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

**LUKE-075**. **WHOSE IMAGE AND SUPERSCRIPTION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Whose image and superscription hath it?"*

*Luke 20:24*

It is no unusual thing for antagonists to join forces in order to crush a third person obnoxious to both. So in this incident we have an unnatural alliance of the two parties in Jewish politics who were at daggers drawn. The representatives of the narrow conservative Judaism, which loathed a foreign yoke, in the person of the Pharisees and Scribes, and the Herodians, the partisans of a foreigner and a usurper, lay their heads together to propose a question to Christ which they think will discredit or destroy Him. They would have answered their own question in opposite ways. One would have said, It is lawful to give tribute to Caesar; the other would have said, It is not. But that is a small matter when malice prompts. They calculate, If He says, No! we will denounce Him to Pilate as a rebel. If He says, Yes! we will go to the people and say, Here is a pretty Messiah for you, that has no objection to the foreign yoke. Either way we shall end Him.

Jesus Christ serenely walks through the cobwebs, and lays His hand upon the fact. Let Me see a silver penny!--which, by the bye, was the amount of the tribute--Whose head is that?The currency of the country proclaims the monarch of the country. To stamp his image on the coin is an act of sovereignty. Caesar's head declares that you are Caesar's subjects, whether you like it or not, and it is too late to ask questions about tribute when you pay your bills in his money. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

Does not the other side of Christ's answer--to God the things that are God's--rest upon a similar fact? Does not the parallelism require that we should suppose that the destiny of things to be devoted to God is stamped upon them, whatever they are, at least as plainly as the right of Caesar to exact tribute was inferred from the fact that his money was the currency of the country? The thought widens out in a great many directions, but I want to confine it to one special line of contemplation, and to take it as suggesting to each of us this great truth, that the very make of men shows that they belong to God, and are bound to yield themselves to Him. If the answer to the question be plain, and the conclusion irresistible, about the penny with the image of Tiberius, the answer is no less plain, nor the conclusion less irresistible, when we turn the interrogation within, and, looking at our own being, say to ourselves, Whose image and superscription hath it? '

**I. First, then, note the image stamped upon man, and the consequent obligation.**

We can very often tell what a thing is for by noticing its make. The instructed eye of an anatomist will, from a bone, divine the sphere in which the creature to whom it belonged was intended to live. Just as plainly as gills or lungs, fins or wings, or legs and arms, declare the element in which the creature that possesses them is intended to move, so plainly stamped upon all our natures is this, that God is our Lord since we are made in a true sense in His image, and that only in Him can we find rest.

I need not remind you, I suppose, of the old word, Let us make man in our own image. Nor need I, I suppose, insist at any length upon the truth that though, by the fact of man's sin, the whole glory and splendour of the divine image in which he was made is marred and defaced, there still remain such solemn, blessed, and awful resemblances between man and God that there can be no mistake as to which beings in the universe are the most kindred; nor any misunderstanding as to who it is after whose likeness we are formed, and in whose love and life alone we can be blessed.

I am not going to weary you with thoughts for which, perhaps, the pulpit is not the proper place; but let me just remind you of one or two points. Is there any other being on this earth that can say of itself I am? God says I am that I am'. You and I cannot say that, but we alone, in this order of things, possess that solemn and awful gift, the consciousness of our personal being. And, brethren, whoever is able to say to himself I amwill never know rest until he can turn to God and say Thou art, and then, laying his hand in the Great Father's hand, venture to say We are. We are made in His image, in that profoundest of all senses.

But to come to something less recondite. We are like God in that we can love; we are like Him in that we can perceive the right, and that the right is supreme; we are like Him in that we have the power to say I will. And these great capacities demand that the creature who thus knows himself to be, who thus knows the right, who thus can love, who thus can purpose, resolve, and act, should find his home and his refuge in fellowship with God.

