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

**LUKE-083**. **THE CROSS, THE VICTORY AND DEFEAT OF DARKNESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"This is your hour, and the power of darkness."*

*Luke 22:53*

The darkness was the right time for so dark a deed. The surface meaning of these pathetic and far-reaching words of our Lord's in the garden to His captors is to point the correspondence between the season and the act. As He has just said, He had been daily with them in the Temple, but in the blaze of the noontide they laid no hands upon Him. They found a congenial hour in the midnight. But the words go a great deal deeper than allusive symbolism of that sort. Looking at them as giving us a little glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of Christ, we can scarcely help tracing in them the very clear consciousness that He was the Light, and that all antagonism to Him was the work of darkness in an eminent and especial sense. But whilst this unobscured consciousness, which no mere man could venture so unqualifiedly to assert, is manifest in the words, there is also in them, to my ear, a tone of majestic resignation, as if He said, There! do your worst!and bowed His head, as a man might do, standing breast high in the sea, that the wave might roll over Him. And there is in them, too, a shrinking as of horror from the surging upon Him of the black tide to which He bows His head.

But whilst thus pathetic and significant in their indication of the feelings of our Lord, they have a wider and a deeper meaning still, I think, if we ponder them; inasmuch as they open before us some aspects of His sufferings and eminently of His Cross, which it becomes us all to lay to heart. And it is to these that I desire to turn your attention for a few moments.

**I. I see in them, then, first, this great thought, that the Cross of Jesus Christ is the centre and the meeting-point for the energies of three worlds.**

This is your hour. Now our Lord habitually speaks of His sufferings, and of other points in His life, as being My hour, by which, of course, He means the time appointed to Him by God for the doing of an appointed work. And that idea is distinctly to be attached to the use of the word here. But, on the other hand, there is emphasis laid on your, and that hour is thereby designated as a time in which they could do as they would. It was their opportunity, or, as we say in our colloquialism, now was their time when, unhindered, they might carry into effect their purposes.

So there is given us the thought of His passion and death as being the most eminent and awful instance of men being left unchecked to work out whatsoever was in their evil hearts, and to carry into effect their blackest purposes.

But, on the other hand, there goes with the phrase the idea to which I have already referred; and this is their hour, not merely in the sense that it was their opportunity, but also that it was the hour appointed by God and allotted them for their doing the thing which their unhindered evil passions impelled them to do. And so we are brought face to face with the most eminent instance of that great puzzle that runs through all life--how God works out His lofty designs by means of responsible agents, making the wrath of men to praise Him, and girding Himself with the remainder.

Nor is that all. For the next words of my text bring in a third set of powers as in operation. This is your hourlets us see man overarched by the abyss of the heavens, and the power of darknesslets us see the deep and awful forces that are working beneath and surging upwards into humanity, and opens the subterranean volcanoes. I do not say that there is any reference here to a personal Antagonist of good, in whom these dark tendencies are focussed, but there is a distinct reference to the darknessas a whole, a kind of organic whole, which operates upon men. Even when they think themselves to be freest, and are carrying out their own wicked designs, they are but the slaves of impulses that come straight from the dark kingdom. If I may turn from the immediate purpose of my sermon for a moment, I pray you to consider that solemn aspect of our life, a film between two firmaments, like the earth with the waters above and the waters beneath. On the one side it is open and pervious to heavenly influences, and moulded by the overarching and sovereign will, and on the other side it is all honeycombed beneath with, and open to, the uprisings of evil, straight from the bottomless pit.

But if we turn to the more immediate purpose of the words, think for a moment of the solemn and wonderful aspect which the Cross of Christ assumes, thus contemplated. Three worlds focus their energies upon it--heaven, earth, hell. Looked at from one side it is all radiant and glorious, as the transcendent exhibition of the divine love and sweetness and sacrifice and righteousness and tenderness. But the sunshine that plays upon it shifts and passes, and looked at from another point of view it is swathed in blackness, as the most awful display of man's unbridled antagonism to the good. And looked at from yet another, it assumes a still more lurid aspect as the last stroke which the kingdom of darkness attempted to strike in defence of its ancient and solitary reign. So earth, heaven, hell, the God that works through man's evil passions, and yet does not acquit them though He utilises them to a lofty issue; man that is evil and thinks himself free; and the kingdom of darkness that uses him as its slave--all hare part in that cross, which is thus the result of such diametrically opposite forces.

