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

**LUKE-020**. **WORTHY - NOT WORTHY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... They besought Him ... saying, That he was worthy for whom He should do this:... 6. I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof: 7. Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto Thee..."*

*Luke 7:4, 6, 7*

A Roman centurion, who could induce the elders of a Jewish village to approach Jesus on his behalf, must have been a remarkable person. The garrison which held down a turbulent people was not usually likely to be much loved by them. But this man, about whom the incident with which our texts are connected is related, was obviously one of the people of whom that restless age had many, who had found out that his creed was outworn, and who had been drawn to Judaism by its lofty monotheism and its austere morality. He had gone so far as to build a synagogue, and thereby, no doubt, incurred the ridicule of his companions, and perhaps the suspicions of his superiors. What would the English authorities think of an Indian district officer that conformed to Buddhism or Brahminism, and built a temple? That is what the Roman officials would think of our centurion. And there were other beautiful traits in his character. He had a servant that was dear to him. It was not only the nexus of master and servant and cash payments that bound these two together. And very beautiful is this story, when he himself speaks about this servant. He does not use the rough word which implies a bondservant, and which is employed throughout the whole of the rest of the narrative, but a much gentler one, and speaks of him as his boy. So he had won the hearts of these elders so far as to make them swallow their dislike to Jesus, and deign to go to Him with a request which implied His powers at which at all other times they scoffed.

Now, we owe to Luke the details which show us that there was a double deputation to our Lord--the first which approached Him to ask His intervention, and the second which the centurion sent when he saw the little group coming towards his house, and a fresh gush of awe rose in his heart. The elders said, He is worthy; he said, I am not worthy. The verbal resemblance is, indeed, not so close in the original as in our versions, for the literal rendering of the words put into the centurion's mouth is not fit. But still the evident antithesis is preserved: the one saying expresses the favourable view that partial outsiders took of the man, the other gives the truer view that the man took of himself. And so, putting away the story altogether, we may set these two verdicts side by side, as suggesting wider lessons than those which arise from the narrative itself.

**I. And, first, we have here the shallow plea of worthiness.**

These elders did not think loftily of Jesus Christ. The conception that we have of Him goes a long way to settle whether it is possible or not for us to approach Him with the word worthyon our lips. The higher we lift our thought of Christ, the lower becomes our thought of ourselves. These elders saw the centurion from the outside, and estimated him accordingly. There is no more frequent, there is no more unprofitable and impossible occupation, than that of trying to estimate other people's characters. Yet there are few things that we are so fond of doing. Half our conversation consists of it, and a very large part of what we call literature consists of it; and it is bound to be always wrong, whether it is eulogistic or condemnatory, because it only deals with the surface.

Here we have the shallow plea advanced by these elders in reference to the centurion which corresponds to the equally shallow plea that some of us are tempted to advance in reference to ourselves. The disposition to do so is in us all. Luther said that every man was born with a Pope in his belly. Every man is born with a Pharisee in himself, who thinks that religion is a matter of barter, that it is so much work, buying so much favour here, or heaven hereafter. Wherever you look, you see the working of that tendency. It is the very mainspring of heathenism, with all its penances and performances. It is enshrined in the heart of Roman Catholicism, with its dreams of a treasury of merits, and works of supererogation and the like. Ay! and it has passed over into a great deal of what calls itself Evangelical Protestantism, which thinks that, somehow or other, it is all for our good to come here, for instance on a Sunday, though we have no desire to come and no true worship in us when we have come, and to do a great many things that we would much rather not do, and to abstain from a great many things that we are strongly inclined to, and all with the notion that we have to bring some worthinessin order to move Jesus Christ to deal graciously with us.

And then notice that the religion of barter, which thinks to earn God's favour by deeds, and is, alas! the only religion of multitudes, and subtly mingles with the thoughts of all, tends to lay the main stress on the mere external arts of cult and ritual. He loveth our nation, and hath built us a synagogue; not, He is gentle, good, Godlike. He has built a synagogue. That is the type of work which most people who fall into the notion that heaven is to be bought, offer as the price. I have no doubt that there are many people who have never caught a glimpse of any loftier conception than that, and who, when they think--which they do not often do--about religious subjects at all, are saying to themselves, I do as well as I can, and who thus bring in some vague thought of the mercy of God as a kind of make-weight to help out what of their own they put in the scale. Ah, dear brethren! that is a wearying, an endless, a self-torturing, an imprisoning, an enervating thought, and the plea of worthinessis utterly out of place and unsustainable before God.

**II. Now let me turn to the deeper conviction which silences that plea.**

I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof, wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto Thee. This man had a loftier conception of who and what Christ was than the elders had. To them He was only one of themselves, perhaps endowed with some kind of prophetic power, but still one of themselves. The centurion had pondered over the mystic power of the word of command, as he knew it by experience in the legion, or in the little troop of which he, though a man under the authority of his higher officers, was the commander; and he knew that even his limited power carried with it absolute authority and compelled obedience. And he had looked at Christ, and wondered, and thought, and had come at last to a dim apprehension of that great truth that, somehow or other, in this Man there did lie a power which, by the mere utterance of His will, could affect matter, could raise the dead, could still a storm, could banish disease, could quell devils. He did not formulate his belief, he could not have said exactly what it led to, or what it contained, but he felt that there was something divine about Him. And so, seeing, though it was but through mists, the sight of that great perfection, that divine humanity and human divinity, he bowed himself and said, Lord! I am not worthy.

When you see Christ as He is, and give Him the honour due to His name, all notions of desert will vanish utterly.

