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

**LUKE-013**. **PREACHING AT NAZARETH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And He began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled In your ears."*

*Luke 4:21*

This first appearance of our Lord, in His public work at Nazareth, the home of His childhood, was preceded, as we learn from John's Gospel, by a somewhat extended ministry in Jerusalem. In the course of it, He cast the money-changers out of the Temple, did many miracles, had His conversation with Nicodemus, and on His return towards Galilee met the woman of Samaria at the well. The report of these things, no doubt, had preceded Him, and kindled the Nazarenescuriosity to see their old companion who had suddenly shot up into a person of importance, and had even made a sensation in the metropolis. A great man's neighbours are keen critics of, and slow believers in, his greatness. So it was natural and very prudent that Jesus should not begin His ministry in Nazareth.

We can easily imagine the scene that morning in the little village, nestling among the hills. How many memories would occupy Christ as He entered the synagogue, where He had so often sat a silent worshipper! How Mary's eyes would fill with tears if she was there, and how the companions of His boyhood, who used to play with Him, would watch Him; all curious, some sympathetic, some jealous, some contemptuous!

The synagogue service began with prayer and praise. Then followed two readings, one from the Law, one from the Prophets. When the latter point was reached, in accordance with usage, Jesus rose, thereby signifying His desire to be reader of the Prophetic portion. We can understand how there would be a movement of quickened attention as the roll was handed to Him and He turned its sheets. He found the place; that looks as if He sought for it; that is to say, that it was not the appointed lesson for the day--if there was such--but that it was a passage selected by Himself.

I need not enter upon the divergences between Luke's quotation as given in our English version and the Hebrew. They are partly due to the fact that he is quoting from memory the Greek version of the LXX. He inserts, for instance, one clause which is not found in that place in Isaiah, but in another part of the same prophet. Having read standing, as was the usage, in token of reverence for the Scripture, Jesus resumed His seat, not as having finished, but, as was the usage, taking the attitude of the teacher, which signified authority. And then, His very first sentence was the most unlimited assertion that the great words which He had been reading had reached their full accomplishment in Himself. They are very familiar to our ears. If we would understand their startling audacity we must listen to them with the ears of the Nazarenes, who had known Him ever since He was a child. This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears. Now, it seems to me that this first sermon of our Lord's to His old fellow-townsmen brings into striking prominence some characteristics of His whole teaching, to which I desire briefly to direct attention.

**I. I note Christ's self-assertion.**

To begin in Nazareth with such words as these in my text was startling enough, but it is in full accord with the whole tone of our Lord's teaching. If you will carefully search for the most essential characteristics and outstanding differentia of the words of Jesus Christ, even if you make all allowance that some make for the non-historical character of the Gospels, you have this left as the residuum, that the impression which He made upon the men that were nearest to Him, and that caught up most fully the spirit of His teaching, was that the great thing that differentiated it from all other was His unhesitating persistence in pushing into the very forefront, His testimony about Himself. I do not think that there is anything parallel to that anywhere else amongst the men whom the world recognises as being great religious geniuses or great moral teachers. What characterises as perfectly unique our Lord's teaching is not only the blessed things that He said about God or the deep truths that He said about men and their duty, or the sad things that He said about men and their destiny, or the radiant hopes that He unveiled as to men and their possibility, but what He said about Himself. His message was not so much Believe in God and do right, as it was Believe in Me and follow Me.

I need only point you to the Sermon on the Mount, which is popularly supposed to contain very little of Christ's reference to Himself, and to remind you how there, in that authoritative proclamation of the laws of the new kingdom, He calmly puts His own utterances as co-ordinate with--nay! as superior to--the utterances of the ancient law, and sweeps aside Moses--though recognising Mosesdivine mission--with an I say unto you. I need only remind you, further, how, at the end of that compendium of reasonable morality, He lays down this principle--that these sayings of Mineare a rock-foundation, on which whoever builds shall never be put to confusion. This is but a specimen of the golden thread, if I may call it so, of self-assertion which runs through the whole of our Lord's teaching.

Now, I venture to say that this undeniable characteristic is only warranted on the supposition that He is the Son of God, and His work the salvation of the world. If He is so, if He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father, if the revelation of Himself which He makes is the Revelation of God, if His death is for the life of the world; and if, when we honour Him, we honour God; when we trust Him, we trust God; when we obey Him we obey God; then I can understand His persistent self-assertion. But otherwise does He not deliberately intercept emotions which are only rightly directed to God? Does He not claim prerogatives, such as forgiveness of sins, bestowal of life, answering of prayer, which are only possessed by the Divine Being?

