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

**JOHN-117**. **AN ELOQUENT CATALOGUE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of His disciples."*

*John 21:2*

This chapter, containing the infinitely significant and pathetic account of our Lord's appearance to these disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, is evidently an appendix to the Gospel of John. The design of that Gospel is complete with the previous chapter, and there is a formal close, as of the whole book, at the end thereof. But whilst obviously an appendix, this chapter is as obviously the work of the same hand as wrote the Gospel. There are many minute points of identity between the style of it and of the rest of the work, so that there can be no difficulty or doubt as to whence it came. This enumeration of these seven disciples, regarded as being the work of John himself, seems to me to be significant, and to contain a good many lessons. And I desire to turn to these now.

**I. First of all, the fact that they were together is significant.**

How did they come to hold together? How had they not yielded to the temptation to seek safety by flight, which would have been the natural course after the death of their Leader on a charge of treason against the Roman power? The process of disintegration had begun, and we see it going on in the conduct of the disciples before the Resurrection. The Shepherd was smitten, and, as a matter of course, the sheepbegan to scatter. And yet here we find them back in Galilee, in their old haunts, and not trying to escape by separation, which would have been the first step suggested to ordinary men in an ordinary state of things. But where everybody knew them, and they knew everybody, and everybody knew them to be disciples of Jesus Christ, thither they go, and hold together as if they had still a living centre and a uniting bond. How did that come about? The fact that after Christ's death there was a group of men united together simply and solely as disciples, and exhibiting their unity as disciples conspicuously, in the face of the men that knew them best, this forms a strange phenomenon that needs an explanation. And there is only one explanation of it, that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. That drew them together once more. You cannot build a Church on a dead Christ; and of all the proofs of the Resurrection, I take it that there is none that it is harder for an unbeliever to account for, in harmony with his hypothesis, than the simple fact that Christ's disciples held together after He was dead, and presented a united front to the world.

So, then, the fact of the group is itself significant, and we may claim it as being a morsel of evidence for the historical veracity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**II. Then the composition of this group is significant.**

Taken in comparison with the original nucleus of the Church, the calling of which we find recorded in the first chapter of this Gospel, it is to be noticed that of the five men who made the Primitive Church, there are three who reappear here by name--viz. Simon Peter, John and Nathanael, and Nathanael never appears anywhere else except in these two places. Then, note that there are two unnamed men here, two other of His disciples; who, I think, in all probability are the two of the original five that we do not find named here--viz. Philip and Andrew, Simon Peter's brother--both of them connected with Bethsaida, the place where probably this appearance of the risen Lord took place.

So, then, I think, the fair inference from the list before us is that we have here the original nucleus again, the first five, with a couple more, and the couple more are Thomas, who is called Didymus--and we shall see the reason for his presence in a moment--and the brother of John, one of the first pair.

Thus, then, to the original little group that had gathered round Him at the first, and to whom He had been so often manifested in this very scene where they were standing now, He is revealed again. There, along the beach, is the place where James and John and Simon and Andrew were called from their nets three short years ago. Across yonder, on the other side of the lake, is the bit of green grass where the thousands were fed. Behind it is the steep slope down which the devil-possessed herd rushed. There, over the shoulder of the hill, is the road that leads up to Cana of Galilee, which they had trod together on that never-to-be-forgotten first morning, and from which little village one of the group came. They who had companied with Him all the time of His too short fellowship, and had seen all His manifestations, were fittingly chosen to be the recipients of this last appearance, which was to be full of instruction as to the work of the Church, its difficulties, its discouragements, its rewards, its final success, and His benediction of it until the very end of time. It was not for nothing that they who were gathered together were that first nucleus of the Church, who received again from their Master the charge to be fishers of men.

And then, if we look at the list, having regard to the history of those that make it up, it seems to me that that also brings us some valuable considerations. Foremost stand, as receiving this great manifestation of Jesus Christ, the two greatest sinners of the whole band, Simon Peter, and Thomas, which is called Didymus, the denier and the doubter. Singularly contrasted these two men were in much of their disposition; and yet alike in the fact that the Crucifixion had been too much for their faith. The one of them was impetuous, the other of them slow. The one was always ready to say more than he meant; the other always ready to do more than he said. The one was naturally despondent, disposed to look ahead and to see the gloomiest side of everything--Let us also go that we may die with Him--the other never looking an inch beyond his nose, and always yielding himself up to the impulse of the moment. And yet both of them were united in this, that the one, from a sudden wave of cowardice which swept him away from his deepest convictions and made him for an hour untrue to his warmest love, and the other, from giving way to his constitutional tendency to despondency, and to taking the blackest possible view of everything--they had both of them failed in their faith, the one turning out a denier and the other turning out a doubter. And yet here they are, foremost upon the list of those who saw the Risen Christ.

Well, there are two lessons there, and the one is this--let us Christian people learn with what open hearts and hands we should welcome a penitent when he comes back. The other is,--let us learn who they are to whom Jesus Christ deigns to manifest Himself--not immaculate monsters, but men that, having fallen, have learned humility and caution, and by penitence have risen to a securer standing, and have turned even their transgressions into steps in the ladder that lifts them to Christ. It was something that the first to whom the risen Saviour appeared when He came victorious and calm from the grave, was the woman out of whom He had cast seven devils, and the blessed truth which that teaches is the same as that which is to be drawn from this list of those whom He regarded, and whom we regard, as then constituting the true nucleus of His Church--a list which is headed by the blackest denier and the most obstinate and captious sceptic in the whole company. There were together Simon Peter and Thomas, which is called Didymus, and the little group was glad to have them, and welcomed them, as it becomes us to welcome brethren who have fallen, and who come again saying, I repent.

