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

**JOHN-116**. **THE SILENCE OF SCRIPTURE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name."*

*John 20:30-31*

It is evident that these words were originally the close of this Gospel, the following chapter being an appendix, subsequently added by the writer himself. In them we have the Evangelist's own acknowledgment of the incompleteness of his Gospel, and his own statement of the purpose which he had in view in composing it. That purpose was first of all a doctrinal one, and he tells us that in carrying it out he omitted many things that he could have put in if he had chosen. But that doctrinal purpose was subordinate to a still further aim. His object was not only to present the truth that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, but to present it in such a way as to induce his readers to believe in that Christ. And he desired that they might have faith in order that they might have life.

Now, it is a very good old canon in judging of a book that in every workwe are to regard the writer's end, and if that simple principle had been applied to this Gospel, a great many of the features in it which have led to some difficulty would have been seen to be naturally explained by the purpose which the Evangelist had in view.

But this text may be applied very much more widely than to John's Gospel. We may use it to point our thoughts to the strange silences and incompletenesses of the whole of Revelation, and to the explanation of these incompletenesses by the consideration of the purpose which it all had in view. In that sense I desire to look at these words before us.

**I. First, then, we have here set forth the incompleteness of Scripture.**

Take this Gospel first. Anybody who looks at it can see that it is a fragment. It is not meant to be a biography; it is avowedly a selection, and a selection under the influence, as I shall have to show you presently, of a distinct dogmatic purpose. There is nothing in it about Christ's birth, nothing in it about His baptism, nor about His selection of His Apostles. There is scarcely anything about the facts of His outward life at all. There is scarcely a word about the whole of His ministry in Galilee. There is not one of His parables, there are only seven of His miracles before the Resurrection, and two of these occur also in the other Evangelists. There is scarcely any of His ethical teaching; there is not a word about the Lord's Supper.

And so I might go on enumerating many remarkable gaps in this Gospel. Nearly half of it is taken up with the incidents of one week at the end of His life, and the incidents of and after the Resurrection. Of the remainder-by far the larger portion consists of several conversations which are hung upon miracles that seem to be related principally for the sake of these. The whole of the phenomena show us at once the fragmentary character of this Gospel as stamped upon the very surface.

And when we turn to the other three, the same thing is true, though less strikingly so. Why was it that in the Church, after the completion of the Scriptural canon, there sprang up a whole host of Apocryphal Gospels, full of childish stories of events which people felt had been passed over with strange silence, in the teachings of the four Evangelists: stories of His childhood, for instance, and stories about what happened between His death and His resurrection? A great many miracles were added to those that have been told us in Scripture. The condensed hints of the canonical Gospels received a great expansion, which indicated how much their silence about certain points had been felt. What a tiny pamphlet they make! Is it not strange that the greatest event in the world's history should be told in such brief outline, and that here, too, the mustard seed, less than the least of all seeds, should have become such a great tree? Put the four Gospels down by the side of the two thick octavo volumes, which it is the regulation thing to write nowadays, as the biography of any man that has a name at all, and you will feel their incompleteness as biographies. They are but a pen-and-ink drawing of the Sun! And yet, although they be so tiny that you might sit down and read them all in an evening over the fire, is it not strange that they have stamped on the mind of the world an image so deep and so sharp, of such a character as the world never saw elsewhere? They are fragments, but they have left a symmetrical and a unique impression on the consciousness of the whole world.

And then, if you turn to the whole Book, the same thing is true, though in a modified sense there. I have no time to dwell upon that fruitful field, but the silence of Scripture is quite as eloquent as its speech. Think, for instance, of how many things in the Bible are taken for granted which one would not expect to be taken for granted in a book of religious instruction. It takes for granted the being of a God. It takes for granted our relations to Him. It takes for granted our moral nature. In its later portions, at all events, it takes for granted the future life. Look at how the Bible, as a whole, passes by, without one word of explanation or alleviation, a great many of the difficulties which gather round some of its teaching. For instance, we find no attempt to explain the divine nature of our Lord; or the existence of the three Persons in the Godhead. It has not a word to say in explanation of the mystery of prayer; or of the difficulty of reconciling the Omnipotent will of God on the one hand, with our own free will on the other. It has not a word to explain, though many a word to proclaim and enforce, the fact of Christ's death as the atonement for the sins of the whole world. Observe, too, how scanty the information on points on which the heart craves for more light. How closely, for instance, the veil is kept over the future life! How many questions which are not prompted by mere curiosity, our sorrow and our love ask in vain!

Nor is the incompleteness of Scripture as a historical book less marked. Nations and men appear on its pages abruptly, rending the curtain of oblivion, and striding to the front of the stage for a moment, and then they disappear, swallowed up of night. It has no care to tell the stories of any of its heroes, except for so long as they were the organs of that divine breath, which, breathed through the weakest reed, makes music. The self-revelation of God, not the acts and fortunes of even His noblest servants, is the theme of the Book. It is full of gaps about matters that any sciolist or philosopher or theologian would have filled up for it. There it stands, a Book unique in the world's history, unique in what it says, and no less unique in what it does not say.

