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

**LUKE-041**. **NEIGHBOURS FAR OFF by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"25. And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted Him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? 26. He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? 27. And he, answering, said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. 28. And He said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. 29. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour? 30. And Jesus, answering, said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. 31. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. 33. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, 34. And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35. And on the morrow, when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him: and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. 36. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves! 37. And he said. He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise."*

*Luke 10:25-37*

The lawyer's first question was intended to temptJesus, which here seems to mean, rather, to test; that is, to ascertain His orthodoxy or His ability. Christ walks calmly through the snare, as if not seeing it. His answer is unimpeachably orthodox, and withal just hints in the slightest way that the question was needless, since one so learned in the law knew well enough what were the conditions of inheriting life. The lawyer knows the letter too well to be at a loss what to answer. But it is remarkable that he gives the same combination of two passages which Jesus gives in His last duel with the Pharisees (Matt. xxii; Mark xii.). Did Jesus adopt this lawyer's summary? Or is Luke's narrative condensed, omitting stages by which Jesus led the man to so wise an answer?

Our Lord's rejoinder has a marked tone of authority, which puts the lawyer in his right place. His answer is commended, as by one whose estimate has weight; and his practice is implicitly condemned, as by one who knows, and has a right to judge. This dois a sharp sword-thrust. It also unites the two lovesas essentially one, by saying This-not these--do. The lawyer feels the prick, and it is his defective practice, not his question, which he seeks to justify. He did not think that his love to God needed any justification. He had fully done his duty there, but about the other half he was less sure. So he tried to ride off, lawyer-like, on a question of the meaning of words. Who is my neighbour?is the question answered by the lovely story of the kindly Samaritan.

**I. The main purpose, then, is to show how far off men may be, and yet be neighbours.**

The lawyer's question, Who is my neighbour?is turned round the other way in Christ's form of it at the close. It is better to ask Whose neighbour am I?than Who is my neighbour?The lawyer meant by the word a person whom I am bound to love. He wanted to know how far an obligation extended which he had no mind to recognise an inch farther than he was obliged. Probably he had in his thought the Rabbinical limitations which made it as much duty to hate thine enemyas to love thy neighbour. Probably, too, he accepted the national limitations, which refused to see any neighbours outside the Jewish people.

Neighbourhood, in his judgment, implied nearness, and he wished to know how far off the boundaries of the region included in the command lay. There are a great many of us like him, who think that the obligation is a matter of geography, and that love, like force, is inversely as the square of the distance. A good deal of the so-called virtue of patriotismis of this spurious sort. But Christ's way of putting the question sweeps all such limitations aside. Who became neighbour tothe wounded man? He who showed mercy on him, said the lawyer, unwilling to name the Samaritan, and by his very reluctance giving the point to his answer which Christ wished to bring out. We are not to love because we are neighbours in any geographical sense, but we become neighbours to the man farthest from us when we love and help him. The relation has nothing to do with proximity. If we prove ourselves neighbours to any man by exercising love to him, then the relation intended by the word is as wide as humanity. We recognise that A. is our neighbour when a throb of pity shoots through our heart, and thereby we become neighbours to him.

The story is not, properly speaking, a parable, or imaginary narrative of something in the physical world intended to be translated into something in the spiritual region, but it is an illustration (by an imaginary narrative) of the actual virtue in question. Every detail is beautifully adapted to bring out the lesson that the obligation of neighbourly affection has nothing to do with nearness either of race or religion, but is as wide as humanity. The wounded man was probably a Jew, but it is significant that his nationality is not mentioned. He is a certain man, that is all. The Samaritan did not ask where he was born before he helped him. So Christ teaches us that sorrow and need and sympathy and help are of no nationality.

That lesson is still more strongly taught by making the helper a Samaritan. Perhaps, if Jesus had been speaking in America, he would have made him a negro; or, if in France, a German; or, if in England, a foreigner. It was a daring stroke to bring the despised name of Samaritaninto the story, and one sees what a hard morsel to swallow the lawyer found it, by his unwillingness to name him after all.

