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

**JOHN-118**. **THE BEACH AND THE SEA by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"When the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore; but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus."*

*John 21:4*

The incident recorded in this appendix to John's Gospel is separated from the other appearances of our risen Lord in respect of place, time, and purpose. They all occurred in and about Jerusalem; this took place in Galilee. The bulk of them happened on the day of the Resurrection, one of them a week after. This, of course, to allow time for the journey, must have been at a considerably later date. Their object was, mainly, to establish the reality of the Resurrection, the identity of Christ's physical body, and to confirm the faith of the disciples therein. Here, these purposes retreat into the background; the object of this incident is to reveal the permanent relations between the risen Lord and His struggling Church.

The narrative is rich in details which might profitably occupy us, but the whole may be gathered up in two general points of view in considering the revelation which we have here in the participation of Christ in His servantswork, and also the revelation which we have in the preparation by Christ of a meal for His toiling servants. We take this whole narrative thus regarded as our subject on this Easter morning.

**I. First we have here a revelation of the permanent relation of Jesus Christ to His Church and to the individuals who compose it, in this, that the risen Lord on the shore shares in the toil of His servants on the restless sea.**

The little group of whom we read in this narrative reminds us of the other group of the first disciples in the first chapter of this Gospel. Four out of the five persons named in our text appear there: Simon Peter, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John. And a very natural inference is that the two othersunnamed here are the two others of that chapter, viz. Andrew and Philip. If so, we have at the end, the original little group gathered together again; with the addition of the doubting Thomas.

Be that as it may, there they are on the shore of the sea, and Peter characteristically takes the lead and suggests a course that they all accept: I go a fishing. We also go with thee.

Now we must not read that as if it meant: It is all over! Our hopes are vain! We dreamed that we were going to be princes in the Messiah's Kingdom, we have woke up to find that we are only fishermen. Let us go back to our nets and our boats!No! all these men had seen the risen Lord, and had received from His breath the gift of the Holy Spirit. They had all gone from Jerusalem to Galilee, in obedience to His command, and were now waiting for His promised appearance. Very noble and beautiful is the calm patience with which they fill the time of expectation with doing common and long-abandoned tasks. They go back to the nets and the boats long since forsaken at the Master's bidding. That is not like fanatics. That is not like people who would be liable to the excesses of excitement that would lead to the hallucination, which is the modern explanation of the resurrection faith, on the part of the disciples.

And it is a precious lesson for us, dear brethren! that whatever may be our memories, and whatever may be our hopes, the very wisest thing we can do is to stick to the common drudgery, and even to go back to abandoned tasks. It stills the pulses. Study to be quiet; and to do our own businessis the best remedy for all excitement, whether it be of sorrow or of hope. And not seldom to us, if we will learn and practise that lesson, as to these poor men in the tossing fisherman's boat, the accustomed and daily duties will be the channel through which the presence of the Master will be manifested to us.

So they go, and there follow the incidents which I need not repeat, because we all know them well enough. Only I wish to mark the distinct allusion throughout the whole narrative to the earlier story of the first miraculous draught of fishes which was connected with their call to the Apostleship, and was there by Christ declared to have a symbolical meaning. The correspondences and the contrasts are obvious. The scene is the same; the same green mountains look down upon the same blue waters. It was the same people that were concerned. They were, probably enough, in the same fishing-boat. In both there had been a night of fruitless toil; in both there was the command to let down the net once more; in both obedience was followed by instantaneous and large success.

So much for the likenesses; the contrasts are these. In the one case the Master is in the boat with them, in the other He is on the shore; in the one the net is breaking; in the other, though there were so many, yet did it not break. In the one Peter, smitten by a sense of his own sinfulness, says, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!In the other, Peter, with a deeper knowledge of his own sinfulness, but also with the sweet knowledge of forgiveness, casts himself into the sea, and flounders through the shallows to reach the Lord. The one is followed by the call to higher duty and to the abandonment of possessions; the other is followed by rest and the mysterious meal on the shore.

That is to say, whilst both of the stories point the lesson of service to the Master, the one of them exhibits the principles of service to Him whilst He was still with them, and the other exhibits the principles of service to Him when He is removed from struggling and toiling on the billows to the calm of the peaceful shore in the morning light.

So we may take that night of toil as full of meaning. Think of them as the darkness fell, and the solemn bulk of the girdling hills lay blacker upon the waters, and the Syrian sky was mirrored with all its stars sparkling in the still lake. All the night long cast after cast was made, and time after time the net was drawn in and nothing in it but tangle and mud. And when the first streak of the morning breaks pale over the Eastern hills they are still so absorbed in their tasks that they do not recognise the voice that hails them from the nearer shore: Lads, have ye any meat?And they answer it with a half surly and wholly disappointed monosyllabic No!It is an emblem for us all; weary and wet, tugging at the oar in the dark, and often seeming to fail. What then? If the last cast has brought nothing, try another. Out with the nets once more! Never mind the darkness, and the cold, and the wetting spray, and the weariness. You cannot expect to be as comfortable in a fishing-boat as in your drawing-room. You cannot expect that your nets will be always full. Failure and disappointment mingle in the most successful lives. Christian work has often to be done with no results at all apparent to the doer, but be sure of this, that they who learn and practise the homely, wholesome virtue of persistent adherence to the task that God sets them, will catch some gleams of a Presence most real and most blessed, and before they die will know that their labour has not been in vain in the Lord. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.

