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

**JOHN-115**. **THOMAS AND JESUS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And after eight days, again His disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Then came Jesus."*

*John 20:26*

There is nothing more remarkable about the narrative of the resurrection, taken as a whole, than the completeness with which our Lord's appearances met all varieties of temperament, condition, and spiritual standing. Mary, the lover; Peter, the penitent; the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, the thinkers; Thomas, the stiff unbeliever--the presence of the Christ is enough for them all; it cures those that need cure, and gladdens those that need gladdening. I am not going to do anything so foolish as to try to tell over again, less vividly, this well-known story. We all remember its outlines, I suppose: the absence of Thomas from Christ's first meeting with the assembled disciples on Easter evening; the dogged disbelief with which he met their testimony; his arrogant assumption of the right to lay down the conditions on which he should believe, and Christ's gracious acceptance of the conditions; the discovery when they were offered that they were not needful; the burst of glad conviction which lifted him to the loftiest height reached while Christ was on earth, and then the summing up of all in our Lord's words--Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed!--the last Beatitude, that links us and all the generations yet to come with the story, and is like a finger pointing to it, as containing very special lessons for them all.

I simply seek to try to bring out the force and instructiveness of the story. The first point is--

**I. The isolation that misses the sight of the Christ.**

Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. No reason is assigned. The absence may have been purely accidental, but the specification of Thomas as one of the Twelve, seems to suggest that his absence was regarded by the Evangelist as a dereliction of apostolic duty; and the cause of it may be found, I think, with reasonable probability, if we take into account the two other facts that the same Evangelist records concerning this Apostle. One is his exclamation, in which a constitutional tendency to accept the blackest possibilities as certainties, blends very strangely and beautifully with an intense and brave devotion to his Master. Let us also go, said Thomas, when Christ announced His intention, but a few days before the Passion, of returning to the grave of Lazarus, that we may die with Him. He is going to His death, that I am sure of, and I am going to be beside Him even in His death. A constitutional pessimist! The only other notice that we have of him is that he broke in--with apparent irreverence which was not real,--with a brusque contradiction of Christ's saying that they knew the way, and they knew His goal. Lord! we know not whither Thou goest--there spoke pained love fronting the black prospect of eternal separation,--and how can we know the way?--there spoke almost impatient despair.

So is not that the kind of man who on the Resurrection day would have been saying to himself, even more decidedly and more bitterly than the two questioning thinkers on the road to Emmaus had said it, We trusted that this had been He, but it is all over now? The keystone was struck out of the arch, and this brick tumbled away of itself. The hub was taken out of the wheel, and the spokes fell apart. The divisive tendency was begun, as I have had occasion to remark in other sermons. Thomas did the very worst thing that a melancholy man can do, went away to brood in a corner by himself, and so to exaggerate all his idiosyncrasies, to distort the proportion of truth, to hug his despair, by separating himself from his fellows. Therefore he lost what they got, the sight of the Lord. He was not with them when Jesus came. Would he not have been better in the upper room than gloomily turning over in his mind the dissolution of the fair company and the shipwreck of all his hopes?

May we not learn a lesson? I venture to apply these words, dear friends, to our gatherings for worship. The worst thing that a man can do when disbelief, or doubt, or coldness shrouds his sky, and blots out the stars, is to go away alone and shut himself up with his own, perhaps morbid, or, at all events, disturbing thoughts. The best thing that he can do is to go amongst his fellows. If the sermon does not do him any good, the prayers and the praises and the sense of brotherhood will help him. If a fire is going out, draw the dying coals close together, and they will make each other break into a flame. One great reason for some of the less favourable features that modern Christianity presents, is that men are beginning to think less than they ought to do, and less than they used to do, of the obligation and the blessing, whatever their spiritual condition, of gathering together for the worship of God. But, further, there is a far wider thought than that here, which I have already referred to, and which I do not need to dwell upon, namely, that, although, of course, there are very plain limits to be put to the principle, yet it is a principle, that solitude is not the best medicine for any disturbed or saddened soul. It is true that solitude is the mother-country of the strong, and that unless we are accustomed to live very much alone, we shall not live very much with God. But on the other hand, if you cut yourself off from the limiting, and therefore developing, society of your fellows, you will rust, you will become what they call eccentric. Your idiosyncrasies will swell into monstrosities, your peculiarities will not be subjected to the gracious process of pruning which society with your fellows, and especially with Christian hearts, will bring to them. And in every way you will be more likely to miss the Christ than if you were kindly with your kind, and went up to the house of God in company.