The divine government which reached its most beneficent ends through the unbridled antagonism of sinful men, and made even the dark counsels of the kingdom of darkness tributary to the diffusion of the light, works ever in the same fashion. Antagonism and obedience both work out its purposes. Let us learn to bow before that all-encompassing Providence in whose great scheme both are included. Let us not confuse ourselves by the attempt to make plain to our reason the harmony of the two certain facts--man's freedom and God's sovereignty. Enough for us to remember that the sin is none the less though the issue may coincide with the divine purpose, for sin lies in the motive, which is ours, not in the unintended result, which is God's. Enough for us to realise the tremendous solemnity of the lives we live, with all sweet heavenly influences falling on them from above, and all sulphurous suggestions rising into them from the fires beneath, and to see to it that we keep our hearts open to the one, and fast closed against the other.

This is your hour--a time in which you feel yourselves free, and yet are instruments in the hands of God, and also are tools in the claws of evil.

**II. Still further, my text brings before us the thought that the Cross is the high-water mark of man's sin.**

This is the power of darkness--the specimen instance of what it would and can do. Strange to think that, amidst all the black catalogue of evil deeds that have been done in this world from the beginning, there is one deed which is the worst, and that it is this one! Not that the doers were sinners above all men: for that is a question of knowledge and of motives, but that the deed in itself was the worst thing that ever man did. Of course I take for granted the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; that He came from heaven, that He lived a life of perfect purity and beauty, and that He died on the Cross as the Gospel tells us. And taking these things for granted, is it not true that His rejection, His condemnation, and His death do throw the most awful and solemn light upon what poor humanity left to itself, and yielding to the suggestions and the impulses of the kingdom of darkness, does when it comes in contact with the Light?

It is the great crucial instance of the incapacity of the average man to behold spiritual beauty and lofty elevation of character. People lament over the blindness of embruted souls to natural beauty, to art, to high thinking, and so on; but all these, tragic as they are, are nothing as compared with this stunning fact, that perfect righteousness and perfect tenderness and ideal beauty of character walked about the world for thirty and three years, and that all the wise and religious men who came across Him thought that the best thing they could do was to crucify Him. So it has ever been from the days of Cain and Abel. As the Apostle John asks, Wherefore slew be him?For a very good reason, Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous. That is reason enough for killing any prophets and righteous men. It was so in the past, and in modified forms it is so today. The plain fact is that humanity has in it a depth of incapacity to behold, and of angry indisposition to admire, lofty and noble lives. The power of the darkness to blind men is set forth once in the superlative degree that we may all beware of it in the lower instances, by that fact, the most tragical in the history of the world, the Light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness apprehendeth it not.

And not only does that Cross mark the high-water mark of man's blindness, and of man's hatred to the lofty and the true and the good, but it marks, too, the awful power that seems, by the very make of the world, to be lodged on the side of evil and against good. The dice seem to be so terribly loaded. Virtue and beauty and truth and tenderness, and all that is noble and lofty and heart-appealing, have no chance against a mere piece of savage brutality. And that fact, which has been repeated over and over again from the beginning, and so largely makes the misery of mankind, reaches its very climax, and most solemn and awful illustration, in the fact that a handful of ruffians and a detachment of Roman soldiers were able to put an end to the life of God manifest in the flesh. If we have nothing more to say about Jesus than that He lived upon earth and did works of goodness and of beauty for a few short years, and then died, and there an end, it seems to me that the story of the Death of Christ is the most despairing page in the whole history of humanity, and that it accentuates and makes still more dreadful the dreadful old puzzle of how it comes that, in a world with a God in it, evil seems to be so riotously preponderant and good seems to be ever trodden under foot. Either the Death of Christ, if He died and did not rise again, is the strongest argument in the history of mankind for rank atheism, or else it is true that He rose, the King of humanity, glorified and exalted by the vain attempts of His foes.