And so, finally, about this first part of my subject, there stands out before us here the blessed picture of the Lord Himself, the Risen Lord, with the halo of death and resurrection round about Him; there, on the firm beach, in the increasing light of the morning, interested in, caring about, directing and crowning with His own blessing, the obedient work of His servants.

The simple prose fact of the story, in its plain meaning, is more precious than any spiritualisingof it. Take the fact. Jesus Christ, fresh from the grave, who had been down into those dark regions of mystery where the dead sleep and wait, and had come back into this world, and was on the eve of ascending to the Father--this Christ, the possessor of such experience, takes an interest in seven poor men's fishing, and cares to know whether their ragged old net is full or is empty. There never was a more sublime and wonderful binding together of the loftiest and the lowliest than in that question in the mouth of the Risen Lord. If men had been going to dream about what would be fitting language for a risen Saviour, if we had to do here with a legend, and not with a piece of plain, prosaic fact, do you think that the imagination would ever have entered the mind of the legend-maker to put such a question as that into such lips at such a time? Lads, have ye any meat?

It teaches us that anything that interests us is not without interest to Christ. Anything that is big enough to occupy our thoughts and our efforts is large enough to be taken into His. All our ignoble toils, and all our petty anxieties, touch a chord that vibrates in that deep and tender heart. Though other sympathy may be unable to come down to the minutenesses of our little lives, and to wind itself into the narrow room in which our histories are prisoned, Christ's sympathy can steal into the narrowest cranny. The risen Lord is interested in our poor fishing and our disappointments.

And not only that, here is a promise for us, a prophecy for us, of certain guidance and direction, if only we will come to Him and acknowledge our dependence upon Him. The question that was put to them, Lads, have ye any meat?was meant to evoke the answer, No!The consciousness of my failure is the pre-requisite to my appeal to Him to prosper my work. And just as before He would, on the other margin of that same shore, multiply the loaves and the fishes, He put to them the question, How many have ye?that they might know clearly the inadequacy of their own resources for the hungry crowd, so here, in order to prepare their hearts for the reception of His guidance and His blessing, He provides that they be brought to catalogue and confess their failures. So He does with us all, beats the self-confidence out of us, blessed be His name! and makes us know ourselves to be empty in order that He may pour Himself into us, and flood us with the joy of His presence.

Then comes the guidance given. We may be sure that it is given to us all to-day, if we wait upon Him and ask Him. Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. His command is followed by swift, unanswering, unquestioning obedience, which in its turn is immediately succeeded by the large blessing which the Master then gave on the instant, which He gives still, though often, in equal love and unquestioned wisdom, it comes long after faith has discerned His presence and obedience has bowed to His command.

It may be that we shall not see the results of our toil till the morning dawns and the great net is drawn to land by angel hands. But we may be sure that while we are toiling on the tossing sea, He watches from the shore, is interested in all our weary efforts, will guide us if we own to Him our weakness, and will give us to see at last issues greater than we had dared to hope from our poor service. The dying martyr looked up and saw Him standing at the right hand of God, in the attitude of interested watchfulness and ready help. This Easter morning bids us lift our eyes to a risen Lord who has not left us to serve alone, nor gone up on high, like some careless general to a safe height, while his forsaken soldiers have to stand the shock of onset without him. From this height He bends down and covers our heads in the day of battle. He was received up, says the Evangelist, and sat on the right hand of God, and they went forth and preached everywhere. Strange contrast between His throned rest and their wandering toils for Him! But the contrast gives place to a deeper identity of work and condition, as the Gospel goes on to say, The Lord also working with them and confirming the word with signs following.

Though we be on the tossing sea and He on the quiet shore, between us there is a true union and communion, His heart is with us, if our hearts be with Him, and from Him will pass over all strength, grace, and blessing to us, if only we know His presence, and owning our weakness, obey His command and expect His blessing.

**II. Look at the other half of this incident before us.**

I pass over the episode of the recognition of Jesus by John, and of Peter struggling to His feet, interesting as it is, in order to fix upon the central thought of the second part of the narrative, viz. the risen Lord on the shore, in the increasing light of the morning, preparing a tablefor His toiling servants. That fire of coalsand the simple refreshment that was being dressed upon it had been prepared there by Christ's own hand. We are not told that there was anything miraculous about it. He had gathered the charcoal; He had procured the fish; He had dressed it and prepared it. They are bidden to bring of the fish they had caught; He accepts their service, and adds the result of their toil, as it would seem, to the provision which His own hand has prepared. He summons them to a meal, not the midday repast, for it was still early morning. They seat themselves, smitten by a great awe. The meal goes on in silence. No word is spoken on either side. Their hearts know Him. He waits on them, making Himself their Servant as well as their Host. He taketh bread and giveth them and fish likewise, as He had done in the miracles by the same shore and on that sad night in the upper room that seemed so far away now, and in the roadside inn at Emmaus, when something in His manner or action disclosed Him to the wondering two at the table.

