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

**LUKE-070**. **MELTED BY KINDNESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to-day I must abide at thy house."*

*Luke 19:5*

It is characteristic of Luke that only he tells the story of Zacchaeus. He always dwells with special interest on incidents bringing out the character of Christ as the Friend of outcasts. His is eminently the Gospel of forgiveness. For example, we owe to Him the three supreme parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, as well as those of the Pharisee and the publican praying in the Temple; and of the good Samaritan. It is he that tells us that all the publicans and sinners came near to Jesus to hear Him; and he loses no opportunity of enforcing the lesson with which this incident closes, The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. It is because of the light that it throws upon that great thought that he tells this fascinating story of Zacchaeus. I need not repeat it. We all remember it, and the quaintness and grotesqueness of part of it fix it in people's memories. We know how the rich tax gatherer, pocketing his dignity, and unable to see over the heads of the crowd, scrambled up into the branches of the sycamore tree that overhung the road; and there was found by the eye of love, and surprised by the words of kindness, which melted him down, and made a new man of him on the spot. The story seems to me to be full of teaching, to which I desire to turn your attention at this time.

**I. First, note the outcast, drawn by imperfect motives to Jesus Christ.**

It has been supposed that this man was a Gentile, but his Jewish name establishes his origin. And, if so, the fact that he was a publican and a Jew says a good deal about his character. There are some trades which condemn, to a certain extent, the men who engage in them. You would not expect to find a man of sensitive honour acting as a professional spy; or one of earnest religious character keeping a public-house. You would not expect to find a very good Jew condescending to be the tool of the Roman Government. Zacchaeus was at the head of the revenue office in Jericho, a position of considerable importance, inasmuch as there was a large volume of trade through that city from its situation near the fords of the Jordan, and from the fertility of the plain in which it stood. He had made some money, and probably made it by very questionable means. He was the object, not undeservedly, of the execration and suspicion of his countrymen. Italians did not love Italians who took service under Austria. Irishmen did not love Irishmen who in the bad old days used to collect church cess. And so Jews had no very kind feeling towards Jews who became Caesar's servants. That a man should be in such a position indicated that he cared more for money than for patriotism, religion, or popular approval. His motto was the motto of that Roman Emperor who said, Money has no smell, out of whatever cesspool it may have been fished up. But the consciousness of being encompassed by universal hatred would induce the object of it to put on an extra turn of the screw, and avenge upon individuals the general hostility. So we may take it for granted that Zacchaeus, the head of the Jericho custom-house, and rich to boot, was by no means a desirable character.

What made him want to see Jesus Christ? He said to himself, curiosity; but probably he was doing himself injustice, and there was something else working below than merely the wish to see what sort of man was this Rabbi Joshua from Galilee that everybody was talking about. Had he heard that Jesus had a soft place in His heart for his class? Or was he, perhaps, beginning to get tired of being the butt of universal hatred, and finding that money scarcely compensated for that? Or was there some reaching out towards some undefined good, and a dissatisfaction with a very defined present, though unnamed, evil? Probably so. Like some of us, he put the trivial motive uppermost because he was half ashamed of the half-conscious better one.

I wonder if there are any here now who said to themselves that they would come out of curiosity to hear the preacher, or from some such ordinary motive, and who all the while have, lying deep below that, another reason altogether, a dim feeling that it is not all right between them and God, and that here may be the place to have it put right? At all events, from whatsoever imperfect motives little Zacchaeus was perched up in the sycamore there, he went to see Christ, and he got more than he went for. Unconsciously we may be drawn, and imperfect motives may lead us to a perfect Saviour.

He sets us an example in another way. Do not be too punctilious about dignity in pursuing aims that you know to be good. It would be a sight to bring jeers and grins on the faces of the crowd to see the rich man of the custom-house sitting up amongst the leaves. But he did not mind about that if he got a good look at the Rabbi when He passed. People care nothing for ridicule if their hearts are set upon a thing. I wish there were more of us who did not mind being laughed at if only what we did helped us to see Jesus Christ. Do not be afraid of ridicule. It is not a test of truth; in nine cases out of ten it is the grimace of fools.