The nations have not yet learned the deep, simple truth of this parable. It absolutely forbids all limitations of mercy and help. It makes every man the neighbour of every man. It carries in germ the great truth of the brotherhood of the race. Humanityis a purely Christian word, and a conception that was never dreamed of before Christ had showed us the unity of mankind. We slowly approximate to the realisation of the teaching of this story, which is oftener admired than imitated, and perhaps oftenest on the lips of people who obey it least.

**II. Another aspect of the parable is its lesson as to the true manifestations of neighbourliness.**

The minutely detailed account of the Samaritan's care for the half-dead man is not only graphic, but carries large lessons. Compassionate sentiments are very well. They must come first. The help that is given as a matter of duty, without the outgoing of heart, will be worth little, and soon cease to flow; but the emotion that does not drive the wheels of action, and set to work to stanch the sorrows which cause it to run so easily, is worth still less. It hardens the heart, as all feeling unexpressed in action does. If the priest and Levite had gone up to the man, and said, Ah, poor fellow, poor fellow! how sorry we are for you! somebody ought to come and help you, and so had trudged on their way, they would have been worse than they are painted as being.

The various acts are enumerated as showing the genius of true love. We notice the swift, cool-headed deftness of the man, his having at hand the appliances needed, the business-like way in which he goes about his kindness, his readiness to expend his wine and oil, his willingness to do the surgeon's work, his cheerful giving up of his own beast, while he plodded along on foot, steadying the wounded man on his ass; his care for him at the inn; his generosity, and withal his prudence, in not leaving a great sum in the host's hands, but just enough to tide over a day or two, and his wise hint that he would audit the accounts when he came back. This man's quick compassion was blended with plenty of shrewdness, and was as practical as the hardest, least compassionate man could have been. There is need for organisation, faculty, and the like, in the work of loving our neighbour. A thousand pities that sometimes Christian charity and Christian common-sense dissolve partnership. The Samaritan was a man of business, and he did his compassion in a business-like fashion, as we should try to do.

**III. Another lesson inwrought into the parable is the divorce between religion and neighbourliness, as shown in the conduct of the priest and Levite.**

Jericho was one of the priestly cities, so that there would be frequent travellers on ecclesiastical errands. The priest was going down(that is from Jerusalem), so he could not plead a pressing public engagementat the Temple. The verbal repetition of the description of the conduct of both him and the Levite serves to suggest its commonness. They two did exactly the same thing, and so would twenty or two hundred ordinary passers by. They saw the man lying in a pool of blood, and they made a wide circuit, and, even in the face of such a sight, went on their way. Probably they said to themselves, Robbers again; the sooner we get past this dangerous bit, the better. We see that they were heartless, but they did not see it. We do the same thing ourselves, and do not see that we do; for who of us has not known of many miseries which we could have done something to stanch, and have left untouched because our hearts were unaffected? The world would be a changed place if every Christian attended to the sorrows that are plain before him.

Let professing Christians especially lay to heart the solemn lesson that there does lie in their very religion the possibility of their being culpably unconcerned about some of the world's wounds, and that, if their love to God does not find a field for its manifestation in active love to man, worship in the Temple will be mockery. Philanthropy is, in our days, often substituted for religion. The service of man has been put forward as the only real service of God. But philanthropic unbelievers and unphilanthropic believers are equally monstrosities. What God hath joined let not man put asunder. That simple and, which couples the two great commandments, expresses their indissoluble connection. Well for us if in our practice they are blended in one!

It is not spiritualising this narrative when we say that Jesus is Himself the great pattern of the swift compassion and effectual helpfulness which it sets forth. Many unwise attempts have been made to tack on spiritual meanings to the story. These are as irreverent as destructive of its beauty and significance. But to say that Christ is the perfect example of that love to every man which the narrative portrays, has nothing in common with these fancies. It is only when we have found in Him the pity and the healing which we need, that we shall go forth into the world with love as wide as His.