But if you take a coin, and compare it with the die from which it has been struck, you will find that wherever in the die there is a relief, in the coin there is a sunken place; and conversely. So there are not only resemblances in man to the divine nature, which bear upon them the manifest marks of his destiny, but there are correspondences, wants, on our side, being met by gifts upon His; hollow emptinesses in us being filled, when we are brought into contact with Him, by the abundance of His outstanding supplies and gifts. So the poorest, narrowest, meanest life has in it a depth of desire, an ardour, and sometimes a pain and a madness of yearning and longing which nothing but God can fill. Though we often misunderstand the voice, and so make ourselves miserable by vain efforts, our heart and our flesh, in every fibre of our being, cry out for the living God. And what we all want is some one Pearl of great price into which all the dispersed preciousness and fragmentary brilliances that dazzle the eye shall be gathered. We want a Person, a living Person, a present Person, a sufficient Person, who shall satisfy our hearts, our whole hearts, and that at one and the same time, or else we shall never be at rest.

Because, then, we are made dependent, because we possess these wild desires, because immortal thirst attaches to our nature, because we have consciences that need illuminating, wills that are only free when they are absolutely submissive, hearts that are dissatisfied, and left yearning, after all the sweetnesses of limited, transient, and creatural affections, we bear on our very fronts the image of God; and any man that wisely looks at himself can answer the question, Whose image and superscription hath it?in but one way. In the image of God created He him.

Therefore by loving fellowship, by lowly trust, by ardour of love, by submissiveness of obedience, by continuity of contemplation, by the sacrifice of self, we must yield ourselves to God if we would pay the tribute manifestly owing to the Emperor by the fact that His image and superscription are upon the coin.

**II. And so let me ask you to look, in the next place, at the defacement of the image and the wrong expenditure of the coin.**

You sometimes get into your hands money on which there has been stamped, by mischief, or for some selfish purpose, the name of some one else than the king's or queen's which surrounds the head upon it. And in like manner our nature has gone through the stamping-press again, and another likeness has been deeply imprinted upon it. The image of God, which every man has, is in some senses and aspects ineffaceable by any course of conduct of theirs. But in another aspect it is not like the permanent similitude stamped upon the solid metal of the penny, but like the reflection, rather, that falls upon some polished plate, or that is cast upon the white sheet from a lantern. If the polished plate be rusty and stained, the image is faint and indistinct; if it be turned away from the light the image passes. And that is what some of you are doing. By living to yourselves, by living day in and day out without ever remembering God, by yielding to passions, lusts, ambitions, low desires, and the like, you are doing your very best to erase the likeness which still lingers in your nature. Is there any one here that has yielded to some lust of the flesh, some appetite, drunkenness, gluttony, impurity, or the like, and has so sold himself to it, as that that part of the divine image, the power of saying I will, has pretty nearly gone? I am afraid there must be some who, by long submission to passion, have lost the control that reason and conscience and a firm steady purpose ought to give. Is there any man here who, by long course of utter neglect of the divine love, has ceased to feel that there is a heart at the centre of the universe, or that He has anything to do with it? Brethren, the awful power that is given to men of degrading themselves till, lineament by lineament, the likeness in which they are made vanishes, is the saddest and most tragical thing in the world. Like the beasts that perish, says one of the psalms, the men become who, by the acids and the files of worldliness and sensuality and passion, have so rubbed away the likeness of God that it is scarcely perceptible in them. Do I speak to some such now? If there is nothing else left there is this, a hunger for absolute good and for the satisfaction of your desires. That is part of the proof that you are made for God, and that only in Him can you find rest.

