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

**MARK-002**. **THE STRONG FORERUNNER AND THE STRONGER SON by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; 2. As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee. 3. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. 4. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. 5. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. 6. And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey; 7. And preached, saying, There cometh One mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. 8. I indeed have baptized you with water: but He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost. 9. And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him: 11. And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."*

*Mark 1:1-11*

The first words of In Memoriam might be taken to describe the theme of Mark's Gospel. It is the strong Son of Godwhom he sets forth in his rapid, impetuous narrative, which is full of fiery energy, and delights to paint the unresting continuity of Christ's filial service. His theme is not the King, as in Matthew; nor the Son of Man, as in Luke; nor the eternal Word manifested in flesh, as in John. Therefore he neither begins by tracing His kingly lineage, as does the first evangelist; nor by dwelling on the humanities of wedded life and the sacredness of the family since He has been born; nor by soaring to the abysses of the eternal abiding of the Word with God, as the agent of creation, the medium of life and light; but plunges at once into his subject, and begins the Gospel with the mission of the Forerunner, which melts immediately into the appearance of the Son.

**I. We may note first, in this passage, the prelude, including verses 1, 2, and 3.**

We need not discuss the grammatical connection of these verses, nor the relation of verses 2 and 3 to the following section. However that be settled, the result, for our present purpose, is the same. Mark considers that John's mission is the beginning of the gospel. Here are two noteworthy points,--his use of that well-worn word, the gospel, and his view of John's place in relation to it. The gospel is the narrative of the facts of Christ's life and death. Later usage has taken it to be, rather, the statement of the truths deducible from these facts, and especially the proclamation of salvation by the power of Christ's atoning death; but the primitive application of the word is to the history itself. So Paul uses it in his formal statement of the gospel which he preached, with the addition, indeed, of the explanation of the meaning of Christ's death (1 Cor. 15:1-6). The very name good newsnecessarily implies that the gospel is, primarily, history; but we cannot exclude from the meaning of the word the statement of the significance of the facts, without which the facts have no message of blessing. Mark adds the dogmatic element when he defines the subject of the Gospel as being Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In the remainder of the book the simple name Jesusis used; but here, in starting, the full, solemn title is given, which unites the contemplation of Him in His manhood, in His office as fulfiller of prophecy and crown of revelation, and in His mysterious, divine nature.

Whether we regard verses 2 and 3 as connected grammatically with the preceding or the following verses, they equally refer to John, and define his position in relation to the Gospel. The Revised Version restores the true reading, in Isaiah the prophet, which some unwise and timid transcriber has, as he thought, mended into the prophets, for fear that an error should be found in Scripture. Of course, verse 2 is not Isaiah's, but Malachi's; but verse 3, which is Isaiah's, was uppermost in Mark's mind, and his quotation of Malachi is, apparently, an afterthought, and is plainly merely introductory of the other, on which the stress lies. The remarkable variation in the Malachi quotation, which occurs in all three Evangelists, shows how completely they recognised the divinity of our Lord, in their making words which, in the original, are addressed by Jehovah to Himself, to be addressed by the Father to the Son. There is a difference in the representation of the office of the forerunner in the two prophetic passages. In the former heprepares the way of the coming Lord; in the latter he calls upon his hearers to prepare it. In fact, John prepared the way, as we shall see presently, just by calling on men to do so. In Mark's view, the first stage in the gospel is the mission of John. He might have gone further back--to the work of prophets of old, or to the earliest beginnings in time of the self-revelation of God, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews does; or he might have ascended even higher up the stream--to the true beginning, from which the fourth Evangelist starts. But his distinctly practical genius leads him to fix his gaze on the historical fact of John's mission, and to claim for it a unique position, which he proceeds to develop.

**II. So we have, next, the strong servant and fore runner (verses 4-8).**

The abruptness with which the curtain is drawn, and the gaunt figure of the desert-loving ascetic shown us, is very striking. It is like the way in which Elijah, his prototype, leaps, as it were, full-armed, into the arena. The parallel passage in Matthew links his appearance with the events which it has been narrating by the phrase in these days, and calls him the Baptist. Mark has no such words, but lets him stand forth in his isolation. The two accounts may profitably be compared. Their likenesses suggest that they rest on a common basis, probably of oral tradition, while their differences are, for the most part, significant. Mark differs in his arrangement of the common matter, in omissions, and in some variations of expression. Each account gives a general summary of John's teaching at the beginning; but Matthew puts emphasis on the Baptist's proclamation that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, to which nothing in Mark corresponds. His Gospel does not dwell on the royalty of Jesus, but rather represents Him as the Servant than as the King. Mark begins with describing John as baptizing, which only appears later in Matthew's account. Mark omits all reference to the Sadducees and Pharisees, and to John's sharp words to them. He has nothing about the axe laid to the trees, nothing about the children of Abraham, nothing about the fan in the hand of the great Husbandman. All the theocratic aspect of the Messiah, as proclaimed by John, is absent; and, as there is no reference to the fire which destroys, so neither is there to the fire of the Holy Ghost, in which He baptizes. Mark reports only John's preaching and baptism of repentance, and his testimony to Christ as stronger than he, and as baptizing with the Holy Ghost.

So, on the whole, Mark's picture brings out prominently the following traits in John's personality and mission:--First, his preparation for Christ by preaching repentance. The truest way to create in men a longing for Jesus, and to lead to a true apprehension of His unique gift to mankind, is to evoke the penitent consciousness of sin. The preacher of guilt and repentance is the herald of the bringer of pardon and purity. That is true in reference to the relation of Judaism and Christianity, of John and Jesus, and is as true to-day as ever it was. The root of maimed conceptions of the work and nature of Jesus Christ is a defective sense of sin. When men are roused to believe in judgment, and to realise their own evil, they are ready to listen to the blessed news of a Saviour from sin and its curse. The Christ whom John heralds is the Christ that men need; the Christ whom men receive, without having been out in the wilderness with the stern preacher of sin and judgment, is but half a Christ--and it is the vital half that is missing.

