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

**LUKE-098**. **CHRIST'S WITNESSES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"48.* *Ye are witnesses of these things. 49. And, behold, I send the promise of My Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high."*

*Luke 24:48-49*

Luke's account of the Resurrection and subsequent forty days is so constructed as to culminate in this appointment of the disciples to their high functions and equipment for it, by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Evangelist has evidently in view his second treatise, and is here preparing the link of connection between it and the Gospel. Hence this very condensed summary of many conversations lays stress upon these points--the fulfilment of prophecy in Christ's life and death; the world-wide destination of the blessings to be proclaimed in His name; and the appointment and equipment of the disciples.

The same notes are again struck in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. The same charge to the disciples, when viewed in connection with Christ's life on earth, may be considered as its end and aim; and when viewed in connection with the history of the Church, as its foundation and beginning. So that we are following in the line plainly marked out for us by the Evangelist himself, when we take these words as containing a charge and a gift as really belonging to all Christians in this day as to the little group on the road to Bethany, to whom they were first addressed on the Ascension morning. There are, then, but two points to be looked at in the words before us; the one the function of the Church, and the other its equipment for it.

**I. The task of the Church.**

Now, of course, I need not remind you that there is a special sense in which the office of witness-bearing belonged only to those who had seen Christ in the flesh, and could testify to the fact of His Resurrection. I need not dwell upon that further than to remark that the fact that the designation of the first preachers of the Gospels was witnessesis significant of a great deal. For witness implies fact, and the nature of their message, as being the simple attestation to the occurrence of things that truly happened in the earth, is wrapped up in that name. They were not speculators, philosophers, moralists, legislators. They had neither to argue nor to dissertate, nor to lay down rules for conduct, nor to ventilate their own fancies. They were witnesses, and their business was to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. All doctrine and all morality will come second. The first form of the Gospel is, How that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was raised again the third day, according to the Scriptures. First, a history; then a religion; then a morality; and morality and religion because it is a history of redemption.

These early Christians were witnesses in another sense. The very existence of the Church at all was a testimony to that supernatural fact without which it could not have been. We are often told in recent years that the belief in the Resurrection grew slowly up amongst the early Christians. What became of the Church whilst it was growing? What held it together? How comes it that the fate of Christ's followers was not the fate of the followers of Theudas and other people that rose up, boasting themselves to be somebody, whose followers as a matter of course, came to noughtwhen the leader was slain? There is only one answer. He rose again from the dead. Else there is no possibility of accounting for the fact that the Church as a distinct organisation survived Calvary. The Resurrection was no gradually evolved hardening of desire and fancy into fact, but it was the foundation upon which the Church was built. Ye--by your words and by your existence as a community--are the witnesses of these things.

But that is somewhat apart from the main purpose of my remarks now. I desire rather to emphasise the thought that, with modifications in form, the substance of the functions of these early believers remains still the office and dignity of all Christian men. Ye are the witnesses of these things.

And what is the manner of testimony that devolves upon you and me, Christian friends? Witness by your lives. Most men take their notions of what Christianity is from the average of the Christians round about them. And, if we profess to be Christ's followers, we shall be taken as tests and specimen cases of the worth of the religion that we profess. Ye are the Epistles of Christ, and if the writing be blurred and blotted and often half unintelligible, the blame will be laid largely at His door. And men will say, and say rightly, If that is all that Christianity can do, we are just as well without it. It is our task to adorn the doctrine of Christ, marvellous as it may seem that anything in our poor lives can commend that fairest of all beautiful things--and to commend it to some hearts. Just as some poor black-and-white engraving of a masterpiece of the painter's brush may, to an eye untrained in the harmony of colour, be a better interpretation of the artist's meaning than his own proper work, so our feeble copies of the transcendent splendour and beauty may suit some purblind and untrained eyes better than the serener and loftier perfection which we humbly copy. We are the witnesses of these things. And depend upon it, mightier than all direct effort, and more unusual than all utterances of lip, is the witness of the life of all professing Christians to the reality of the facts upon which they say they base their faith.

