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

**LUKE-090**. **THE DYING THIEF by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom."*

*Luke 23:42*

There is an old and true division of the work of Christ into three parts--prophet, priest, and king. Such a distinction manifestly exists, though it may be overestimated, or rather, the statement of it may be exaggerated, if it be supposed that separate acts of His discharge these separate functions, and that He ceases to be the one before He becomes the other. Rather it is true that all His work is prophetic, that all His work is priestly, and that His prophetic and priestly work is the exercise of His kingly authority. But still the division is a true one, and helps to set before us, clearly and definitely, the wide range of the benefits of Christ's mission and death. It is noteworthy that these three groups round the Cross, the third of which we have to speak of now--that of the daughters of Jerusalem, that of the deriding scribes and the indifferent soldiers, and this one of the two thieves--each presents us Christ in one of the three characters. The words that He spoke upon the Cross, with reference to others than Himself, may be gathered around, and arranged under, that threefold aspect of Christ's work. The prophet said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves, for the days are coming. The priest said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. The king, in His sovereignty, ruled the heart of that penitent man from His Cross, and while the crown shone athwart the smoke and the agony of the death, the king opened the gates of the kingdom of heaven unto all believerswhen He said, This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise!We shall not attempt, in dealing with this incident, to paint pictures. I have a far more important thing to do than even to try to bring vividly before your minds the scene on that little hill of Calvary. It is the meaning that we are concerned with, and not the mere externals. I take it for granted, then, that we know the details:--the dying man in his agony, beginning to see dimly, as his soul closed upon earthly things, who this was--patient, loving, mighty there in His sufferings; and using his last breath to cry, Lord, remember me!--and the sufferer throned in the majesty of His meekness, and divinity of His endurance; calm, conscious, full of felt but silent power, accepting homage, bending to the penitence, loving the sinner, and flinging open the gates of the pale kingdoms into which He was to pass, with these His last words.

First, then, we see here an illustration of the Cross in its power of drawing men to itself. It is strange to think that, perhaps, at that moment the only human being who thoroughly believed in Christ was that dying robber. The disciples are all gone. The most faithful of them are recreant, denying, fleeing. A handful of women are standing there, not knowing what to think about it, stunned but loving; and alone (as I suppose), alone of all the sons of men, the crucified malefactor was in the sunshine of faith, and could say I believe!As everything of the future history of the world and of the Gospel is typified in the events of the Crucifixion, it was fitting that here again and at the last there should be a prophetic fulfilment of His own saying, I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.

But mark, here we have a striking instance of the universal law of the progress of the Gospel, in the two-fold effort of the contemplation of the Cross. By its foot was to be seen the derision of the scribes and the stupor of the soldiery; and now here are the two thieves--the one chiming in with the universal reproaches; and the other beholding the same event, having the same circumstances displayed before him, and they influence him thus. Brethren, it is just the history of the Gospel wherever it goes. It is its history now, and among us. The Gospel is preached equally to every man. The same message comes to us all, offering us the same terms. Christ stands before each of us in the same attitude. And what is the consequence? A parting of the whole mass of us, some to one side and some to the other. So, when you take a magnet, and hold it to an indiscriminate heap of metal filings, it will gather out all the iron, and leave behind all the rest. I, if I be lifted up, said He, will draw all men unto Me. The attractive power will go out over the whole race of His brethren; but from some there will be no response. In some hearts there will be no yielding to the attraction. Some will remain rooted, obstinate, steadfast in their place; and to some the lightest word will be mighty enough to stir all the slumbering pulses of their sin-ridden hearts, and to bring them, broken and penitent, for mercy to His feet. To the one He is a savour of life unto life, and to the other a savour of death unto death. The broadest doctrine of the universal adaptation, and the universal intention too, of the Gospel, as the power of God unto salvation, contains hidden in its depths this undeniable fact, that, be the cause what it may (and as I believe, the cause lies with us, and is our fault) this separating, judging effect follows from all faithful preaching of Christ's words. He came to judge the world, that they which see not(as He Himself said) might see, and they which see might be made blind, And on the Cross that process went on in two men, alike in necessity, alike in criminality, alike in this, that Death's icy finger was just being laid upon their heart, to stop all the flow of its wild blood and passion, but different in this, that the one of them turned himself, by God's grace, and laid hold on the Gospel that was offered to him, and the other turned himself away, and derided, and died.