Take the next point that is here:

**II. The stiff incredulity that prescribed terms.**

When Thomas came back to his brethren, they met him with the witness that they had seen the Lord, and he met them as they had met the witnesses that brought the same message to them. They had thought the women's words idle tales. Thomas gives them back their own incredulity. I need not remind you of what I have already had occasion to say, how much this frank acknowledgment that none of these, who were afterwards to be witnesses of the Resurrection to the world, accepted testimony to the Resurrection as enough to convince them, enhances the worth of their testimony, and how entirely it shatters the conception that the belief in the Resurrection was a mist that rose from the undrained swamps of their own heated imaginations.

But notice how Thomas exaggerated their position, and took up a far more defiant tone than any of them had done. He is called doubting Thomas. He was no doubter. Flat, frank, dogged disbelief, and not hesitation or doubt, was his attitude. The very form in which he puts his requirement shows how he was hugging his unbelief, and how he had no idea that what he asked would ever be granted. Unless I have so-and-so I will not, indicates an altogether spiritual attitude from what If I have so-and-so, I will, would have indicated. The one is the language of willingness to be persuaded, the other is a token of a determination to be obstinate. What right had he--what right has any man--to say, So-and-so must be made plain to me, or I will not accept a certain truth? You have a right to ask for satisfactory evidence; you have no right to make up your minds beforehand what that must necessarily be. Thomas showed his hand not only in the form of his expression, not only in his going beyond his province and prescribing the terms of surrender, but also in the terms which he prescribed. True, he is only saying to the other Apostles, I will give in if I have what you had, for Jesus Christ had said to them, Handle Me and see!But although thus they could say nothing in opposition, it is clear that he was asking more than was needful, and more than he had any right to ask. And he shows his hand, too, in another way. I will not believe!--what business had he, what business have you, to bring any question of will into the act of belief or credence? Thus, in all these four points, the form of the demand, the fact of the demand, the substance of the demand, and the implication in it that to give or withhold assent was a matter to be determined by inclination, this man stands not as an example of a doubter, but as an example, of which there are too many copies amongst us always, of a determined disbeliever and rejecter.

So I come to the third point, and that is:

**III. The revelation that turned the denier into a rapturous confessor.**

What a strange week that must have been between the two Sundays--that of the Resurrection and the next! Surely it would have been kinder if the Christ had not left the disciples, with their new-found, tremulous, raw conviction. It would have been less kind if He had been with them, for there is nothing that is worse for the solidity of a man's spiritual development than that it should be precipitated, and new thoughts must have time to take the shape of the mind into which they come, and to mould the shape of the mind into which they come. So they were left to quiet reflection, to meditation, to adjust their thoughts, to get to understand the bearings of the transcendent fact. And as a mother will go a little way off from her little child, in order to encourage it to try to walk, they were left alone to make experiments of that self-reliance which was also reliance on Him, and which was to be their future and their permanent condition. So the week passed, and they became steadier and quieter, and began to be familiar with the thought, and to see some glimpses of what was involved in the mighty fact, of a risen Saviour. Then He comes back again, and when He comes He singles out the unbeliever, leaving the others alone for the moment, and He gives him back, granted, his arrogant conditions. How much ashamed of them Thomas must have been when he heard them quoted by the Lord's own lips! How different they would sound from what they had sounded when, in the self-sufficiency of his obstinate determination, he had blurted them out in answer to his brethren's testimony! There is no surer way of making a good man ashamed of his wild words than just to say them over again to him when he is calm and cool. Christ's granting the request was Christ's sharpest rebuke of the request. But there was not only the gracious and yet chastising granting of the foolish desire, but there was a penetrating warning: Be not faithless, but believing. What did that mean? Well, it meant this: It is not a question of evidence, Thomas; it is a question of disposition. Your incredulity is not due to your not having enough to warrant your belief, but to your tendency and attitude of mind and heart. There is light enough in the sun; it is our eyes that are wrong, and deep below most questions, even of intellectual credence, lies the disposition of the man. The ultimate truths of religion cannot be matters of demonstration any more than the fundamental truths of any science can be proved; any more than Euclid's axioms can be demonstrated; any more than the sense of beauty or the ear for music depend on the understanding. Be not faithless, but believing. The eye that is sound will see the light.

