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

**LUKE-029**. **THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"2. And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, 3. And Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto Him of their substance."*

*Luke 8:2-3*

The Evangelist Luke has preserved for us several incidents in our Lord's life in which women play a prominent part. It would not, I think, be difficult to bring that fact into connection with the main characteristics of his Gospel, but at all events it is worth observing that we owe to him those details, and the fact that the service of these grateful women was permanent during the whole of our Lord's wandering life after His leaving Galilee. An incidental reference to the fact is found in Matthew's account of the Crucifixion, but had it not been for Luke we should not have known the names of two or three of them, nor should we have known how constantly they adhered to Him. As to the women of the little group, we know very little about them. Mary of Magdala has had a very hard fate. The Scripture record of her is very sweet and beautiful. Delivered by Christ from that mysterious demoniacal possession, she cleaves to Him, like a true woman, with all her heart. She is one of the little group whose strong love, casting out all fear, nerved them to stand by the Cross when all the men except the gentle Apostle of love, as he is called, were cowering in corners, afraid of their lives, and she was one of the same group who would fain have prolonged their ministry beyond His death, and who brought the sweet spices with them in order to anoint Him, and it was she who came to the risen Lord with the rapturous exclamation, Rabboni, my Master. By strange misunderstanding of the Gospel story, she has been identified with the woman who was a sinner in the previous chapter in this book, and her fair fame has been blackened and her very name taken as a designation of the class to which there is no reason whatever to believe she belonged. Demoniacal possession was neither physical infirmity nor moral evil, however much it may have simulated sometimes the one or the other.

Then as to Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, old Church tradition tells us that she was the consort of the nobleman whose son Christ healed at Capernaum. It does not seem very likely that Herod's steward would have been living in Capernaum, and the narrative before us rather seems to show that she herself was the recipient of healing from His hands. However that may be, Herod's court was not exactly the place to look for Christian disciples, was it? But you know they of Caesar's household surrounded with their love the Apostle whom Nero murdered, and it is by no means an uncommon experience that the servantshall knows and loves the Christ that the lord in the saloon does not care about.

And then as for Susanna, is it not a sweet fate to be known to all the world for ever more by one line only, which tells of her service to her Master?

So I will try to take out of these little incidents in our text some plain lessons about this matter of Christian service and ministry to Christ, with which it seems to be so full. It will apply to missionary work and all other sorts of work, and perhaps will take us down to the bottom of it all, and show us the foundation on which it should all rest.

Let me ask you for a moment to look with me first of all at the centre figure, as being an illustration of--what shall I say? may I venture to use a rough word and say the pauper Christ?--as the great Pattern and Motive for us, of the love that becomes poor. We very often cover the life of our Lord with so much imaginative reverence that we sometimes lose the hard angles of the facts of it. Now, I want you to realise it, and you may put it into as modern English as you like, for it will help the vividness of the conception, which is a simple, prosaic fact, that Jesus Christ was, in the broadest meaning of the word, a pauper; not indeed with the sodden poverty that you can see in our slums, but still in a very real sense of the word. He had not a thing that He could call His own, and when He came to the end of His life there was nothing for His executioners to gamble for except His one possession, the seamless robe. He is hungry, and there is a fig-tree by the roadside, and He comes, expecting to get His breakfast off that. He is tired, and He borrows a fishing-boat to lie down and sleep in. He is thirsty, and He asks a woman of questionable character to give Him a draught of water. He wants to preach a sermon about the bounds of ecclesiastical and civil society, and He says, Bring Me a penny. He has to be indebted to others for the beast of burden on which He made His modest entry into Jerusalem, for the winding sheet that wrapped Him, for the spices that would embalm Him, for the grave in which He lay. He was a pauper in a deeper sense of the word than His Apostle when he said, Having nothing, and yet possessing all things, as poor, and yet making many rich. For let us remember that the great mystery of the Gospel system--the blending together in one act and in one Person all the extremes of lowliness and of the loftiness which go deep down into the very profundities of the Gospel, is all here dramatised, as it were, and drawn into a picturesque form on the very surface; and the same blending together of poverty and absolute love, which in its loftiest form is the union in one Person of Godhead and of manhood, is here for us in this fact, that all the dark cloud of poverty, if I may so say, is shot through with strange gleams of light like sunshine caught and tangled in some cold, wet fog, so that whenever you get some definite and strange mark of Christ's poverty, you get lying beside it some definite and strange mark of His absoluteness and His worth. For instance, take the illustration I have already referred to--He borrows a fishing-boat and lies down, weary, to sleep on the wooden pillow at the end of it; aye, but He rises and He says, Peace, be still, and the waves fall. He borrows the upper room, and with a stranger's wine and another man's bread He founds the covenant and the sacrament of His new kingdom. He borrows a grave; aye, but He comes out of it, the Lord both of the dead and of the living. And so we have to say, Consider the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich.