And now, there is another consideration. If we look at this man, this penitent thief, and contrast him, his previous history, and his present feelings, with the people that stood around, and rejected and scoffed, we get some light as to the sort of thing that unfits men for perceiving and accepting the Gospel when it is offered to them. Remember the other classes of persons who were there. There were Roman soldiers, with very partial knowledge of what they were doing, and whose only feeling was that of entire indifference; and there were Jewish Rabbis, Pharisees, Priests, and people, who knew a little more of what they were doing, and whose feeling was derision and scorn. Now, if we mark the ordinary scriptural representation, especially as to the last class, we cannot help seeing that there comes out this principle:--The thing of all others that unfits men for the reception of Christ as a Saviour, and for the simple reliance on His atoning blood and divine mercy, is not gross, long profligacy, and outward, vehement transgression; but it is self-complacency, clean, fatal self-righteousness and self-sufficiency.

Why was it that Scribes and Pharisees turned away from Him? For three reasons. Because of their pride of wisdom. We are the men who know all about Moses and the traditions of the elders; we judge this new phenomenon not by the question, How does it come to our consciences, and how does it appeal to our hearts? but we judge it by the question, How does it fit our Rabbinical learning and subtle casuistical laws? We are the Priests and the Scribes; and the people that know not the law, they may accept a thing that only appeals to the common human heart, but for us, in our intellectual superiority, living remote from the common wants of the lower class, not needing a rough outward Gospel of that sort, we can do without such a thing, and we reject it. They turned away from the Cross, and their hatred darkened into derision, and their menaces ended in a crucifixion, not merely because of a pride of wisdom, but because of a complacent self-righteousness that knew nothing of the fact of sin, that never had learned to believe itself to be full of evil, that had got so wrapped up in ceremonies as to have lost the life; that had degraded the divine law of God, with all its lightning splendours, and awful power, into a matter of mint and anise and cummin. They turned away for a third reason. Religion had become to them a mere set of traditional dogmas, to think accurately or to reason clearly about which was all that was needful. Worship having become ceremonial, and morality having become casuistry, and religion having become theology, the men were as hard as a nether millstone, and there was nothing to be done with them until these three crusts were peeled off the heart, and, close and burning, the naked heart and the naked truth of God came into contact.

