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

**LUKE-016**. **FEAR AND FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord."*

*Luke 5:8*

*"Now, when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him,... and did cast himself into the sea."*

*John 21:7*

These two instances of the miraculous draught of fishes on the Lake of Gennesareth are obviously intended to be taken in conjunction. Their similarities and their differences are equally striking and equally instructive. In the fragment of the incident which I have selected for our consideration now, we have the same man, in the same scene and circumstances, in the presence of the same Lord, acting under the influences of the same motive, and doing two exactly opposite things.

In the first case, the miracle at once struck him with the consciousness that he was now, in some way, he knew not how, in the immediate presence of the supernatural. That was immediately followed by a quick spasm and sense of sin, and that again by a recoil of terror, and that again by the cry, Go out of the boat; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

In the other instance, as soon as he saw (or rather, by the help of his friend's clearer sight, learned) that that dim and questionable figure on the morning beach there, was the Lord, the sight brought back his sin to his mind. But this time the consciousness of sin sent him splashing over the side, and through the shallow water, to struggle anyhow to get close to his Lord, not because he thought more complacently of himself or less loftily of his Master, but because he had learned that the best place for a sinful man was as close to Christ as ever he could get. And so, if we put these two incidents together, we get two or three thoughts that it is worth our while to dwell upon.

**I. I ask you to notice, first, that instinctive and swift awaking of conscience.**

This was not Peter's first acquaintance with Jesus Christ, nor his first enrolment in the ranks of disciples. John's Gospel tells the very beginning, and how, long before this incident, he had recognised Jesus Christ to be the King of Israel. This was not his first experience of a miracle. There had been many wrought in Capernaum of which probably he was an observer; and he had been at the wedding of Cana of Galilee; and in many ways and at many times, no doubt had seen manifestations of our Lord's supernatural power. But here, in his own boat, with his own nets, about his own sort of work, the thing came home to him as it never had come home before. And although he had long ago recognised Jesus Christ as the Messiah, there is a new, tremulous accession of conviction in that O Lord!It means more than Master, as he had just called Jesus. It means more than he knew himself, no doubt, but it means at least a great, sudden illumination as to who and what Christ was. And so the consciousness of sin flashes upon him at once, as a consequence of that new vision of the divine, as manifested in Jesus Christ. The links of the process of thought are suppressed. We only see the two ends of it. He passed through a series of thoughts with lightning rapidity. The beginning was the recognition of Christ as in some sense the manifestation to him of the Divine Presence, and the end of it was the recognition of his own sinfulness. He had no new facts; but new meaning and vitality were given to the facts that had long been familiar to him. The first result of this was a new conviction of his own hollowness and evil; and then, side by side with that sense of demerit and sin, came this other trembling apprehension of personal consequences. And so, not thinking so much about the sin as about the punishment that he thought must necessarily come when the holy and the impure collided, he cried, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!Now I take it that you get there, in that one instance, packed into small and picturesque compass, just the outlines of what it is reasonable and right that there should always go on in a heart when it first catches a glimpse of the purity, and holiness, and nearness of God, and of the awful, solemn verity that we do, each of us for himself, stand in a living, personal relation to Him. That sudden conviction may come by a thousand causes. A sunset opening the gates to the infinite distance may do it. A chance word may do it. A phrase in a sermon may do it. Some personal sorrow or sickness may do it. Any accidental push may touch the spring, and then the door flies open, for we all of us carry, buried deep down in most of us, and not easily got at, that hidden conviction, only needing the letting in of air to flame up, that we have indeed to do with a living God; that we are sinful and He is pure, and that, that being the case, the discord between us, if we come to close quarters, must end disastrously for us.