**II. Then, further, notice the self-invited Guest.**

When the little procession stopped under the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus would begin to feel uncomfortable. He may have had experience in past times of the way in which the great doctors of orthodoxy were in the habit of treating a publican, and may have begun to be afraid that this new one was going to be like all the rest, and elicit some kind of mob demonstration against him. The crowd would be waiting with intense curiosity to see what would pass between the Rabbi and the revenue collector. They would all be very much astonished. Zacchaeus! make haste and come down. To-day I must abide at thy house. Perhaps it was the first time since he had been a child at his mother's knee that he had heard his name pronounced in tones of kindness. There was not a ragged beggar in Jericho who would not have thought himself degraded by putting his foot across the threshold that Jesus now says He will cross.

It is the only time in which we read that Jesus volunteered to go into any house. He never offers to go where He is not wanted, any more than He ever stays away where He is. And so the very fact of His saying I will abide at thy house, is to me an indication that, deep down below Zacchaeussuperficial and vulgar curiosity, there was something far more noble which our Lord fosters into life and consciousness by this offer.

Many large truths are suggested by it on which we may touch. We have in Christ's words an illustration of His individualising knowledge. Zacchaeus, come down. There is no sign that anybody had told Christ the name, or that He knew anything about Zacchaeus before by human knowledge. But the same eye that saw Nathanael under the fig-tree saw Zacchaeus in the sycamore; and, seeing in secret, knew without being told the names of both. Christ does not name men in vain. He generally, when He uses an individual's name in addressing him, means either to assert His knowledge of his character, or His authority over him, or in some way or other to bespeak personal adhesion and to promise personal affection. So He named some of His disciples, weaving a bond that united each single soul to Himself by the act. This individualising knowledge and drawing love and authority are all expressed, as I think, in that one word Zacchaeus. And these are as true about us as about him. The promises of the New Testament, the words of Jesus Christ, the great, broad, universal whosoeversof His assurance and of His commandments are as directly meant for each of us as if they were in an envelope with our names upon them and put into our hands. We, too, are spoken to by Him by our names, and for us, too, there may be a personal bond of answering love that knits us individually to the Master, as there certainly is a bond of personal regard, compassion, affection, and purpose of salvation in His heart in regard of each single soul of all the masses of humanity. I should have done something if I should have been able to gather into a point, that blessedly pierced some heart to let the life in, the broad truths of the Gospel. Whosoever will, let him come. Say to yourself, That is me. Whosoever cometh I will in no wise cast out. Say to yourself, That is me. And in like manner with all the general declarations, and especially with that chiefest of them all, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish. Read it as you may--and you will never read it right until you do--God so loved me--John, Mary, or whatever be your name--Jesus so loved me that if I believe upon Him I shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

Then, note, further, how here we get the revelation, in a concrete form, of Christ's perfect willingness and desire to make common cause, and dwell with the most degraded and outcast. I have said that this is the only instance in which He volunteered to be a guest. Pharisees asked Him, and He did not refuse. The publican's dwelling, which was tabooed, He opened the door of by His own hand. And that is what He always does.

This little incident may be taken to be, not merely a symbol of His whole dealings, but an illustration, in small, of the same principle which has its largest embodiment and illustration in the fact of His Incarnation and Manhood. Why did Jesus Christ take flesh and dwell among us? Because He desired to seek and to save that which is lost. Why did He go into the publican's house, and brave the sneers of the crowd, and associate Himself with the polluted? For the same reason. Microscopic crystals and gigantic ones are due to the same forces working in the same fashion. This incident is more than a symbol; it is a little instance of the operation of the law which finds its supreme and transcendent instance in the fact that the Eternal Son of God bowed the heavens and came down and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.