Brethren, change the name, and the story is true about us. God forbid that I should deny that every form of gross, sensual immorality, hardens all within(as one poor victim of it said), and petrifies the feeling. God forbid that I should seem to be speaking slightingly of the exceeding sinfulness of such sin, or to be pouring contempt upon the laws of common morality. Do not misapprehend me so. Still it is not sin in its outward forms that makes the worst impediment between a man and the Cross, but it is sin plus self-righteousness which makes the insurmountable obstacle to all faith and repentance. And oh! in our days, when passion is tamed down by so many bonds and chains; when the power of society lies upon all of us, prescribing our path, and keeping most of us from vice, partly because we are not tempted, and partly because we have been brought up like some young trees behind a wall, within the fence of decent customs and respectable manners,--we have far more need to tell orderly, respectable moral men--My brother, that thing that you have is worth nothing, as settling your position before God; than to stand up and thunder about crimes which half of us never heard of, and perhaps only an infinitesimal percentage of us have ever committed. All sin separates from God, but the thing that makes the separation permanent is not the sin, but the ignorance of the sin. Self-righteousness, aye, and pride of wisdom, they--they have perverted many a nature, many a young man's glowing spirit, and have turned him away from the Gospel. If there be a man here who is looking at the simple message of peace and pardon and purity through Christ, and is saying to himself, Yes; it may fit the common class of minds that require outward signs and symbols, and must pin their faith to forms; but for me with my culture, for me with my spiritual tendencies, for me with my new lights, I do not want any objective redemption; I do not want anything to convince me of a divine love, and I do not need any crucified Saviour to preach to me that God is merciful!--this incident before us has a very solemn lesson in it for him. And if there be a man here who is living a life of surface blamelessness, it has as solemn a lesson for him. Look at the Scribe, and look at the Pharisee--religious men in their way, wise men in their way, decent and respectable men in their way; and look at that poor thief that had been caught in the wilderness amongst the caves and dens, and had been brought red-handed with blood upon his sword, and guilt in his heart, and nailed up there in the short and summary process of a Roman jurisprudence;--and think that Scribe, and Pharisee, and Priest, saw nothing in Christ; and that the poor profligate wretch saw this in Him,--innocence that showed heavenly against his diabolical blackness; and his heart stirred, and he laid hold of Him in the stress of his mighty agony--as a drowning man catches at anything that protrudes from the bank; and he held and shook it, and the thing was fast, and he was safe! Not transgression shuts a man out from mercy. Transgression, which belongs to us all, makes us subjects for the mercy; but it is pride, self-righteousness, trust in ourselves, which bars the gates of mercy on mankind; and the men that are condemned are condemned not only because they have transgressed the commandments of God, but this is the condemnation, that light came into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

And then (and but a word) we see here, too, the elements of which acceptable faith consists. One does not exactly know by what steps or through what process this poor dying thief passed, which issued in faith--whether it was an impression from Christ's presence, whether it was that he had ever heard anything about Him before, or whether it was only that the wisdom which dwells with death was beginning to clear his eyes as life ebbed away. But however he came to the conviction, mark what it was that he believed and expressed,--I am a sinful man; all punishment that comes down upon me is richly deserved: This man is pure and righteous; Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom!That is all--that is all. That is the thing that saves a man. How much he did know--whether he knew all the depth of what he was saying, when he said Lord!is a question that we cannot answer; whether he understood what the kingdomwas that he was expecting, is a question that we cannot solve; but this is clear--the intellectual part of faith may be dark and doubtful, but the moral and emotional part of it is manifest and plain. There was, I am nothing--Thou art everything: I bring myself and my emptiness unto Thy great fullness: fill it and make me blessed!Faith has that. Faith has in it repentance--repentance has in it faith too. Faith has in it the recognition of the certainty and the justice of a judgment that is coming down crashing upon every human head; and then from the midst of these fears, and sorrows, and the tempest of that great darkness, there rises up in the night of terrors, the shining of one perhaps pale, quivering, distant, but divinely given hope, My Saviour! My Saviour! He is righteous: He has died--He lives! I will stay no longer; I will cast myself upon Him!Once more--this incident reminds us not only of the attractive power of the Cross, but of the prophetic power of the Cross. We have here the Cross as pointing to and foretelling the Kingdom. Pointing out, and foretelling: that is to say, of course, and only, if we accept the scriptural statement of what these sufferings were, the Person that endured them, and the meaning of their being endured. But the only thing I would dwell upon here, is, that when we think of Christ as dying for us, we are never to separate it from that other solemn and future coming of which this poor robber catches a glimpse. They crowned Him with thorns, and they gave Him a reed for His sceptre. That mockery, so natural to the strong practical Romans in dealing with one whom they thought a harmless enthusiast, was a symbol which they who did it little dreamed of. The crown of thorns proclaims a sovereignty founded on sufferings. The sceptre of feeble reed speaks of power wielded in gentleness. The Cross leads to the crown. The brow that was pierced by the sharp acanthus wreath, therefore wears the diadem of the universe. The hand that passively held the mockery of the worthless, pithless reed, therefore rules the princes of the earth with the rod of iron. He who was lifted up to the Cross, was, by that very act, lifted up to be a Ruler and Commander to the peoples. For the death of the Cross God hath highly exalted Him to be a Prince and a Saviour. The way to glory for Him, the power by which He wields the kingdom of the world, is precisely through the suffering. And therefore, whensoever there arises before us the image of the one, oh! let there rise before us likewise the image of the other. The Cross links on to the kingdom--the kingdom lights up the Cross. My brother, the Saviour comes--the Saviour comes a King. The Saviour that comes a King is the Saviour that has been here and was crucified. The kingdom that He establishes is all full of blessing, and love, and gentleness; and to us (if we will unite the thoughts of Cross and Crown) there is opened up not only the possibility of having boldness before Him in the day of judgment, but there is opened up this likewise--the certainty that He shall receive of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. Oh, remember that as certain as the historical fact--He died on Calvary; so certain is the prophetic fact--He shall reign, and you and I will stand there! I durst not touch that subject. Take it into your own hearts; and think about it--a kingdom, a judgment-seat, a crown, a gathered universe; separation, decision, execution of the sentence. And oh! ask yourselves, When that gentle eye, with lightning in its depths, falls upon me, individualises me, summons out me to its bar--how shall I stand?Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness before Him in the day of judgment, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.