All occupations of heart and mind and will and active life with other things to the exclusion of supreme devotion to God are, then, sacrilege and rebellion. The emperor's head was the token of sovereignty and carried with it the obligation to pay tribute. Every fibre in your nature protests against the prostitution of itself to anything short of God. You remember the story in the Old Testament about that saturnalia of debauchery, the night when Babylon fell, when Bel-shazzar, in the very wantonness of godless insolence, could not be satisfied with drinking his wine out of anything less sacred than the vessels that had been brought from the Temple at Jerusalem. That is what many of us are doing, taking the sacred cup which is meant to be filled with the wine of the kingdom and pouring into it the foaming but poisonous beverages which steal away our brains and make us drunk, the moment before our empire totters to its fall and we to our ruin. All the consecrated things of the house of the Lord they dedicated to Baal, says one of the narratives in the Book of Chronicles. That is what some of us are doing, taking the soul that is meant to be consecrated to God and find its blessedness there, and offering it to false gods in whose service there is no blessedness.

For, dear friends, I beseech you, lay this to heart that you cannot thus use the Godlike being that you possess without bringing down upon your heads miseries and unrest. The raven, that black bird of evil omen, went out from the ark, and flew homeless over the weltering ocean. The souls that seek not God fly thus, strangers and restless, through a drowned and lifeless world. The dove came back with an olive branch in its beak. Souls that are wise and have made their nests in the sanctuary can there fold their wings and be at peace. As the ancient saint said, We are made for God, and only in God have we rest. Oh, that thou hadst hearkened to me, then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea. Cannot you see the blessed, gentle gliding of the full stream through the meadows with the sunshine upon its ripples? Such is the heart that has yielded itself to God. In solemn contrast to that lovely image, the same prophet has for a repeated refrain in his book, The wicked is like the troubled sea which cannot rest, but goes moaning round the world, and breaking in idle foam upon every shore, and still is unquiet for evermore. Brethren, only when we render to God the thing that is God's--our hearts and ourselves-have we repose.

**III. Now, lastly, notice the restoration and perfecting of the defaced image.**

Because man is like God, it is possible for God to become like man. The possibility of Revelation and of Redemption by an incarnate Saviour depend upon the reality of the fact that man is made in the image of God. Thus there comes to us that divine Christ, who lays His hands upon bothand being on the one hand the express image of His person, so that He can say, He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father, on the other hand was in all points made like unto His brethren, with only the exception that the defacement which had obliterated the divine image in them left it clear, untarnished, and sharply cut in Him.

Therefore, because Jesus Christ has come, our Brother, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, made like unto us, and in our likeness presenting to us the very image of God and eradiation of His light, therefore no defacement that it is possible for men or devils to make on this poor humanity of ours need be irrevocable and final. All the stains may be blotted out, all the usurping superscriptions may be removed and the original imprint restored. The dints may be elevated, the too lofty points may be lowered, the tarnish and the rust may be rubbed off, and, fairer than before, the likeness of God may be stamped on every one of us, after the image of Him that created us, if only we will turn ourselves to that dear Lord, and cast our souls upon Him. Christ hath become like us that we might become like Him, and therein be partakers of the divine nature. We all, reflecting as a glass does the glory of the Lord, may be changed into the same image from glory to glory.

 Nor do the possibilities stop there, for we look forward to a time when, if I might pursue the metaphor of my text, the coinage shall be called in and reminted, in new forms of nobleness and of likeness. We have before us this great prospect, that we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is; and in all the glories of that heaven we shall partake, for all that is Christ's is ours, and we that have borne the image of the earthly shall also bear the image of the heavenly.

I come to you, then, with this old question: Whose image and superscription hath it?and the old exhortation founded thereupon: Render therefore to God the thing that is God's; and yield yourselves to Him. Another question I would ask, and pray that you may lay it to heart, To what purpose is this waste?What are you doing with the silver penny of your own soul? Wherefore do ye spend it for that which is not bread?Give yourselves to God; trust yourselves to the Christ who is like you, and like Him. And, resting upon His great love you will be saved from the prostitution of capacities, and the vain attempts to satisfy your souls with the husks of earth; and whilst you remain here will be made partakers of Christ's life, and growingly of His likeness, and when you remove yonder, your body, soul, and spirit will be conformed to His image, and transformed into the likeness of His glory, according to the mighty working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.