And now notice that this high-water mark, as I have called it, or climax of human sin, was reached through very common and ordinary transgressions. Judas betrayed Christ because he had always felt uncomfortable with his earthly tendencies beside that pure spirit, and also because he wanted to jingle the thirty pieces of silver in his pocket. The priests did Him to death because He claimed the Messiahship and to be the Son of God, and their formalism rose against Him, and their blindness to all spiritual elevation made them hate Him. Pilate sent Him to the Cross because he was a coward, and thought that the life of a Jewish peasant was a small thing to give in order to secure his position. And the mob howled at His heels, and wagged their heads as they passed by, oblivious of His miracles and His benevolence, simply because of the vulgar hatred of anything that is lofty, and because they were so absorbed in material things that they had no eyes for that radiant beauty. In the whole list of these motives there is not a sin that you and I do not commit, nor is there any one of them which may not be reproduced, and as a matter of fact, is reproduced, by hundreds and thousands in this professedly Christian land.

Oh, brethren! the actual murderers are not the worst criminals, though their deed be the worst, considered in itself. Those Roman soldiers who nailed His hands to the Cross, and went back to their barracks that night, quite comfortable and unconscious that they had been doing anything beyond their routine military duty, were innocent and white-handed compared with the men and women among us, who, with the additional evidence of the Cross, and the empty grave, and the throne in the heavens, and the Christian Church, still stand aloof and say, We see no beauty in Him that we should desire Him. Take care lest your attitude to Jesus Christ bring the level of your criminality close up to that high-water mark, or carry it even beyond it, for it is possible to crucify the Son of God afresh, and they who do so have the greater guilt.

**III. Now, lastly, my text suggests that the temporary triumph of the darkness is the eternal victory of the light.**

This is your hour--not the next. This is your hour. Sixty minutes tick, and it will be gone. When Christ was beaten He was Conqueror, and as He looked upon His Cross He said, I have overcome the world. The eclipse which hung over the little hill and the land of Palestine, during the long hours of that slowly passing day, ended before He died. And His death was but the passing for a brief moment of the shadow of death across the bright luminary which, when the shadow has passed, shines out and with new spangled beams, flames in the forehead of the morning sky. The darkness triumphed, and in its triumph it was overcome.

He, by dying, is the death of death. This Jonah inflicted a mortal wound on the loathly monster in whose maw He lay for three days. He, by bearing the penalty of sin, takes away the penalty of it for us all. He, in the quenching of the light of His life in the night of death, reveals God more than even He did in His life, and is never more truly the Illuminator of mankind than when He lies in the darkness of the grave and brings immortality to light. He, by His death, delivers men from the kingdom of darkness, and translates them into His own kingdom; giving them new powers for holiness, new hopes, inspiriting them to rebellion against the tyrants that have dominion over them; and thus conquering when He falls. The power of the darkness is broken like a crested wave, toppling over at its highest and dissolving in ineffectual spray.

So we have encouragement for all momentary checks and defeats, if there be such in our experience, when we are doing Christ's work. The history of the Church repeats in all ages, generation after generation, the same law to which the Master submitted: Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit. We conquer when we are overcome; Christ conquered so, and His servants after Him.

And now apply all these principles which I have so imperfectly stated to your own personal lives. Men and the kingdom of darkness over-reached and outwitted themselves when they slew Jesus Christ. And so all antagonism to Him, whether it be theoretical or whether it be practical, and alienation of heart only, is suicidal folly. When it most succeeds it is nearest the breaking point of utter failure, like a man sawing off the branch on which he sits. Every man that sets himself against God in Christ, either to argue Him down and talk Him out of existence, or to break His bands asunder and cast away His cords, has begun a Sisyphean task which will never come to any good. All sin is essentially irrational and opposed to the whole motion of the universe, and must necessarily be annihilated and come to nothing. The coarse title of one of our old English plays carries a great truth in it; The Devil is an Ass, and for the man that obeys the kingdom of darkness the right epitaph is Thou fool! Oh, brothers! do not fling yourselves into that hopeless struggle. Put yourselves on the right side in this age-long conflict, of which the issue was determined before evil was, and was accomplished when Christ died. For be sure of this, that as certainly as The darkness is past, and the true Light now shineth, so certainly all they that fight against the light--and all men fight against it who shut their eyes to it--are engaged in a conflict of which only one issue is possible, and that is defeat, bitter, complete, absolute. Rather let us all, though we be evil, and though there be a bad self in us that knows itself to be evil and hates the Light--let us all go to it. It may pain the eye, but it is the only cure for the ophthalmia. Let us go to it, spread ourselves out before it, and say, Search me, O Christ, and try me, and see if there be any wicked way in me. Lead me, a blind man, into the light. And His answer will come: I am the Light of the world; he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of life.