The noblest life that was ever lived upon earth--I hope you and I think it is a great deal more than that, but we all think it is that at any rate--the noblest life that was ever lived upon earth was the life of a poor man. Remember that pure desires, holy aspirations, noble purposes, and a life peopled with all the refinement and charities that belong to the spirit, and that is ever conscious of the closest presence of God and of the innate union with Him, is possible under such conditions, and so remember that the pauper Christ is, at the least, the perfect Man.

But then what I more immediately intended was to ask you to take that central figure with this external fact of His poverty, of the depth of His true inanition, the emptying of Himself for our sakes, as being the great motive, and Oh! thank God that with all humility, we may venture to say, the great Pattern to which you and I have to conform. There is the reason why we say, I love to speak His name, there is the true measure of the devotion of the consecration and the self-surrender which He requires. Christ gave all for us even to the uttermost circumference of external possession, and standing in the midst of those for whose sakes He became poor, He turns to them with a modest appeal when He says, Minister unto Me, for I have made Myself to need your ministrations for the sake of your redemption. So much, then, for the first point which I would desire to urge upon you from this incident before us.

Now, in the next place, and pursuing substantially the same course of thought, let me suggest to you to look at the love--the love here that stoops to be served.

It is a familiar observation and a perfectly true one that we have no record of our Lord's ever having used miraculous power for the supply of His own wants, and the reason for that, I suppose, is to be found not only in that principle of economy and parsimony of miraculous energy, so that the supernatural in His life was ever pared down to the narrowest possible limits, and inosculated immediately with the natural, but it is also to be found in this--let me put it into very plain words--that Christ liked to be helped and served by the people that He loved, and that Christ knew that they liked it as well as He. It delighted Him, and He was quite sure that it delighted them. You fathers and mothers know what it is when one of your little children comes, and seeing you engaged about some occupation says, Let me help you. The little hand perhaps does not contribute much to the furtherance of your occupation. It may be rather an encumbrance than otherwise, but is not there a gladness in saying Yes, here, take this and do this little thing for me? And do not we all know how maimed and imperfect that love is which only gives, and how maimed and imperfect that love is which only receives, so that there must be an assumption of both attitudes in all true commerce of affection, and that same beautiful flashing backwards and forwards from the two poles which makes the sweetness of our earthly love find its highest example there in the heavens. There are the two mirrors facing each other, and they reverberate rays from one polished surface to another, and so Christ loves and gives, and Christ loves and takes, and His servants love and give, and His servants love and take. Sometimes we are accustomed to speak of it as the highest sign of our Lord's true, deep conviction that He has given so much to us. It seems to me we may well pause and hesitate whether the mightiness and the wonderfulness of His love to us are shown more in that He gives everything to us, or in that He takes so much from us. It is much to say, The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister; I do not know but that it is more to say that the Son of man let this record be written: Certain women also which ministered to Him of their substance. At all events there it stands and for us. What although we have to come and say, All that I bring is Thine; what then? Does a father like less to get a gift from his boy because he gave him the shilling to buy it? And is there anything that diminishes the true sweetness of our giving to Christ, and as we may believe the true sweetness to Him of receiving it from us, because we have to herald all our offerings, all our love, aspirations, desires, trust, conformity, practical service, substantial help, with the old acknowledgment, All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee.

