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

**LUKE-015**. **INSTRUCTIONS FOR FISHERMEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Now when He had left speaking, He said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught."*

*Luke 5:4*

The day's work begins early in the East. So the sun, as it rose above the hills on the other side of the lake, shone down upon a busy scene, fresh with the dew and energy of the morning, on the beach by the little village of Bethsaida. One group of fishermen was washing their nets, their boats being hauled up on the strand. A crowd of listeners was thus early gathered round the Teacher; but the fishermen, who were His disciples, seem to have gone on with their work, never minding Christ or the crowd. It is sometimes quite as religious to be washing nets as to be listening to Christ's teaching.

The incident which follows the words of my text, and which is called the first miraculous draught of fishes, is stamped by our Lord Himself with a symbolic purpose; for at the end of it He says: Fear not! from henceforth thou shalt catch men. And that flings back a flood of light on the whole story; and not only warrants but obliges us to take it as being by Him intended for the instruction in their Christian work of these four whom He has chosen to be His workers. However many of our Lord's miracles may not come under this category of symbolism (and I, for my part, do not believe that there are any of them which do not), this one clearly does. We have His own commentary to compel us to interpret its features as meaning something beyond what appears on the surface. I take it, then, that we have here a first vivid code of instructions which our Lord gives to all His servants who do work for Him; and I wish to look at the various stages of this incident from that point of view.

If there are any of my hearers who think to themselves, Ah, well! he is not going to say anything that I have anything to do with, so much the worse for you, if you are not a Christian; or, so much the worse for you if, being a Christian, you are not an active servant. Jesus Christ had four disciples who were fishermen, and out of them He made four fishers of men. The obligation is universal.

**I. The Law of Service.**

Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. Now there is nothing more remarkable in the whole narrative than the matter-of-course fashion in which our Lord takes the disposal of these men, and orders them about. It is not explicable unless we fall back upon what Luke does not tell us, but John does, in his Gospel, that this was by no means the first time that He had come across Peter and Andrew his brother, or James and John his brother. We do not need to trouble ourselves with the chronological question how long before they had been drawn to Him at the fords of Jordan by the witness of John the Baptist, and by the witness of some of them to the others. The relationship had been then commenced which is presupposed by our Lord's authoritative tone here. It leads in the incident of my text to a closer discipleship, which did not admit of Simon and John hauling or cleaning their nets any more. They had been disciples before in a certain loose fashion, a fashion which permitted them to go home and look after their ordinary avocations. Hence-forward they were disciples in a much more stringent fashion. It was because they had already said Rabbi! Thou art the Son of God! Thou art the King of Israel, that this strange imperative command, inexplicable, except by the supplement of the last of the four Gospels, came from Christ's lips and secured immediate obedience.

If we thus understand that His authority follows on our discipleship, and that the words of my text, first of all, insist upon and assert His right to command and absolutely dispose of the activities, resources, and persons of all His disciples, we have learned something that we only need to practise in order to make our lives noble with a strange nobility, and blessed and sweet with an unearthly sanctity and blessedness.

Further, the words of my text not only declare for us thus the absolute authority of Jesus Christ over all His disciples, but also reveal His sweet promise and gracious assurance that He cares to guide, to direct, to prescribe spheres, to determine methods, to lead those who docilely look to Him and wait upon Him, in paths in which their activity may most profitably be employed for Him and for His Church. If there is anything that is declared to us plainly in the Scriptures, with regard to the relationships between men and Jesus Christ, it is this, that a docile heart will always be a guided heart, partly by inward whispers, which only they disbelieve who limit God in His relation to men, beyond what they have a right to do; and partly by outward providences which only they disbelieve who limit God in His power over the external world, beyond what they have a right to do. He will guide, sometimes with His eye, to which the loving eye flashes back response; sometimes with His whispered word, when the noises of earth and the pulsations of self-will are stilled; sometimes with His rod, which the less sensitive of His sons do often need; sometimes by successes in paths that we venture upon tentatively and timidly; and sometimes by failures in paths into which we rush confidently and presumptuously; but always, the waiting heart is a guided heart, and if we listen we shall hear This is the way, walk ye in it. And sometimes it is God's will that we should make mistakes, for these too help us to learn His will.

But, further, and more particularly, I do not think that I am unduly reading too much meaning into this story, if I ask you to put emphasis upon one word, Launch out into the deep. As long as you keep pottering along, a boat's length from the shore, you will only catch little fishes. The big ones, and the heavy takes are away out yonder. Go out there, if you want to get them. Which, being translated, is this--The same spirit of daring enterprise, which is a condition of success in secular matters, is no less potent a factor in the success of Christian men in their enterprises for Jesus Christ. As long as we keep Him down, within the limits of use and wont, and are horribly afraid of anything that our great-grandfathers did not use to do, there will be very few fish in the bottom of the boat.

Oh, brethren! if one thinks of the world into which it has been God's providence to put us, a world all seething with new aspirations and unrest--if we think of the condition of the great city in which we live, which is only a specimen of the cities of England, and of the tragical insufficiency of Christian enterprise and effort, as compared with the overwhelming masses of the community, surely, surely, there is nothing more wanted to make Christian people wake up from their old jog-trot habits, and cast themselves with new earnestness, new daring and enterprise, into forms of service which conscience and sober wisdom may approve. Of course, I do not forget that any such new methods must each approve themselves at the tribunal of the Christian consciousness. It is no part of my business here to descend into details and particulars, but I do want to lay on my own heart, and especially on the hearts of the members of the church of which I have the honour to be the pastor, and also upon all other Christian people whom my voice may reach, the solemn responsibility which the conditions of life in our generation lay upon Christian men and women, Launch out into the deep and let down your nets. I believe, for my part, that if all the good, God-fearing, Christ-loving men and women in Manchester were to hear this voice sounding in their ears, and to obey it, they would change the face of the city.