Many other things truly didthat divine Spirit in His march through the ages, which are not written in this book; but these are written that ye might believe.

**II. And so that brings me next to say a word or two about the more immediate purpose which explains all these gaps and incompletenesses.**

John's Gospel, and the other three Gospels, and the whole Bible, New Testament and Old, have this for their purpose, to produce in men's hearts the faith in Jesus as the Christand as the Son of God.

I need not speak at length about this one Gospel with any special regard to that thought. I have already said that the Evangelist avows that his work is a selection, that he declares that the purpose that determined his selection was doctrinal, and that he picked out facts which would tend to represent Jesus Christ to us in the twofold capacity,--as the Christ, the Fulfiller of all the expectations and promises of the Old Covenant, and as the Son of God. The one of these titles is a name of office, the other a name of nature; the one declares that He had come to be, and to do, all to which types and prophecies and promises had dimly pointed, and the other declares that He was the Eternal Word, which in the beginning was with God and was God, and was manifest here upon earth to us.

This was his purpose, and this representation of Jesus Christ is that which shapes all the facts and all the phenomena of this Gospel, from the very first words of it to its close.

And so, although it is wide from my present subject, I may just make one parenthetical remark, to the effect that it is ridiculous in the face of this statement for criticsto say, as some of them do: The author of the fourth Gospel has not told us this, that, and the other incident in Christ's life, therefore, he did not know it. Then some of them will draw the conclusion that John's Gospel is not to be trusted in the given case, because he does not give us a certain incident, and others might draw the conclusion that the other three Evangelists are not to be trusted because they do give it us. And the whole fabric is built up upon a blunder, and would have been avoided if people had listened when John said to them: I knew a great many things about Jesus Christ, but I did not put them down here because I was not writing a biography, but preaching a gospel; and what I wanted to proclaim was that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

But now we may extend that a great deal further. It is just as true about the whole New Testament. The four Gospels are written to tell us these two facts about Christ. They are none of them merely biographies; as such they are singularly deficient, as we have seen. But they are biographies plus a doctrine; and the biography is told mainly for the sake of carrying this twofold truth into men's understandings and hearts, that Jesus is, first of all, the Christ, and second, the Son of God.

And then comes the rest of the New Testament, which is nothing more than the working out of the theoretical and practical consequence of these great truths. All the Epistles, the Book of Revelation, and the history of the Church, as embodied in the Acts of the Apostles,--all these are but the consequences of that fundamental truth; and the whole of Scripture in its later portions is but the drawing of the inferences and the presenting of the duties that flow from the facts that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

And what about the Old Testament? Why, this about it: that whatever may be the conclusion as to the date and authorship of any of the books in it,--and I am not careful to contend about these at present;--and whatever a man may believe about the verbal prophecies which most of us recognise there,--there is stamped unmistakably upon the whole system, of which the Old Testament is the record, an onward-looking attitude. It is all anticipatory of good things to come, and of a Person who will bring them. Sacrifice, sacred offices, such as priesthood and kingship, and the whole history of Israel, have their faces turned to the future. They that went before, and they that followed after, cried "Hosanna! Blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord!"This Christ towers up above the history of the world and the process of revelation, like Mount Everest among the Himalayas. To that great peak all the country on the one side runs upwards, and from it all the valleys on the other descend; and the springs are born there which carry verdure and life over the world.

Christ, the Son of God, is the centre of Scripture; and the Book-- whatever be the historical facts about its origin, its authorship, and the date of the several portions of which it is composed--the Book is a unity, because there is driven right through it, like a core of gold, either in the way of prophecy and onward-looking anticipation, or in the way of history and grateful retrospect, the reference to the one Name that is above every name, the name of the Christ, the Son of God.

And all its incompleteness, its fragmentariness, its carelessness about persons, are intended, as are the slight parts in a skilful artist's handiwork, to emphasise the beauty and the sovereignty of that one central Figure on which all lights are concentrated, and on which the painter has lavished all the resources of his art. So God--for God is the Author of the Bible--on this great canvas has painted much in sketchy outline, and left much unfilled in, that every eye may be fixed on the central Figure, the Christ of God, on whose head comes down the Dove, and round whom echoes the divine declaration: This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

But it is not merely in order to represent Jesus as the Christ of God that these things are written, but it is that that representation may become the object of our faith. If the intention of Scripture had been simply to establish the fact that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God, it might have been done in a very different fashion. A theological treatise would have been enough to do that. But if the object be that men should not only accept with their understandings the truth concerning Christ's office and nature, but that their hearts should go out to Him, and that they should rest their sinful souls upon Him as the Son of God and the Christ, then there is no other way to accomplish that, but by the history of His life and the manifestation of His heart. If the object were simply to make us know about Christ, we do not need a Book like this; but if the object is to lead us to put our faith in Him, then we must have what we have here, the infinitely touching and tender Figure of Jesus Christ Himself, set before us in all its sweetness and beauty as He lived and moved and died for us.