But beyond that, there is yet another department of testimony which belongs to each of us, and that is the attestation of personal experience. That is a form of Christian service which any and every Christian can put forth. You cannot all be preachers, in the technical sense. You cannot all be thinkers and strong champions, argumentative or otherwise, for God's truth. But I will tell you what you all can be. You can all say, Come and hear all ye; and I will declare what He hath done for my soul. It does not take eloquence, gifts, learning, intellectual grasp of the doctrinal side of Christian truth for a man to say, as the first preacher of Christ upon earth said, Brother! we have found the Messias. That was all, and that was enough. That you can say, if you have found Him, and after all, the witness of personal experience of what faith in Jesus Christ can make of a man, and do for a man, is the strongest and most universal weapon placed in the hands of Christian men and women. There is nothing that goes so far as that, if it be backed up by a life corresponding, which, like a sounding-board behind a man, flings his words out into the world; Whether this man be a sinner or no I know not; I leave all that talk about heights and depths of argument and controversy to other people, but this one thing I know--not I think, not I believe, not I am disposed to come to the conclusion that--but this one thing I know, that whereas I was blind now I see. There is no getting over that! Ye are the witnesses of these things. And do not be ashamed of your function, nor slothful nor cowardly in its discharge.

May I say a word here about the grounds on which this obligation to witness rests for us? If Jesus Christ had never said, Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, it would not have made a bit of difference as to the imperative duty that is laid upon all Christian men; for that arises, not from that command, which only gives voice to a previous obligation, but it flows, from the very nature of things, from the message that we receive from our links with other men and from the constitution and make of our own natures.

It flows directly from the gift that we have received. There are plenty of truths which, per se, carry with them no obligation to impart them. But any truth in which is wrapped up the possible happiness of another man, any truth which bears upon moral or spiritual subjects, carries with it the strongest obligation to impart it. We have such large insights into God and His love as the Gospel gives us, not that we may eat our morsel alone, or merely sun ourselves in the light, and expatiate in the warmth of the beams that come to us, but that we may share them with all around: God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined into our hearts, that we may give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The obligation arises from the links that knit us all together. Am I my brother's keeper?Why, the question answers itself. If he is your brother, you are certainly his keeper. And you cannot shuffle off the obligation by any irrelevant pitting of one field of Christian work against another; still less by any criticism, hostile or friendly, as it may be, of the methods of Christian work, or of the parity and elevation of the character and motives of the workers. Humanity is one, linked by a mystic chain, and every link of it should thrill by a common impulse; and through all the members there should circulate a common life. That great thought is one of the gains that the Gospel has brought us, and in the presence of it and our indebtedness and obligation to every man, woman, and child that bears the form of man, all geographical limits to Christian witnessing seem supremely absurd and incongruous. You cannot get rid of your obligation by saying, I do not care about foreign missions, I go in for home ones. And you cannot get rid of it by chiming in an ignorant second to the talk that has been going on lately, carping at or criticising methods of work. It would be a very strange thing if we had hit all at once, in the very beginning of an enterprise, upon the best of all possible methods; and it would be a very strange thing if the mission-field is the only one where there are no lazy workers and selfish motives and unworthy occupants of high places. All that is true about home as it is about other places. But grant it all, and back comes the obligation based upon the nature of the truth that we have received, upon our links with our brethren, and upon our loyalty to our Master, and it peals into the ears of every Christian man and woman: Thou art a witness of these things; and to this end wert thou born again, that thou mightest bear witness to the truth.

Ah, brethren! the issues of faithfulness to that high function are sweet and blessed and wonderful. A witnessing Christian will be a believing Christian; for there is no surer way to deepen my own convictions about any moral or spiritual truth than to constitute myself their humble servant to proclaim them. Whosoever is a believer should be an apostle, and if he is an apostle he will be tenfold a believer. There is nothing which will give a man a firmer grasp of the Gospel for his own soul than when he finds that, ministered by his humble efforts, it produces in other hearts the same effects which he finds it working upon himself. There is no page in the great book of the evidences of the truth of Christianity more conclusive than that which in the last century has been written by the experience of Christian missions. Let the objectors, Jannes and Jambres, who withstood Moses, let them do the same with their enchantments, and then we will discuss the questions of the truth of the Gospel with them.