I know that many who will not go with me in my intellectual formularising of the truth about Christ's nature do bow to Him with unfeigned reverence. But it seems to me, I humbly confess, that there is no logical basis for such reverence except the full-toned recognition that the mystery of His self-assertion is explained by the mystery of His nature, God manifest in the flesh. I, for my part, do not see how the moral perfectness of Jesus Christ is to be saved, in view of that unmistakable strand in His teaching, unless by such admission. Rather, I feel that the recognition of it brings us face to face with the tremendous alternative, and that the people who were moved to indignation by His self-assertion because they recognised not His divine origin, and said This man blasphemeth; This deceiver said, have more to say in defence of their conclusion than those who bow before Him with reverence, and declare Him to be the pattern of all human perfectness, and yet falter when they are asked to join in the great confession, Thou are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

**II. Secondly, note here our Lord's sad conception of humanity.**

There are, as it were, two strands running through the prophetic passage which He quotes, one in reference to Himself, one in reference to those whom He came to help. To the latter I now turn, to get our Lord's point of view when He looked upon the facts of human life.

No man will ever do much for the world whose ears have not been opened to hear its sad music. An inadequate conception of its miseries is sure to lead to inadequate prescriptions for their remedy. We must bear upon our own hearts the burdens that we seek to lift off our brothersshoulders. There is nothing about the Master's words concerning mankind more pathetic and more plain than the sad, stern, and yet pitying view which He always took concerning them and their condition.

In the passage on which Jesus based His claims, as given by Luke, one of the clauses is probably not in this place genuine, for the healing of the brokenheartedshould be struck out of the true text. There are then four symbols employed: the poor, the captives, the blind, the bruised. And these four are representations of the result of one fell cause, and that is--sin.

Sin impoverishes. Our true wealth is God. No man that possesses Him, by love, and trust, and conformity of will and effort to His discerned will, is poor, whatever else he has, whatever else he lacks. And no man who has lost this one durable treasure, the loving communion with, and possession of, God, in mind and heart and will and effort, but is a pauper whatever else he possesses. Wherever a man has sold himself to his own will, and has made himself and his own inclinations and misread good his centre and his aim, which is the definition of sin, there bankruptcy and poverty have come. Thieves sometimes beset travellers from the gold mines, as they are bringing down their dust or their nuggets to market, and empty the pockets of the gold, and fill them up with sand. That is what sin does for us; it takes away our true treasure, and befools us by giving us what seems to be solid till we come to open the bag; and then there is no power in it to buy anything for us. Why will ye spend your labour for that which satisfieth not?The one poverty is the impoverishment that lays hold of every soul that wrenches itself, in self-will, apart from God. Sin makes poor.

Sin not only impoverishes, but imprisons the captives. Ah! you have only to think of your own experience to find out what that means. Is there nothing in the set of your affections, in the mastery that your passion has over you, in the habits of your lives, which you know as well as God knows it, to be wrong and ruinous, and of which you have tried to get rid? I know the answer, and every one of us, if we will look into our own hearts, knows it: we are tied and bound by the chains of our sin. You do not need to go to inebriate homes, where there are people that would cut their right hands off if they could get rid of the craving, and cannot, to find instances of this bondage. We have only to be honest with ourselves, and to try to pull the boat against the stream instead of letting it drift with it, to know the force with which the current runs. A tiny thread like a spider's draws after it a bit of cotton a little thicker, and knotted to that there is a piece of pack-thread, and after that a two-stranded cord, and then a cable that might hold an ironclad at anchor. That is a parable of how we draw to ourselves, by imperceptible degrees, an ever-thickening set of manacles that bind our wills and make us the servants of sin. His slaves ye are whom ye obey. Sin imprisons. That is, your sin--do not let us befool ourselves with abstractions--your sin imprisons you.