Now what does all that teach us? Two things; and first--neglecting for a moment the difference between shore and sea--here we have the fact of Christ's providing, even by doing menial offices, for His servants.

These seven men were wet and weary, cold and hungry. The first thing they wanted when they came out of the fishing-boat was their breakfast. If they had been at home, their wives and children would have got it ready for them. Jesus had a great deal to say to them that day, a great deal to teach them, much to do for them, and for the whole world, by the words that followed; but the first thing that He thinks about is to feed them. And so, cherishing no overstrained contempt for material necessities and temporal mercies, let us remember that it is His hand that feeds us still, and let us be glad to think that this Christ, risen from the dead and with His heart full of the large blessings that He was going to bestow, yet paused to consider: They are coming on shore after a night's hard toil, they will be faint and weary; let Me feed their bodies before I begin to deal with their hearts and spirits.

And He will take care of you, brother! and of us all. The bread will be givenus, at any rate, and the water made sure. It was a modest meal that He with His infinite resources thought enough for toiling fishermen. One fish, as the original shows us, one loaf of bread. No more! He could as easily have spread a sumptuous table for them. There is no covenant for superfluities, necessaries will be given. Let us bring down our wishes to His gifts and promises, and recognise the fact that he who needs least is the nearest the gods, and he that needs least is surest of getting from Christ what he needs.

But then, besides that, the supply of all other deeper and loftier necessities is here guaranteed. The symbolism of our text divides, necessarily, the two things which in fact are not divided. It is not all toiling on the restless sea here, any more than it is all rest and fruition yonder; but all that your spirit needs, for wisdom, patience, heroism, righteousness, growth, Christ will give you in your work; and that is better than giving it to you after your work, and the very work which is blessed by Him, and furthered and prospered by Him, the very work itself will come to be moat and nourishment. Out of the eater will come forth meat, and the slain lionsof past struggles and sorrows, the next time we come to them, will be full of honey.

Finally, there is a great symbolical prophecy here if we emphasise the distinction between the night and the morning, between the shore and the sea. We can scarcely fail to catch this meaning in the incident which sets forth the old blessed assurance that the risen Lord is preparing a feast on the shore while His servants are toiling on the darkling sea.

All the details, such as the solid shore in contrast with the changeful sea, the increasing morning in contrast with the toilsome night, the feast prepared, have been from of old consecrated to shadow forth the differences between earth and heaven. It would be blindness not to see here a prophecy of the glad hour when Christ shall welcome to their stable home, amid the brightness of unsetting day, the souls that have served Him amidst the fluctuations and storms of life, and seen Him in its darkness, and shall satisfy all their desires with the bread of heaven.

Our poor work which He deigns to accept forms part of the feast which is spread at the end of our toil, when there shall be no more sea. He adds the results of our toil to the feast which He has prepared. The consequences of what we have done here on earth make no small part of the blessedness of heaven.

Their works and alms and all their good endeavour Stayed not behind, nor in the grave were trod.

The souls which a Paul or a John has won for the Master, in their vocation as fishers of men, are their hope and joy and crown of rejoicing, in the presence of our Lord Jesus. The great benediction which the Spirit bade the Apocalyptic seer write over the dead which die in the Lord, is anticipated in both its parts by this mysterious meal on the beach. They rest from their laboursinasmuch as they find the food prepared for them, and sit down to partake; Their works do follow theminasmuch as they bring of the fish which they have caught.

Finally, Christ Himself waits on them, therein fulfilling in symbol what He has told us in great words that dimly shadow wonders unintelligible until experienced: Verily I say unto you, He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth, and serve them.

So here is a vision to cheer us all. Life must be full of toil and of failure. We are on the midnight sea, and have to tug, weary and wet, at a heavy oar, and to haul an often empty net. But we do not labour alone. He comes to us across the storm, and is with us in the night, a most real, because unseen Presence. If we accept the guidance of His directing word, His indwelling Spirit, and His all-sufficient example, and seek to ascertain His will in outward Providences, we shall not be left to waste our strength in blunders, nor shall our labour be in vain. In the morning light we shall see Him standing serene on the steadfast shore. The Pilot of the Galilean lakewill guide our frail boat through the wild surf that marks the breaking of the sea of life on the shore of eternity; and when the sun rises over the Eastern hills we shall land on the solid beach, bringing our few small fisheswith us, which He will accept. And there we shall rest, nor need to ask who He is that serves us, for we shall know that It is the Lord!