Nor need I do more than remind you of the highest of all blessed issues which is yet to come. Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life. Alas! alas! how many of us professing Christians will have to stand at last without that crown of rejoicingwhich they wear who, by their poor work and witness, have won some souls to the Master. Do you, Christian men, contemplate entering heaven alone, or bringing your sheaves with you? It will be sad to stand with hands empty then, because they were idle in the days of the seed-basket and the reaping-hook, whilst those that sowed and those that reaped shall rejoice together. Ye are the witnesses of these things: see to it that you do your work.

**II. And now, secondly, and briefly, note the equipment of the witnesses for their task.**

Our Lord here distinguishes two stages in the endowment. Then and there they receive the gift of the Divine Spirit, as is more fully recorded in John's account of these last days, but that gift, rich and precious as it was, was not yet the full bestowment which they needed for their task. That came on the day of Pentecost. Mark the vivid and picturesque word which our Lord here employs: Until ye be clothed with power from on high. That divine gift coming down as a vesture, wraps and covers and hides their own weakness, their own naked and poor personality.

I can only say a word or two about this matter. The same collocation of ideas--a witnessing Spirit by whose indwelling energy the Christian community becomes witnesses, is found (and has been explained at length by me in former discourses) in the farewell words of our Lord in the upper chamber. The Spirit of Truth which proceedeth from the Father, He shall bear witness of Me, and ye also shall bear witness because ye have been with Me from the beginning.

I need only remark here that the only power by which Christians can discharge their work of witnessing in the world is the power which clothes them from above. The new life which Jesus Christ brings and gives to us is the only life which will avail for discharging this office. Our self-will, the old life of nature, with all its dependence upon ourselves, is nought in reference to this task. But when that divine spark enters into men's hearts, then natural endowments are heightened into supernatural gifts, and new forces are developed, and new powers are bestowed and the earthen vessel is filled with new treasure. Without it--and there is a great deal of so-called Christian witnessing to-day without it--noise, advertising, skill in getting up externals, and all the other unworthy methods which Christian churches sometimes stoop to adopt, are powerless, as they ought to be. You may accomplish a great deal by fussy activity which calls itself Christian earnestness, and has not God's Spirit in it. But it is no more growth than are what the children call devil's puff-ballswhich they find in the fields in these autumn mornings; and it will go up in poisonous, brown dust like these when it is pricked.

The one condition of Christian churches doing their Christian work is that they shall be clothed and filled with God's Spirit. Do not let us rely on machinery; do not let us rely on externals; do not let us rely on advertising tricks which might do very well for a cheap shop, but are all out of harmony with the work that we have to do; but let us rely on this, and on this alone. Holding converse with God and Christ, we shall come out of the secret place of the Most High with our faces glowing with the communion, and our lips on fire to proclaim the sweetnesses that lie within the shrine.

One word more and I have done. This clothing with the Spirit, which is the only fitness of the Church for its witnessing work, is only to be won by much solitary waiting. Tarry ye, or as in the original it stands even more vividly, Sit ye still in the city ... till ye be clothed. It is because so many Christian workers are so seldom alone with Christ that so much of their work is nought, and comes to nought. To draw apart from outward activity into the solitary place, and sit with Him, is the only means by which we can keep up the freshness of our own spirits, and be fit for His service. Mary was being trained for Martha's work when she sat at Christ's feet; but Martha could not do hers without being troubled and careful, because she was more accustomed to the work than to the communion that would have made it light.

So, Christian friends, behold your task and your equipment. I beseech you, who call yourselves Christ's servants, to lay to heart your plain and unavoidable obligations. If you have found Jesus, you are as truly and as individually bound to proclaim Him as if a definite and direct divine command sounded in your ears. Your possession of the Gospel as the food of your own souls binds you to impart it to all the famished. The call to witness comes as straight to you as it did to the young Pharisee on the road to Damascus when he heard Saul! Saul!called from the sky.

May you and I answer as he did, Lord! what wilt Thou have me to do!