be a disciple he shall be saved; but the warning is sure that if he be an unfaithful and a secret disciple there will be a life-long unfaithfulness to a beloved Master to be purged away so as by fire.

**III. And so, lastly, let me point you to the cure.**

These men learned to be ashamed of their cowardice, and their dumb lips learned to speak, and their shy, hidden love forced for itself a channel by which it could flow out into the light; because of Christ's death. And in another fashion that same death and Cross are for us, too, the cure of all cowardice and selfish silence. The sight of Christ's Cross makes the coward brave. It was no small piece of courage for Joseph to go to Pilate and avow his sympathy with a condemned criminal. The love must have been very true which was forced to speak by disaster and death. And to us the strongest motive for stiffening our vacillating timidity into an iron fortitude, and fortifying us strongly against the fear of what man can do to us, is to be found in gazing upon His dying love who met and conquered all evils and terrors for our sakes.

That Cross will kindle a love which will not rest concealed, but will be like the ointment of the right hand which bewrayeth itself. I can fancy men to whom Christ is only what He was to Nicodemus at first, a Teacher sent from God, occupying Nicodemusposition of hidden belief in His teaching without feeling any need to avow themselves His followers; but if once into our souls there has come the constraining and the melting influence of that great and wondrous love which died for us, then, dear brethren, it is unnatural that we should be silent. If those for whom Christ has diedshould hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out. That death, wondrous, mysterious, terrible, but radiant, and glorious with hope, with pardon, with holiness for us and for all the world--that death smites on the chords of our hearts, if I may so speak, and brings out music from them all. The love that died for me will force me to express my love, Then shall the tongue of the dumb sing, and silence will be impossible.

The sight of the Cross not only leads to courage, and kindles a love which demands expression, but it impels to joyful surrender. Joseph gave a place in his own new tomb, where he hoped that one day his bones should be laid by the side of the Master against whom he had sinned--for he had no thought of a resurrection. Nicodemus brought a lavish, almost an extravagant, amount of costly spices, as if by honour to the dead he could atone for treason to the living. And both the one and the other teach us that if once we gain the true vision of that great and wondrous love that died on the Cross for us, then the natural language of the loving heart is--

Here, Lord! I give myself away; Tis all that I can do.

If following Him openly involves sacrifices, the sacrifices will be sweet, so long as our hearts look to His dying love. All love delights in expression, and most of all in expression by surrender of precious things, which are most precious because they give love materials which it may lay at the beloved's feet. What are position, possessions, reputation, capacities, perils, losses, self, but the sweet spiceswhich we are blessed enough to be able to lay upon the altar which glorifies the Giver and the gift? The contemplation of Christ's sacrifice--and that alone--will so overcome our natural selfishness as to make sacrifice for His dear sake most blessed.

I beseech you, then, look ever to Him dying on the Cross for each of us. It will kindle our courage, it will make our hearts glow with love, it will turn our silence into melody and music of praise; it will lead us to heights of consecration and joys of confession; and so it will bring us at last into the possession of that wondrous honour which He promised when He said, He that confesseth Me before men, him will I also confess; and he that denieth Me before men, him will I also deny.