Finally. Here is the Cross as revealing and opening the true Paradise.--This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise. We have no concern at present with the many subtle inferences as to the state of the dead, and as to the condition of our Lord's human spirit before the Resurrection, which have been drawn from these words. To me they do seem fairly to bear the broad and single conclusion that the spirits of the saved do enter at death into a state of conscious presence with their Saviour, and therefore of joy and felicity. But beyond this we have no firm ground for going. It is of more practical worth to note that the penitent's vague prayer is answered, and over-answered. He asks, When Thou comest--whensoever that may be--remember me. I shall stand afar off; do not let me be utterly forgotten. Christ answers--Remember thee! thou shalt be with Me, close to My side. Remember thee when I come!--this day shalt thou be with Me.

And what a contrast that is--the conscious blessedness rushing in close upon the heels of the momentary darkness of death. At the one moment there hangs the thief writhing in mortal agony; the wild shouts of the fierce mob at his feet are growing faint upon his ear; the city spread out at his feet, and all the familiar sights of earth are growing dim to his filmy eye. The soldier's spear comes, the legs are broken, and in an instant there hangs a relaxed corpse; and the spirit, the spirit--is where? Ah! how far away; released from all its sin and its sore agony, struggling up at once into such strange divine enlargement, a new star swimming into the firmament of heaven, a new face before the throne of God, another sinner redeemed from earth! The conscious immediate blessedness of the departed--be he what he may, be his life whatsoever it may have been--who at last, dark, sinful, standing with one foot on the verge of eternity, and poising himself for the flight, flings himself into the arms of Christ--the everlasting blessedness, the Christ-presence and the Christ-gladness, that is the message that the robber leaves to us from his cross. Paradise is opened to us again. The Cross is the true tree of life. The flaming cherubim, and the sword that turneth every way, are gone, and the broad road into the city, the Paradise of God, with all its beauties and all its peaceful joy--a better Paradise, a statelier Eden, than that which we have lost, is flung open to us for ever.

Do not trust a death-bed repentance, my brother. I have stood by many a death-bed, and few indeed have they been where I could have believed that the man was in a condition physically (to say nothing of anything else) clearly to see and grasp the message of the Gospel. There is no limit to the mercy. I know that God's mercy is boundless. I know that whilst there is life there is hope. I know that a man, going--swept down that great Niagara--if, before his little skiff tilts over into the awful rapids, he can make one great bound with all his strength, and reach the solid ground--I know he may be saved. It is an awful risk to run. A moment's miscalculation, and skiff and voyager alike are whelming in the green chaos below, and come up mangled into nothing, far away down yonder upon the white turbulent foam. One was saved upon the Cross, as the old divines used to tell us, that none might despair; and only one, that none might presume. Now is the accepted time, and now is the day of salvation!