Further, the centurion saw himself from the inside, and that makes all the difference. Ah, brethren! most of us know our own characters just as little as we know our own faces, and find it as difficult to form a just estimate of what the hidden man of the heart looks like as we find it impossible to form a just estimate of what we look to other people as we walk down the street. But if we once turned the searchlight upon ourselves, I do not think that any of us would long be able to stand by that plea, I am worthy. Have you ever been on a tour of discovery, like what they go through at the Houses of Parliament on the first day of each session, down into the cellars to see what stores of explosive material, and what villains to fire it, may be lurking there? If you have once seen yourself as you are, and take into account, not only actions but base tendencies, foul, evil thoughts, imagined sins of the flesh, meannesses and basenesses that never have come to the surface, but which you know are bits of you, I do not think that you will have much more to say about I am worthy. The flashing waters of the sea may be all blazing in the sunshine, but if they were drained off, what a frightful sight the mud and the ooze at the bottom would be! Others look at the dancing, glittering surface, but you, if you are a wise man, will go down in the diving-bell sometimes, and for a while stop there at the bottom, and turn a bull's-eye straight upon all the slimy, crawling things that are there, and that would die if they came into the light.

I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof. But then, as I have said, most of us are strangers to ourselves. The very fact of a course of action which, in other people, we should describe with severe condemnation, being ours, bribes us to indulgence and lenient judgment. Familiarity, too, weakens our sense of the foulness of our own evils. If you have been in the Black Hole all night, you do not know how vitiated the atmosphere is. You have to come out into the fresh air to find out that. We look at the errors of others through a microscope; we look at our own through the wrong end of the telescope; and the one set, when we are in a cynical humour, seem bigger than they are; and the other set always seem smaller.

Now, that clear consciousness of my own sinfulness ought to underlie all my religious feelings and thoughts. I believe, for my part, that no man is in a position to apprehend Christianity rightly who has not made the acquaintance of his own bad self. And I trace a very large proportion of the shallow Christianity of this day as well as of the disproportion in which its various truths are set forth, and the rising of crops of erroneous conceptions just to this, that this generation has to a large extent lost--no, do not let me say this generation, you and I--have to a large extent lost, that wholesome consciousness of our own unworthiness and sin.

But on the other hand, let me remind you that the centurion's deeper conviction is not yet the deepest of all, and that whilst the Christianity which ignores sin is sure to be impotent, on the other hand the Christianity which sees very little but sin is bondage and misery, and is impotent too. And there are many of us whose type of religion is far gloomier than it should be, and whose motive of service is far more servile than it ought to be, just because we have not got beyond the centurion, and can only say, I am not worthy; I am a poor, miserable sinner.

**III. And so I come to the third point, which is not in my text, but which both my texts converge upon, and that is the deepest truth of all, that worthiness or unworthiness has nothing to do with Christ's love.**

When these elders interceded with Jesus, He at once rose and went with them, and that not because of their intercession or of the certificate of character which they had given, but because His own loving heart impelled Him to go to any soul that sought His help. So we are led away from all anxious questionings as to whether we are worthy or no, and learn that, far above all thoughts either of undue self-complacency or of undue self-depreciation, lies the motive for Christ's gracious and healing approach in.

His ceaseless, unexhausted love,

Unmerited and free.

This is the truth to which the consciousness of sinfulness and unworthiness points us all, for which that consciousness prepares us, in which that consciousness does not melt away, but rather is increased and ceases to be any longer a burden or a pain. Here, then, we come to the very bed-rock of everything, for

Merit lives from man to man,

But not from man, O Lord, to Thee.

Jesus Christ comes to us, not drawn by our deserts, but impelled by His own love, and that love pours itself out upon each of us. So we do not need painfully to amass a store of worthiness, nor to pile up our own works, by which we may climb to heaven. Say not, who shall ascend up into heaven, to bring Christ down again, but the word is nigh thee, that if thou wilt believe with thine heart, thou shalt be saved. Worthiness or unworthiness is to be swept clean out of the field, and I am to be content to be a pauper, to owe everything to what I have done nothing to procure, and to cast myself on the sole, all-sufficient mercy of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And then comes liberty, and then comes joy. If the gift is given from no consideration of men's deserts, then the only thing that men have to do is to exercise the faith that takes it. As the Apostle says in words that sound very hard and technical, but which, if you would only ponder them, are throbbing with vitality, It is of faith that it might be by grace. Since He gives simply because He loves, the only requisites are the knowledge of our need, the will to receive, the trust that, in clasping the Giver, possesses the gift.

The consciousness of unworthiness will be deepened. The more we know ourselves to be sinful, the more we shall cleave to Christ, and the more we cleave to Christ, the more we shall know ourselves to be sinful. Peter caught a glimpse of what Jesus was when he sat in the boat, and he said, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!But Peter saw both himself and his Lord more clearly, that is more truly, when, subsequent to his black treachery, his brother Apostle said to him concerning the figure standing on the beach in the grey morning, It is the Lord, and he flung himself over the side and floundered through the water to get to his Master's feet. For that is the place for the man who knows himself unworthy. The more we are conscious of our sin, the closer let us cling to our Lord's forgiving heart, and the more sure we are that we have that love which we have not earned, the more shall we feel how unworthy of it we are. As one of the prophets says, with profound meaning, Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy transgression, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done. The child buries its face on its mother's breast, and feels its fault the more because the loving arms clasp it close.

And so, dear brethren, deepen your convictions, if you are deluded by that notion of merit; deepen your convictions, if you see your own evil so clearly that you see little else. Come into the light, come into the liberty, rise to that great thought, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us. Have done with the religion of barter, and come to the religion of undeserved grace. If you are going to stop on the commercial level, the wages of sin is death; rise to the higher ground: the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.