You remember the grand vision of Isaiah, how, when he saw the King sitting on His throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the Temple, the first thought was, not of rapture at the Apocalypse, not of adoration of the greatness, not of aspiration after the purity, not of any desire to join in the Holy! Holy! Holy!of the burning spirits, but Woe is me, for I am undone; for mine eyes have seen the King; for I am a man of unclean lips. Ah, brethren! whenever the commonplaces of our professed religious belief are turned into realities for us, and these things that we have all been familiar with from our childhood, flame before us as true and real, then there comes something analogous to the experience of that other Old Testament character--I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes see Thee; wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

And then there comes, in like manner, and there ought to come, along with this new vision of a God in His purity, and the new sense of my own sinfulness, the apprehension of personal evil. For, although it be the lowest of its functions, it is a function of conscience, not only to say to me, It is wrong to do what is wrong, but to say, too, If you do wrong, you will have to bear the consequences. I believe that a part of the instinctive voice of conscience is the declaration, not only of a law, but of a Lawgiver, and that part of its message to me is not only that sin is a transgression of the law, but that the wages of sin is death.

Now, let me ask you to ask yourselves whether it is not a strange and solemn and sad testimony to the reality and universality of the fact of sin that the sense of impurity and dread of its issues are the uniform results of any vivid, thrilling consciousness of nearness to God. And let me ask you to ask yourself one other question, and that is, whether it is a wise thing to live upon a surface that may be shattered at any moment; whether that is true peace which needs but a touch to melt away; whether you are wise with all this combustible material deep down in your conscience, in paying no regard to it but living and frolicking, and feasting and trafficking, and lusting and sinning on the surface, like those light-hearted, light-headed fools that build their houses on the slopes of volcanoes when the lava rush may come at any moment?

**II. That brings me to note, secondly, the mistaken cry of fear.**

Peter felt uneasy in the presence of that pure eye, and he also felt, and was mistaken in feeling, that somehow or other he would be safer if he was not so near the Master. Well, if it were true that Jesus Christ brought God near to him, and if it were true that the proximity of God was the revelation of his blackness and the premonition and prophecy of evil to himself, would getting Christ out of the boat help him much? The facts would remain the same. The departure of the physician does not tend to cure the disease; and thus the cry, Go away from me because I am sinful, was all but ludicrous if it had not been so tragical in its misapprehension of the facts of the case and the cure for them.

Now the parallel to that, with you and me, is--what? How do we commit this same error? By trying to get rid of the thoughts which evoke these uncomfortable feelings of being impure and in peril. But does ceasing to remember the facts make any difference in the facts? Surely not. Just recall for a moment the many ways in which people manage to blind themselves to these plain, and to some of us unwelcome, truths. You may do it by availing yourselves of that strange power that we all have, of not attending to things that we do not like to think about. It is a strange thing that a man should be able to do that; it is a sad thing that any man should be fool enough to do it. But there are many among my hearers, I have no doubt whatever, who know that if they were to let their thoughts dwell on the facts of their own characters and relation to God they would be uncomfortable, and who, therefore, do their best to keep such thoughts at a safe distance. So, as soon as the sermon is over, some of you will begin to criticise me, or to discuss politics, or gossip, and so get rid of the impressions that the truth might produce. Or you fling yourselves into business. One of the reasons for the fierce energy which some men throw into their common avocations is their knowledge that if they have leisure, there may come into their chambers, and sit down beside them there, these unwelcome thoughts, that kill mirth. Some of you try to get rid of the Christ out of your boat by another way. You plunge into sensualism, and live in the low, vulgar atmosphere of fleshly delight and sensuous excitements in order to drown thought. And some of you do it by the even simpler process of merely giving no heed to such thoughts when kindled. The fire, unfed and unstirred, goes out. That is one way in which people come to have consciences, to use the dreadful words of the New Testament, seared as with a hot iron. If you will only never listen to it, it will stop speaking after a while, and then you will have an exemption from all these thoughts. When Felix first heard about temperance and righteousness and judgment to come he trembled, but paid no heed to his tremor, and said, Go away for this time, and when I am not busy at anything else, I will have thee back again. He did have Paul back again many a time, and communed with him, but we never read that he trembled any more. The impression is not always reproduced, although the circumstances that produced it at first may be. The most impenetrable armour in which to clothe oneself against the sword of the Spirit is hammered out of former convictions that were never acted on. A soul cased in these is very hard to get at.