And so, dear friends, let me put one last word here about this part of my subject. If this be the purpose of Scripture, then let us learn on the one hand the wretched insufficiency of a mere orthodox creed, and let us learn on the other hand the equal insufficiency of a mere creedless emotion.

If the purpose of Scripture, in these Gospels, and all its parts, is that we should believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that purpose is not accomplished when we simply yield our understanding to that truth and accept it as a great many people do. That was much more the fault of the last generation than of this, though many of us may still make the mistake of supposing that we are Christians because we idly assent to--or, at least, do not deny, and so fancy that we accept--Christian truth. But, as Luther says in one of his rough figures, Human nature is like a drunken peasant; if you put him up on the horse on the one side, he is sure to tumble down on the other. And so the reaction from the heartless, unpractical orthodoxy of half a century ago has come with a vengeance to-day, when everybody is saying, Oh! give me a Christianity without dogma!Well, I say that too, about a great many of the metaphysical subtleties which have been called Doctrinal Christianity. But this doctrine of the nature and office of Jesus Christ cannot be given up, and the Christianity which Christ and His Apostles taught be retained. Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? Do you trust your soul to Him in these characters? If you do, I think we can shake hands. If you do not, Scripture has failed to do its work on you, and you have not reached the point which all God's lavish revelation has been expended on the world that you and all men might attain.

**III. Now, lastly, notice the ultimate purpose of the whole.**

Scripture is not given to us merely to make us know something about God in Christ, nor only in order that we may have faith in the Christ thus revealed to us, but for a further end--great, glorious, but, blessed be His Name! not distant--namely, that we may have life in His name. Lifeis deep, mystical, inexplicable by any other words than itself. It includes pardon, holiness, well-being, immortality, Heaven; but it is more than they all.

This life comes into our dead hearts and quickens them by union with God. That which is joined to God lives. Each being according to its nature, is, on condition of the divine power acting upon it. This bit of wood upon which I put my hand, and the hand which I put upon it, would equally crumble into nothingness if they were separated from God.

You can separate your wills and your spiritual nature from Him, and thus separated you are dead in trespasses and in sins. And, O brother! the message comes to you: there is life in that great Christ, in His name; that is to say, in that revealed character of His by which He is made known to us as the Christ and the Son of God.

Union with Him in His Sonship will bring life into dead hearts. He is the true Prometheuswho has come from Heaven with fire, the fire of the divine Life in the reedof His humanity, and He imparts it to us all if we will. He lays Himself upon us, as the prophet laid himself on the little child in the upper chamber; and lip to lip, and beating heart to dead heart, He touches our death, and it is quickened into life.

The condition on which that great Name will bring to us life is simply our faith. Do you believe in Him, and trust yourself to Him, as He who came to fulfil all that prophet, priest, and king, sacrifice, altar, and Temple of old times prophesied and looked for? Do you trust in Him as the Son of God who comes down to earth that we in Him might find the immortal life which He is ready to give? If you do, then, dear brethren! the end that God has in view in all His revelation, that Christ had in view in His bitter Passion, has been accomplished for you. If you do not it has not. You may admire Him, you may think loftily of Him, you may be ready to call Him by many great and appreciative names, but Oh! unless you have learned to see in Him the divine Saviour of your souls, you have not seen what God means you to see.

But if you have, then all other questions about this Book, important as they are in their places, may settle themselves as they will; you have got the kernel, the thing that it was meant to bring you. Many an erudite scholar, who has studied the Bible all his life, has missed the purpose for which it was given; and many a poor old woman in her garret has found it. It is not meant to wrangle over, it is not meant to be read as an interesting product of the religious consciousness, it is not to be admired as all that remains of the literature of a nation that had a genius for religion; but it is to be taken as being God's great Word to the world, the record of the revelation that He has given us in His Son. The Eternal Word is the theme of all the written word. Have you made the jewel which is brought us in that casket your own? Is Jesus to you the Son of the living God, believing on whom you share His life, and become sons of Godby Him? Can you take on to your thankful lips that triumphant and rapturous confession of the doubting Thomas,--the flag flying on the completed roof-tree of this Gospel--My Lord and my God? If you can, you will receive the blessing which Christ then promised to all of us standing beyond the limits of that little group, who have not seen and yet have believed--even that eternal life which flows into our dead spirits from the Christ, the Son of God, who is the Light of the world, and the Life of men.