And there is another lesson here. The words of our Lord, literally rendered, are, become not faithless, but believing. There are two tendencies at work with us, and the one or the other will progressively lay hold upon us, and we shall increasingly yield to it. You can cultivate the habit of incredulity until you descend into the class of the faithless; or you can cultivate the opposite habit and disposition until you rise to the high level of a settled and sovereign belief.

It is clear that Thomas did not reach forth his hand and touch. The rush of instantaneous conviction swept him along and bore him far away from the state of mind which had asked for such evidence. Our Lord's words must have pierced his heart, as he thought: Then He was here all the while; He heard my wild words; He loves me still. As Nathanael, when he knew that Jesus had seen him under the fig-tree, broke out with the exclamation, Rabbi! Thou art the Son of God, so Thomas, smitten as by a lightning flash with the sense of Jesusall-embracing knowledge and all-forgiving love, forgets his incredulity and breaks into the rapturous confession, the highest ever spoken while He was on earth: My Lord and my God!So swiftly did his whole attitude change. It was as when the eddying volumes of smoke in some great conflagration break into sudden flame, the ruddier and hotter, the blacker they were. Sight may have made Thomas believe that Jesus was risen, but it was something other and more inward than sight that opened his lips to cry, My Lord and my God!Finally, we note--

**IV. A last Beatitude that extends to all generations.**

Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed. I need not do more than just in a sentence remind you that we shall very poorly understand either this saying or this Gospel or the greater part of the New Testament, if we do not make it very clear to our minds that believingis not credence only but trust. The object of the Christian's faith is not a proposition; it is not a dogma nor a truth, but a Person. And the act of faith is not an acceptance of a given fact, a Resurrection or any other, as true, but it is a reaching out of the whole nature to Him and a resting upon Him. I have said that Thomas had no right to bring his will to bear on the act of belief, considered as the intellectual act of accepting a thing as true. But Christian faith, being more than intellectual belief, does involve the activity of the will. Credence is the starting-point, but it is no more. There may be belief in the truth of the gospel and not a spark of faith in the Christ revealed by the gospel.

Even in regard to that lower kind of belief, the assent which does not rest on sense has its own blessing. We sometimes are ready to think that it would have been easier to believe if we had seen with our eyes, and our hands had handled the (incarnate) Word of Lifebut that is a mistake.

This generation, and all generations that have not seen Him, are not in a less advantageous position in regard either to credence or to trust, than were those that companied with Him on earth, and the blessing Which He breathed out in that upper room comes floating down the ages like a perfume diffused through the atmosphere, and is with us fragrant as it was in the days of His flesh. There is nothing in the world's history comparable to the warmth and closeness of conscious contact with that Christ, dead for nearly nineteen centuries now, which is the experience today of thousands of Christian men and women. All other names pass, and as they recede through the ages, thickening veils of oblivion, mists of forgetfulness, gather round them. They melt away into the fog and are forgotten. Why is it that one Person, and one Person only, triumphs even in this respect over space and time, and is the same close Friend with whom millions of hearts are in loving touch, as He was to those that gathered around Him upon earth?

What is the blessing of this faith that does not rest on sense, and only in a small measure on testimony or credence? Part of its blessing is that it delivers us from the tyranny of sense, sets us free from the crowding oppression of things seen and temporal; draws back the veil and lets us behold the things that are unseen and eternal. Faith is sight, the sight of the inward eye. It is the direct perception of the unseen. It sees Him who is invisible. The vision which is given to the eye of faith is more real in the true sense of that word, more substantial in the true sense of that word, more reliable and more near than that sight by which the bodily eye beholds external things. We see, when we trust, greater things than when we look. The blessing of blessings is that the faith which triumphs over the things seen and temporal, brings into every life the presence of the unseen Lord.

Brethren! do not confound credence with trust. Remember that trust does involve an element of will. Ask yourselves if the things seen and temporal are great enough, lasting enough, real enough to satisfy you, and then remember whose lips said, Become not faithless but believing, and breathed His last Beatitude upon those who have not seen and yet have believed. We may all have that blessing lying like dew upon us, amidst the dust and scorching heat of the things seen and temporal. We shall have it, if our heart's trust is set on Him, whom one of the listeners on that Sunday spoke of long after, in words which seem to echo that promise, as Jesus in whom though now ye see Him not, yet believing ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.