Now, dear friends, all these principles which I have thus imperfectly touched upon as to the necessity of the blending of the two sides in all true commerce of love, the giving and bestowing the expression of the one affection in both hearts, all bears very directly upon the more special work of Christian men in spreading the name of Christ among those who do not know it. You get the same economy of power there that I was speaking about. The supernatural is finished when the divine life is cast into the world. I am come to fling fire upon the earth, said He, and oh, that it were already kindled!There is the supernatural; after that you have to deal with the thing according to the ordinary laws of human history and the ordinary conditions of man's society. God trusts the spread of His word to His people; there will not be one moment's duration of the barely, nakedly supernatural beyond the absolute necessity. Christ comes; after that you and I have to see to it, and then you say, Collections, collections, collections, it is always collections. This society and that society and the other society, there is no end of the appeals that are made. Charity sermons--men using the highest motives of the Gospel for no purpose but to get a shilling or two out of people's pockets. I am tired of it. Very well; all I have to say is, first of all, Ye have not resisted unto blood; some people have had to pay a great deal more for their Gospel than you have. And another thing, a man that had lost a great deal more for his Master than ever you or I will have to do, said, Unto me who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, that I should preach amongst the heathen the unsearchable riches of Christ. Ah! a generous, chivalrous spirit, a spirit touched to fine issues by the fine touch of the Lord's love, will feel that it is no burden; or if it be a burden, it is only a burden as a golden crown heavy with jewels may be a burden on brows that are ennobled by its pressure. This grace is given, and He has crowned us with the honour that we may serve Him and do something for Him.

Dear brethren! of all the gracious words that our Master has spoken to us, I know not that there is one more gracious than when He said, Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature; and of all the tender legacies that He has left His Church, though there be included amongst these His own peace and His own Spirit, I know not that there is any more tender or a greater sign of His love towards us and His confidence in us than when departing to the far country to receive a kingdom and to return, He gave authority to His servants, and to every man his work.

And so, in the next place, let me ask you to look for a moment at the complement to this love that stoops to serve and delights to serve--the ministry or service of our love. Let me point to two things.

It seems to me that the simple narrative we have before us goes very deep into the heart of this matter. It gives us two things--the foundation of the service and the sphere of the service.

First there is the foundation--Certain women which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Ah, there you come to it! The consciousness of redemption is the one master touch that evokes the gratitude which aches to breathe itself in service. There is no service except it be the expression of love. That is the one great Christian principle; and the other is that there is no love that does not rest on the consciousness of redemption; and from these two--that all service and obedience are the utterance and eloquence of love, and that all love has its root in the sense of redemption--you may elaborate all the distinct characteristics and peculiarities of Christian ethics, whereby duty becomes gladness. I will, and I oughtoverlap and cover each other like two of Euclid's triangles; and whatsoever He commands that I spring to do; and so though the burden be heavy, considered in regard to its requirements, and though the yoke do often press, considered per se, yet because the cords that fasten the yoke to our neck are the cords of love, I can say, My burden is light. One of the old psalms puts it thus; O Lord, truly I am Thy servant; Thou hast loosed my bonds; and because Thou hast loosed, therefore O hear me; speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.

So much then for the foundation--now for the sphere. Ah, you say, there is no parallel there, at any rate. These women served Him with personal ministration of their substance. Well, I think there is a parallel notwithstanding. If I had time I should like to dwell upon the side thoughts connected with that sphere of service, and remind you how very prosaic were their common domestic duties, looking after the comfort of Christ and the travel-stained Twelve who were with Him--let us put it into plain English--cooking their dinners for them, and how that became a religious act. Take the lesson out of it, you women in your households, and you men in your counting-houses and behind your counters, and you students at your dictionaries and lexicons. The commonest things done for the Master flash up into worship, or as good old George Herbert puts it--

A servant with this clause

Makes drudgery divine;

Who sweeps a room, as for Thy cause,

Makes that and thaction fine.