**II. The Response.**

Peter, characteristically, speaks out, and says exactly what a fisherman would be likely to say to a carpenter from Nazareth, that came down to teach him his business. The landsman would not know what the fisherman knew well enough, that it was useless to go fishing in the morning if you had not caught anything all night. There was very little chance of getting any better success when the sun's rays were glinting on the surface of the water.

We have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing. Experience said, No! do not. Christ said, Yes! do. And so when Peter has made a clean breast of his objection, founded on experience, he goes on with the consent prompted by the devotion and consecration of love, nevertheless. A great word that. We have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing; nevertheless at Thy word we will let down the net. So here goes. And away they went, breakfastless perhaps, with their nets half cleaned, and sleepy and tired with the night's work.

Here, then, we see obedience that springs delighted to obey, because it is impelled by love. That is the spirit which can be trusted to go out into the deep, which does not ask whether things are recognised and usual or not, but which, if once it is sure of the Lord's will, takes no counsel of anything else. How should it, seeing that there is nothing so delightsome to a heart that truly loves as to know and do the will of its beloved? And that, dear brethren, is the spirit that all we Christian people need--a deeper, more vivid, more continual, soul-subduing, muscle-straining consciousness that Jesus Christ loved me and gave Himself for me. Then His whisper will be like thunder, and the motto of our lives will be At Thy word, I will!Further, here is obedience that was not in the least degree depressed by the recognition of past failure. All night long they had been dropping the net overboard, and drawing it in, and with horny, wet hands seeking in its meshes, and finding nothing. Then overboard with it again, and more pulling at the heavy sweeps, till the dawn began to show, and all in vain. Now the weary task must be done all over again, though in all the past hours though they were the best, there has been only failure.

I think that our Christian courage and consecration would be immensely increased, if we could learn the lesson of my text; and feel that, however often in the past I may have broken down, the word of Christ's command, which thrills into my will, is also the word of Christ's promise which should stay my heart, and give me the assurance that past defeat shall be converted into future victory.

There is an obedience which did not grudge fresh toil before the effect of past toils had been quite got over. The nets, as I said, were only half cleaned. It was a pity to begin and dirty them again. The fishers had had a very hard night's toil. If they had been like some of us they would have said, Oh! I have been working hard all the night. I cannot possibly do any more this morning. I am so very busy with my business all the week, that it is perfectly absurd to talk about my teaching in a Sunday-school. That was not their spirit at all. No matter how they had to rub their eyes to get the sleep out of them, they just bundled the nets into the boat once more, pushed her down the strand, and shoved her out into the blue waters at Christ's bidding. And that is the sort of workmen that He wants, and that you and I should be.

Further, we have here an obedience that kept the Master's word sounding in its heart whilst it was at work. At Thy word will I let down the net.

Ah! we very often begin working with a very pure motive, and as we go on, the motive gradually oozes away, and what was begun in the spirit is continued in the flesh; and what was begun with a true devotion to Jesus Christ is continued because we were doing it yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, and because it is the custom to do it. So we go on. The heart having all gone out of our service, the blessing is gone out of it too. But if we will keep our hearts near that Lord and listen to His voice calling us, wearied or not wearied, beaten before or not beaten before, and do as He bids us, launch out into the deep, we shall not toil in vain.

**III. The result.**

Christ's command ever includes His promise. Work done for Him is never resultless. True, His most faithful servants have often to say, if they look at their few sheaves with the eye of sense, I have spent my strength for nought. True, the Apostolic experience is, at the best, but too exactly repeated, Some believed, and some believed not. Christ's Gospel always produces its twofold effect, being a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death. If the great Sower, when He went forth to sow, expected but a fourth part of the seed to fall into good ground, His servants need look for no larger results. But still it remains true that honest, earnest work for Jesus, wisely planned and prayerfully carried out with self-oblivion and self-surrender, will not be unblessed. If our labour is in the Lord, it will not be in vain. Just as pain is a danger signal, pointing to mischief at work on the body, so failure in achieving the results of Christian service is, for the most part, an indication of something wrong in method or spirit.

But, if we are toiling in loving obedience to Christ's voice, and seeking His direction as to sphere and manner of service, we may be quite sure of this, that whether we get, immediately or no, the outward and visible results which this incident promises to all who fulfil the conditions, we shall get the results which were symbolised in the second form of this miraculous draught of fishes. For, if you remember, there was another incident at the end of Christ's life, modelled upon this one, and equally significant, though in a different fashion. On that occasion, when the disciples had been toiling all the night, and saw, in the dim twilight of the morning, the questionable figure standing on the shore there, they were bidden to bring of the fish that they had caught, and when they came to land they saw a fire of coals, and fish laid thereon, and bread; and His voice said, Come, and eat!Blessed are the workers that work for the Master, for living they shall not be left without His blessing, and dying, they rest from their labours--by the side of that mysterious fire, and Christ-provided food--and their works do follow them, in that they bring of the fish which they have caught.