Well, then, take the next: he was Nathanael, of Cana in Galilee; a guileless Israelite indeed, so swift to believe, so ready with his confession, so childlike in his wonder, so ardent in his love and faith. The only thing that Christ is recorded as having said to him is this: Because I said... believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these. A promise of growing clearness of vision and growing fullness of manifestation was made to this man, who never appears anywhere else in Scripture but in these two scenes, and so may stand to us as the type of the opposite kind of Christian experience from that stormy one of the doubter and the denier--viz. that of persistent, quiet, continuous growth, which is marked by faithful use of the present amount of illumination, and is rewarded by a continual increase of the same. If the keynote to the two former lives is, that sin confessed helps a man to climb, the keynote to this man's is the other truth, that they are still more blessed who, with no interruptions, backslidings, inconsistencies, or denials, by patient continuousness in well-doing, widen the horizon of their Christian vision and purge their eyesight for daily larger knowledge. To these, as to the others, there is granted the vision of the risen Lord, and to them also is entrusted the care of His sheep and His lambs. We do not need to go away into the depths and the darkness in order to realise the warmth and the blessedness of the light. There is no necessity that any Christian man's career should be broken by denials like Peter's or by doubts like Thomas's, but we may grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. So is the kingdom of heaven, first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.

Then, still further, there were here the two sons of Zebedee. These were the men of whom the Master said that they were sons of thunder, who, by natural disposition, in so far as they resembled one another (which they seem to have done), were eager, energetic, somewhat bigoted, ready with passionate rebukes, and not unwilling to invoke destructive vengeance, all for the love of Him. They were also touched with some human ambition which led them to desire a place at His right hand and His left, but the ambition, too, was touched with love towards Him, which half redeemed it. But by dwelling with Him one of them, at least, had become of all the group the likest his Master. And the old monastic painters taught a very deep truth when, in their pictures of the apostles, they made John's almost a copy of the Master's face. To him, too, there was granted in like manner a place amongst this blessed company, and it is surely a trace of his hand that his place should seem so humble. Any other but himself would certainly have put James and John in their natural place beside Peter. It must have been himself who slipped himself and his brother into so inconspicuous a position in the list, and further veiled his personality under the patronymic, the sons of Zebedee.

Last of all come two other of His disciples, not worth naming. Probably, as I have said, they were the missing two out of the five of the first chapter; but possibly they were only disciplesin the wider sense, and not of the Apostolic group at all. Nobody can tell. What does it matter? The lesson to be gathered from their presence in this group is one that most of us may very well take to heart. There is a place for commonplace, undistinguished people, whose names are not worth repeating in any record; there is a place for us one-talented folk, in Christ's Church, and we, too, have a share in the manifestation of His love. We do not need to be brilliant, we do not need to be clever, we do not need to be influential, we do not need to be energetic, we do not need to be anything but quiet, waiting souls, in order to have Christ showing Himself to us, as we toil wearily through the darkness of the night. Undistinguished disciples have a place in His heart, a sphere and a function in His Church, and a share in His revelation of Himself.

**III. The last point that I touch is this, that the purpose of this group is significant.**

What did they thus get together for? Simon Peter saith, I go a fishing. They say, We also go with thee. So they went back again to their old trade, and they had not left the nets and the boats and the hired servants for ever, as they once thought they had.

What sent them back? Not doubt or despair; because they had seen Jesus Christ up in Jerusalem, and had come down to Galilee at His command on purpose to meet Him. There shall ye see Him, lo! I have told you, was ringing in their ears, and they went back in full confidence of His appearance there. It is very like Peter that he should have been the one to suggest filling an hour of the waiting time with manual labour. The time would be hanging heavily on his hands. John could have sat still in the house, like Mary, the heart all the busier, because the hands lay quietly in the lap. But that was not Peter's way, and John was ready to keep him company. Peter thought that the best thing they could do, till Jesus chose to come, was to get back to their work, and he was sensible and right. The best preparation for Christ's appearance, and the best attitude to be found in by Him, is doing our daily work, however secular and small it may be. A dirty, wet fishing boat, all slimy with scales, was a strange place in which to wait for the manifestation of a risen Saviour. But it was the right place, righter than if they had been wandering about amongst the fancied sanctities of the synagogues.

They went out to do their work; and to them was fulfilled the old saying, I, being in the way, the Lord met me. Jesus Christ will come to you and me in the street if we carry the waiting heart there, and in the shop, and the factory, and the counting-house, and the kitchen, and the nursery, and the study, or wherever we may be. For all things are sacred when done with a hallowed heart, and He chooses to make Himself known to us amidst the dusty commonplaces of daily life.

He had said to them before the Crucifixion: When I sent you forth without purse or scrip, lacked ye anything? And they said, Nothing. And then He said, as changing the conditions: But now he that hath a purse or scrip, let him take it. As long as He was with them they were absolved from these common tasks. Now that He had left them the obligation recurred. And the order of things for His servants in all time coming was therein declared to be: no shirking of daily tasks on the plea of wanting divine communications; keep at your work, and if it last all night, stick to it; and if there are no fish in the net, never mind; out with it again. And be sure that sooner or later you will see Him standing on the beach, and hear His voice, and be blessed by His smile.