Again, Mark brings out John's personal asceticism. He omits much; but he could not leave out the picture of the grim, lean solitary, who stalked among soft-robed men, like Elijah come to life again, and held the crowds by his self-chosen privations no less than by his fierce, fiery eloquence. His desert life and contempt for ease and luxury spoke of a strength of character and purpose which fascinated commoner men, and make the next point the more striking--namely, the utter humility with which this strong, self-reliant, fiery rebuker of sin, and despiser of rank and official dignities, flings himself at the feet of the coming One. He is strong, as his life and the awestruck crowds testified; how strong must that Other be! He feared not the face of man, nor owned inferiority to any; but his whole soul melted into joyful submission, and confessed unworthiness even to unlace the sandals of that mightier One. His transitional position is also plainly marked by our Evangelist. He is the end of prophecy, the beginning of the Gospel, belonging to neither and to both. He is not merely a prophet, for he is prophesied of as well; and he stands so near Him whom he foretells, that his prediction is almost fact. He is not an Evangelist, nor, in the closest sense, a servant of the coming Christ; for his lowly confession of unworthiness does not imply merely his humility, but accurately defines the limits of his function. It was not for him to bear or to loose that Lord's sandals. There were those who did minister to Him, and the least of those, whose message to the world was Christ has come, had the honour of closer service than that greatest among women-born, whose task was to run before the chariot of the King and tell that He was at hand.

**III. We have the gentle figure of the stronger Son.**

The introduction of Jesus is somewhat less abrupt than that of John; but if we remember whom Mark believed Him to be, the quiet words which tell of His first appearance are sufficiently remarkable. There is no mention of His birth or previous years. His deeds will tell who He is. The years before His baptism were of no moment for Mark's purpose. Nor has he any report of the precious conversation of Jesus with John, when the forerunner testified to Christ's purity, which needed no washing nor repentance, and acknowledged at once his own sinfulness and the Lord's cleansing power, and when Christ accepted the homage, and, by implication, claimed the character, purity, and power which John attributed to Him. The omission may be accounted for on a principle which seems to run through all this Gospel--of touching lightly or omitting indications of our Lord's dignity, and dwelling by preference on His acts of lowliness and service. The baptism is recorded; but the conversation, which showed that the King of Israel, in submitting to it, acknowledged no need of it for Himself, but regarded it as fulfilling righteousnessis passed by. The sinlessness of Jesus, and the special meaning of His baptism, are sufficiently shown by the descending Spirit and the approving voice. These Mark does record; for they warrant the great name by which, in his first verse, he has described Jesus as the Son of God.

The brief account of these is marked by the Evangelist's vivid pictorial faculty, which we shall frequently have to notice as we read his Gospel. Here he puts us, by a word, in the position of eye-witnesses of the scene as it is passing, when he describes the heavens as being rent asunder--a much more forcible and pictorial word than Matthew's opened. He says nothing of John's share in the vision. All is intended for the Son. It is Jesus who sees the rending heavens and the descending dove. The voice which Matthew represents as speaking of Christ, Mark represents as speaking to Him.

The baptism of Jesus, then, was an epoch in His own consciousness. It was not merely His designation to John or to others as Messiah, but for Himself the sense of Sonship and the sunlight of divine complacency filled His spirit in new measure or manner. Speaking as we have to do from the outside, and knowing but dimly the mysteries of His unique personality, we have to speak modestly and little. But we know that our Lord grew, as to His manhood, in wisdom, and that His manhood was continually the receiver, from the Father, of the Spirit; and the reality of His divinity, as dwelling in His manhood from the beginning of that manhood, is not affected by the belief that when the dovelike Spirit floated down on His meek head, glistening with the water of baptism, His manhood then received a new and special consciousness of His Messianic office and of His Sonship.

Whilst that voice was for His sake, it was for others too; for John himself tells us (John i.) that the sign had been told him beforehand, and that it was his sight of the descending dove which heightened his thoughts and gave a new turn to his testimony, leading him to know and to show that this is the Son of God. The rent heavens have long since closed, and that dread voice is silent; but the fact of that attestation remains on record, that we, too, may hear through the centuries God speaking of and to His Son, and may lay to heart the commandment to us, which naturally follows God's witness to Jesus, Hear ye Him.

The symbol of the dove may be regarded as a prophecy of the gentleness of the Son. Thus early in His course the two qualities were harmonised in Him, which so seldom are united, and each of which dwelt in Him in divinest perfection, both as to degree and manner. John's anticipations of the strong coming One looked for the manifestations of His strength in judgment and destruction. How strangely his images of the axe, the fan, the fire, are contrasted with the reality, emblemed by this dove dropping from heaven, with sunshine on its breast and peace in its still wings! Through the ages, Christ's strength has been the strength of gentleness, and His coming has been like that of Noah's dove, with the olive-branch in its beak, and the tidings of an abated flood and of a safe home in its return. The ascetic preacher of repentance was strong to shake and purge men's hearts by terror; but the stronger Son comes to conquer by meekness, and reign by the omnipotence of love. The beginning of the gospel was the anticipation and the proclamation of strength like the eagle's, swift of flight, and powerful to strike and destroy. The gospel, when it became a fact, and not a hope, was found in the meek Jesus, with the dove of God, the gentle Spirit, which is mightier than all, nestling in His heart, and uttering soft notes of invitation through His lips.