Sin blinds. Wherever there comes over a soul the mist of self-will and self-regard, sight fails; and all the greatest things are blurred and blotted. The man that is immersed in his own evil is like one plunged in the ocean. The cold, salt waters are about him, and above him; and to him the glories of the sky, and the brightness of the sun, the tenderness of the colouring, are all blotted out. He who goes through life as some of us do, never seeing God, never seeing the loftiest beauty of goodness, never beholding with any clearness of vision the radiant possibilities of the future and its awful threatenings, may indeed see the things an inch from the point of his nose; but he is blind and cannot see afar off, and can only behold, and that darkly, the insignificances that are around him. Sin blinds.

And sin bruises. It takes all the health out of us, and makes us, from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head, masses of wounds and bruises and putrifying sores.

The enchantress having worked all this havoc, then gives us a cup of illusion which, when we drink, we know not that there is anything the matter with us. We are like a lunatic in a cell, who thinks himself a prince in a palace, and though living on porridge and milk, fancies that he is partaking of all the dainties of a luxurious table. The deceitfulness of sin is not the least of its tragical consequences.

**III. Lastly, we have here our Lord's conception of Himself and of His own work.**

Your time will not allow of my dwelling upon this as I would fain have done, but let me point out one or two of the salient features of this initial programme of His. He claims to be the theme and the fulfilment of prophecy. Now, whatever influences modern notions about the genesis of the Old Testament, and the characteristics of its prophetic utterances may have done, they have not touched, and they never will touch, this one central characteristic of all that old system, that embedded in it there was an onward-looking gaze, anticipatory of a higher fulfilment and a further development of all that it taught. To those of us to whom Christ's words are the end of all strife I need only point out that, here, He endorses the belief that prophetic utterances, however they may have had, and did have, a lower and immediate meaning, were only realised in the whole sweep and significance in Himself. So He presents Himself before His acquaintances in the little synagogue at Nazareth, and before the whole world to all time, as the centre-point and pivot on which the history of the world, so to speak, revolves; all that was before converging to Him, all that was after flowing down from Him. They that went before, and they that followed after, cried, Hosanna! blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord.

He claims to possess the whole fullness of the divine Spirit: The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me. That is a reminiscence, no doubt, of the experience by the fords of the Jordan, at the Baptism. But it also opens up a wondrous consciousness, on His part, of a complete and uninterrupted possession of the divine life in all its fullness, which involves an entire separation from the miseries and needs of men. He claims to be the Messiah of the Old Covenant, with all the fullness of meaning, and loftiness of dignity which clustered round that word and that thought. He claims not only to proclaim, but to bestow, the blessings of which He speaks. For He not only comes to preach good tidings to the poor, but to heal the broken-hearted, and to set at liberty all them that are bound. He is the Gospel which He utters. He not merely proclaims the favour of heaven, but He brings the acceptable year of the Lord.

This, in barest outline--which is all that your time will admit--is the summary of what Jesus Christ, in that first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, asserted Himself to be.

He does not detail the means by which He is about to bring the golden year, the year of Jubilee, the acceptable year of the Lord. But I venture to say that it is hard to find, in the life of Jesus Christ, that which fulfils Christ's own programme, as thus announced, unless you bring in His death on the Cross for the abolition of sin, His Resurrection for the abolition of death; His reign in glory for the bestowment on all sinful and bruised souls of the Spirit of healing and of righteousness.

These Nazarenes listened. Their hearts and consciences attested the magnetic power of His personality, and the truth of His word. So do the hearts and consciences of most of us. They wondered at the words of grace--whose matter was grace, whose manner was gracious--that proceeded from His mouth. So do most of us. But they let the incipient movement of their hearts be arrested by the cold, carping question, Is not this Joseph's son?and all the enthusiasm chilled into indifference; indignationfollowed, and some of those who had almost been drawn to Him, in an hour's time had their hands on His robe, to cast Him from the brow of the hill on which their village was built. Every man who comes to the point of feeling some emotions towards Christ as his Redeemer, as his King, is at a fork of the road. He may either take to the right, which will lead him to full communion and acceptance; or he may go to the left, which will carry him away out into the desert. The critical hour in the alchemist's laboratory was when the lead in his crucible began to melt. If a cold current got at it, it resumed its dead solidity, and no gold could be made.

Brother! do not let the world's cold currents get at your heart and freeze it again, if you feel that in any measure it is beginning to melt into penitence, and to flow with faith. The same voice that in the synagogue of Nazareth said, He hath anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poorspeaks to us to-day from heaven, saying, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich ... and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve that thou mayest see.