His example is our pattern. A Christian church which does not imitate its Master in its frank and continual willingness to associate itself with the degraded and the outcast has lost one of the truest signs of its being vitalised with the life of Christ. There is much in this day in the condition of Christian communities to make men dissatisfied and fearful. But there is one thing which, though in all its developments one cannot sympathise with it, is in its essence wholly good, and that is the new and quickened consciousness that a church which does not address itself to the outcasts has no business to live; and that Christian people who are too proud of their righteousness to go amongst the unclean and the degraded are a great deal more of Pharisees than Christians, and have need to learn which be the first principles of the religion which they profess. Self-righteousness gathers up its skirts in holy horror; perfect righteousness goes cheerily and without fear amongst the outcasts, for where should the physician go but to the sick, and where should Christ be found but in the house of the publican?

Further, the saying of our Lord suggests His recognition of the great law that ruled His life. Chronology here is of much importance. We do not generally remember that the scene with Zacchaeus was within about a week of the Crucifixion. Our Lord was on that last journey to Jerusalem to die, during the whole of which there was over His demeanour a tension of holy impatience, altogether unlike His usual manner, which astonished and amazed the disciples as they followed Him. He set His face like a flint to go to Jerusalem; and strode before them on the way as if He were eager to reach the culmination of His sufferings and of His work. Thus borne on the wings of the strong desire to be perfected on the Cross, He is arrested on His path. Nothing else was able to stop Him, but To-day I must abide in thy house. There was a soul to be saved; and the world's sacrifice had to wait till the single soul was secured. Christ hurrying, if I may use the word, at all events steadfastly and without wavering, pressing towards the Cross, let His course be stopped by this need. The highest mustwas obedience to the Father's will, and parallel with that need there was the other, of rescuing the Father's prodigal sons. So this elder Brother owned the obligation, and paused on the road to Calvary, to lodge in the house of Zacchaeus. Let us learn the sweet lesson, and take the large consolations that lie in such a thought.

Again, the utterance of this self-invited Guest suggests His over-abundant fulfilment of timid, half-conscious desires. I said at the beginning of my remarks that only curiosity was on the surface; but that the very fact that our Lord addressed Himself to the man seemed to imply that He descried in him something more than mere vulgar curiosity. And the glad leap with which Zacchaeus came down from his tree might have revealed to Zacchaeus himself, as no doubt it did to some of the bystanders, what it was that he had been dimly wishing. So with us all there are needs, longings, half-emerging wishes, that have scarcely come into the field of consciousness, but yet have power enough to modify our actions. Jesus Christ understands all about us, and reads us better than we do ourselves; and is ready to meet, and by meeting to bring into full relief, these vague feelings after an undefined good. Brethren, He is to us, if we will let Him be, all that we want; and He is to us all that we need, although we only half know that we need it, and never say to ourselves that we wish it.

There is a last thought deducible from these words of our Lord's; and that is, His leaving a man to decide whether he will have Him or no. Make haste and come down, for to-day I must abide at thy house. Yes! but if Zacchaeus had stuck in his tree, Christ's mustwould not have been fulfilled. He would have gone on to Jerusalem if the publican had not scrambled down in haste. He forces Himself on no man; He withholds Himself from no man. He respects that awful prerogative of being the architects of our own evil and our own good, by our own free and unconstrained choice.

Did you ever think that it was now or never with this publican; that Jesus Christ was never to go through the streets of Jericho any more; that it was Zacchaeuslast chance; and that, if he had not made haste, he would have lost Christ for ever? And so it is yet. There may be some in this place at this moment to whom Jesus Christ is now making His last appeal. I know not; no man knows. A Rabbi said, when they asked him when a man should repent, Repent on the last day of your lives. And they said, But we do not know when that will be. And he said, Then repent now. So I say, because some of you may never hear Christ's Gospel again, and because none of us know whether we shall or not; make sure work of it now, and do not let Jesus Christ go out of the city and up the road between the hills yonder; for if once the folds of the ravine shut Him from sight He will never be back in Jericho, or seen by Zacchaeus any more for ever.