But consider the folly of seeking to get rid of truth, however unwelcome, under the delusion that it ceases to be true because we cease to look at it. Christ's leaving the boat would not have helped Peter. The facts remained, however he refused to look at them. If he could have changed them by getting rid of Him who reminded him of them, it might have been worth while to send Him away--but to dismiss the physician is a new way of curing the disease. Pain is an alarm bell for the physical nature to point to something wrong there, and this sense of evil, this shrinking from God regarded as the judge, is the alarm bell in the spiritual nature to warn of something wrong there. Do you think that you banish the danger for which the alarm bell is rung because you wrap a clout round the clapper so as to prevent it from sounding? and do you think that you make it less true that every transgression and disobedience shall receive its just recompense of rewardby bidding your conscience hold its peace when it tells you so, or by trying to drown its voice amidst the shouts of revelry, or the whirr of spindles, or the roar of traffic? By no means. The facts remain; and nothing except what deals with the facts is the cure which a wise man will adopt.

You remember the old story of the king of Babylon who sat feasting on the night when the city was captured. When the Finger came out and wrote upon the wall, Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin, it did not stop the feast. They went on with their rioting, and whilst they were carousing, the enemy was creeping up the dried bed of the diverted river, and in that night was Belshazzar slainamidst his wine-cups, and the flowers on his temples were dabbled with his blood. No more insane way of curing the consciousness of sin and the dread of judgment than that of stifling the voice that evokes it was ever dreamed of in an asylum.

**III. Lastly, notice the right place for a sinful man.**

On the second occasion to which our texts refer we have the Apostle far more deeply conscious of his sin than he was on the first. He remembered his denial, and no doubt he remembered also the secret interview that Jesus Christ had with him on the day of the Resurrection, when, no doubt, He communicated to him His frank and full assurance of forgiveness, He knows far more of Christ's dignity and character and nature after the Resurrection than he had done on that day, long ago, by the banks of the lake. The deeper sense of his own sin, and the clearer and loftier view of who and what Jesus Christ was, send him struggling to his Master, and make him blessed only at His feet.

Ah yes, brother! the superficial knowledge of my evil may drive me away from Jesus Christ; the deepest conviction of it will send me right into His arms. A partial knowledge of the divine nature as revealed in Him as judge, and punitive and necessarily antagonistic to the blackness of my sin, in the lustrous whiteness of His purity, may drive me away from Him, but the deeper knowledge of God manifested in Jesus Christ, the long-suffering, the gentle, loving, pardoning, will send me to Him in all the depth of my self-abasement and in the confidence in His love as covering over my sin and accepting me. Where does the child go when it has transgressed against its mother's word? Into its mother's arms to hide its face upon her bosom near her heart. Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned; and therefore to Thee, Thee only will I go. Only in nearness to Jesus Christ can we get the anodyne that quiets the conscience--the blessed assurance of forgiveness that lightens us of our burden and dread, and the power for holiness that will change our impurity into the likeness of His own purity. He, and He only, can forgive. He, and He only, brings the loving God into the midst of unloving men. He, and He only, hath offered the sacrifice in which all sin is done away. He, and He only, by the communication of His Spirit and life to me, will make me pure and deliver me from the burden of my sin.

And so the man who knows his own need and Christ's grace will not say, Depart from me for I am a sinful man, but he will say, Leave me never, nor forsake me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord; but in Thee I have forgiveness and righteousness.

Dear friends! that consciousness of demerit once evoked in a man's heart, however imperfectly, as I believe it is in some of your hearts now, must issue in one of two things. Either it will send you further into darkness to get away from the light, as the bats in a cave will flit to the deepest recesses of it in order to escape the torch, or it will bring you nearer to Him, and at His feet you will find cleansing.

Oh, dear friends!--strangers many of you, but all friends--let me beseech you that, if the merciful Spirit of God is in any measure using my poor words to touch your consciences and hearts, you would not venture to seek escape from the convictions which are stirring in you by any other way than by betaking yourselves to the Cross. Let it not be, I pray you, that because you know yourselves to be in need of forgiveness, and to stand in peril of judgment, you say to God, Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways. But rather do you cast yourselves into Christ's arms and keep near Him; saying as this same Peter did, on another occasion, Lord! to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.