But then beyond that, is there any personal ministration to do? If any of you have ever been in St. Mark's Convent at Florence, I dare say you will remember that in the Guest Chamber the saintly genius of Fra Angelico has painted, as an appropriate frontispiece, the two pilgrims on the road to Emmaus, praying the unknown man to come in and partake of their hospitality; and he has draped them in the habit of his order, and he has put Christ as the Representative of all the poor and wearied and wayworn travellers that might enter in there and receive hospitality, which is but the lesson, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.

And there is another thing, dear friends. Do we not minister to Him best when we do the thing that is nearest His heart and help Him most in the purpose of His life and in His death? What would you think of a would-be helper of some great reformer who said: I will give you all sorts of material support; but I have not a grain of sympathy with the cause to which you have devoted your life. I think it is madness and nonsense: I will feed you and house you and make you comfortable, but I do not care one rush for the object for which you are to be housed and fed and made comfortable. Jesus Christ let these poor women help Him that He might live to bear the Cross; He lets you and me help Him for that for which on the Cross He died; This honour have all the saints; The foundation of our service is the consciousness of redemption; its sphere is ministering to Him in that which is nearest His heart.

And then, brethren, there is another thing that does not so immediately belong to the incident before us, but which suggests itself to me in connection with it. We have tried to show the motive and the pattern, the foundation and the sphere, of the service: let me add a last thought--the remembrance and the record of it.

How strange that is, that just as a beam of light coming into a room would enable us to see all the motes dancing up and down that lay in its path, so the beam from Christ's life shoots athwart the society of His age, and all those little insignificant people come for a moment into the full lustre of the light. Years before and years afterward they lived, and we do not know anything about them; but for an instant they crossed the illuminated track and there they blazed. How strange Pharisees, officials, and bookmen of all sorts would have felt if anybody had said to them: Do you see that handful of travel-stained Galileans there, those poor women you have just passed by the way? Well, do you know that these three women's names will never perish as long as the world lasts?So we may learn the eternity of work done for Him. Ah, a great deal of it may be forgotten and unrecorded! How many deeds of faithful love and noble devotion are all compressed into those words, which ministered unto Him! It is the old story of how life shrinks, and shrinks, and shrinks in the record. How many acres of green forest ferns in the long ago time went to make up a seam of coal as thick as a sixpence? But still there is the record, compressed indeed, but existent.

And how many names may drop out and not be associated with the work which they did? Do you not think that these anonymous many others which ministeredwere just as dear to Jesus Christ as Mary and Joanna and Susannah? A great many people helped Him whose deeds are related in the Gospel, but whose names are not recorded. But what does it matter about that? With many others of my fellow-labourers also, says St. Paul; whose names--well, I have forgotten them; but that is of little consequence; they are in the Lamb's book of life. And so the work is eternal, and will last on in our blessed consciousness and in His remembrance who will never forget any of it, and we shall self-enfold the large results, even if the rays of dying fame may fade.

And there is one other thought on this matter of the eternity of the work on which I would just touch for an instant.

How strange it must be to these women now! If, as I suppose, you and I believe, they are living with Christ, they will look up to Him and think, Ah! we remember when we used to find your food and prepare for your household comforts, and there Thou art on the throne! How strange and how great our earthly service seems to us now!So it will be to us all when we get up yonder. We shall have to say, Lord, when saw I Thee?He will put a meaning into our work and a majesty into it that we know nothing about at present. So, brethren, account the name of His slaves your highest honour, and the task that love gives you your greatest joy. When we have in our poor love poorly ministered unto Him who in His great love greatly died for us, then, at the last, the wonderful word will be fulfilled: Verily I say unto you, He shall gird Himself and make them to sit down to meat and will come forth and serve them.