**III. And so, lastly, notice the outcast melted by kindness.**

We do not know at what stage in our Lord's intercourse with the publican he stood and said, Half of my goods I give to the poor, and so on. But whensoever it was, it was the sign of the entire revolution that had been wrought upon him by the touch of that loving hand, and by the new fountain of sympathy and love that he had found in Jesus Christ.

Some people have supposed, indeed, that his words do not mark a vow for the future, but express his practice in the past. But it seems to me to be altogether incongruous that Zacchaeus should advertise his past good in order to make himself out to be not quite so bad as people thought him, and, therefore, not so unworthy of being Christ's host. Christ's love kindles sense of our sin, not complacent recounting of our goodness. So Zacchaeus said, Lord! Thou hast loved me, and I wonder. I yield, and fling away my black past; and, so far as I can, make restitution for it.

The one transforming agency is the love of Christ received into the heart. I do not suppose that Zacchaeus knew as much about Jesus Christ even after the conversation as we do; nor did he see His love in that supreme death on the Cross as we do. But the love of the Lord made a deep dint in his heart, and revolutionised his whole nature. The thing that will alter the whole current and set of a man's affections, that will upset his estimate of the relative value of material and spiritual, and that will turn him inside out and upside down, and make a new man of him, is the revelation of the supreme love that in Jesus Christ has come into the world, with an individualising regard to each of us, and has died on the Cross for the salvation of us all. Nothing else will do it. People had frowned on Zacchaeus, and it made him bitter. They had execrated and persecuted him; and his only response was setting his teeth more firmly and turning the screw a little tighter when he had the chance. You can drive a man into devilry by contempt. If you want to melt him into goodness, try love. The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, but Jesus Christ can change his heart, and that will change his skin by degrees. The one transforming power is faith in the love of Jesus Christ.

Further, the one test of a true reception of Him is the abandonment of past evil and restitution for it as far as possible. People say that our Gospel is unreal and sentimental, and a number of other ugly adjectives. Well! If it ever is so, it is the fault of the speakers, and not of the Gospel. For its demands from every man that accepts it are intensely practical, and nothing short of a complete turning of his back upon his old self, shown in the conclusive forsaking of former evil, however profitable or pleasant, and reparation for harm done to men, satisfies them.

It is useless to talk about loving Jesus Christ and trusting Him, and having the sweet assurance of forgiveness, and a glorious hope of heaven, unless these have made you break off your bad habits of whatsoever sort they may be, and cast them behind your backs. Strong emotion, sweet deep feeling, assured confidence in the sense of forgiveness and the hope of heaven, are all very well. Let us see your faith by your works; and of these works the chief is--Behold the evil that I did, I do it no more: Behold! Lord! the half of my goods I give to the poor. There was a young ruler, a chapter before this, who could not make up his mind to part with wealth in order to follow Christ. This man has so completely made up his mind to follow Christ that he does not need to be bidden to give up his worldly goods. The half given to the poor, and fourfold restoration to those whom he had wronged, would not leave much. How astonished Zacchaeus would have been if anybody had said to him that morning, Zacchaeus! before this night falls you will be next door to a pauper, and you will be a happier man than you are now!So, dear friends, like him, all of us may, if we will, and if we need, make a sudden right-about-face that shall alter the complexion of our whole future. People tell us that sudden conversions are suspicious. So they may be in certain cases. But the moment when a man makes up his mind to change the direction in which his face is set will always be a moment, however long may be the hesitation, and the meditation, and the preparation that led up to it.

Jesus Christ is standing before each of us as truly as He did before that publican, and is saying to us as truly as He said to him, Let Me in. Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If any man open ... I will enter. If He comes in He will teach you what needs to be turned out if He is to stop; and will make the sacrifice blessed and not painful; and you will be a happier and a richer man with Christ and nothing than with all beside and no Christ.