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

**MARK-006**. **CHRIST'S TOUCH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Jesus put forth His hand, and touched him."*

*Mark 1:41*

Behold the servant of the Lordmight be the motto of this Gospel, and He went about doing good and healingthe summing up of its facts. We have in it comparatively few of our Lord's discourses, none of His longer, and not very many of His briefer ones. It contains but four parables. This Evangelist gives no miraculous birth as in Matthew, no angels adoring there as in Luke, no gazing into the secrets of Eternity, where the Word who afterwards became flesh dwelt in the bosom of the Father, as in John. He begins with a brief reference to the Forerunner, and then plunges into the story of Christ's life of service to man and service for God.

In carrying out his conception the Evangelist omits many things found in the other Gospels, which involve the idea of dignity and dominion, while he adds to the incidents which he has in common with them not a few fine and subtle touches to heighten the impression of our Lord's toil and eagerness in His patient, loving service. Perhaps it may be an instance of this that we find more prominence given to our Lord's touch as connected with His miracles than in the other Gospels, or perhaps it may merely be an instance of the vivid portraiture, the result of a keen eye for externals, which is so marked a characteristic of this gospel. Whatever the reason, the fact is plain, that Mark delights to dwell on Christ's touch. The instances are these--first, He puts out His hand, and lifts upPeter's wife's mother, and immediately the fever leaves her (1:31); then, unrepelled by the foul disease, He lays His pure hand upon the leper, and the living mass of corruption is healed (1:41); again, He lays His hand on the clammy marble of the dead child's forehead, and she lives (5:41). Further, we have the incidental statement that He was so hindered in His mighty works by unbelief that He could only lay His hands on a few sick folk and heal them (6:5). We find next two remarkable incidents, peculiar to Mark, both like each other and unlike our Lord's other miracles. One is the gradual healing of that deaf and dumb man whom Christ took apart from the crowd, laid His hands on him, thrust His fingers into his ears as if He would clear some impediment, touched his tongue with saliva, said to him, Be opened; and the man could hear (7:34). The other is, the gradual healing of a blind man whom our Lord again leads apart from the crowd, takes by the hand, lays His own kind hands upon the poor, sightless eyeballs, and with singular slowness of progress effects a cure, not by a leap and a bound as He generally does, but by steps and stages; tries it once and finds partial success, has to apply the curative process again, and then the man can see (8:23). In addition to these instances there are two other incidents which may also be adduced. It is Mark alone who records for us the fact that He took little children in His arms, and blessed them. And it is Mark alone who records for us the fact that when He came down from the Mount of Transfiguration He laid His hand upon the demoniac boy, writhing in the grip of his tormentor, and lifted him up.

There is much taught us, if we will patiently consider it, by that touch of Christ's, and I wish to try to bring out its meaning and power.

**I. Whatever diviner and sacreder aspect there may be in these incidents, the first thing, and in some senses the most precious thing, in them is that they are the natural expression of a truly human tenderness and compassion.**

Now we are so accustomed, and as I believe quite rightly, to look at all Christ's life down to its minutest events as intended to be a revelation of God, that we are sometimes apt to think about it as if His motive and purpose in everything was didactic. So an unreality creeps over our conceptions of Christ's life, and we need to be reminded that He was not always acting and speaking in order to convey instruction, but that words and deeds were drawn from Him by the play of simple human feelings. He pitied not only in order to teach us the heart of God, but because His own man's heart was touched with a feeling of men's infirmities. We are too apt to think of Him as posing before men with the intent of giving the great revelation of the Love of God. It is the love of Christ Himself, spontaneous, instinctive, without the thought of anything but the suffering that it sees, which gushes out and leads Him to put forth His hand to the outcast beggars, the blind, the deaf, the lepers. That is the first great lesson we have to learn from this and other stories--the swift human sympathy and heart of grace and tenderness which Jesus Christ had for all human suffering, and has to-day as truly as ever.

There is more than this instinctive sympathy taught by Christ's touch, but it is distinctly taught. How beautifully that comes out in the story of the leper! That wretched man had long dwelt in his isolation. The touch of a friend's hand or the kiss of loving lips had been long denied him. Christ looks on him, and before He reflects, the spontaneous impulse of pity breaks through the barriers of legal prohibitions and of natural repugnance, and leads Him to lay His holy and healing hand on his foulness.

True pity always instinctively leads us to seek to come near those who are its objects. A man tells his friend some sad story of his sufferings, and while he speaks, unconsciously his listener lays his hand on his arm, and, by a silent pressure, speaks his sympathy. So Christ did with these men--not only in order that He might reveal God to us, but because He was a man, and therefore felt ere He thought. Out flashed from His heart the swift sympathy, followed by the tender pressure of the loving hand--a hand that tried through flesh to reach spirit, and come near the sufferer that it might succour and remove the sorrow.

Christ's pity is shown by His touch to have this true characteristic of true pity, that it overcomes disgust. All real sympathy does that. Christ is not turned away by the shining whiteness of the leprosy, nor by the eating pestilence beneath it; He is not turned away by the clammy marble hand of the poor dead maiden, nor by the fevered skin of the old woman gasping on her pallet. He lays hold on each, the flushed patient, the loathsome leper, the sacred dead, with the all-equalising touch of a universal love and pity, which disregards all that is repellent, and overflows every barrier and pours itself over every sufferer. We have the same pity of the same Christ to trust to and to lay hold of to-day. He is high above us and yet bending over us; stretching His hand from the throne as truly as He put it out when here on earth; and ready to take us all to His heart in spite of our weakness and wickedness, our failings and our shortcomings, the fever of our flesh and heartsdesires, the leprosy of our many corruptions, and the death of our sins,--and to hold us ever in the strong, gentle clasp of His divine, omnipotent, and tender hand. This Christ lays hold on us because He loves us, and will not be turned from His compassion by the most loathsome foulness of ours.

**II. And now take another point of view from which we may regard this touch of Christ: namely, as the medium of His miraculous power.**

There is nothing to me more remarkable about the miracles of our Lord than the royal variety of His methods of healing. Sometimes He works at a distance, sometimes He requires, as it would appear for good reasons, the proximity of the person to be blessed. Sometimes He works by a simple word: Lazarus, come forth!Peace be still!Come out of him!sometimes by a word and a touch, as in the instances before us; sometimes by a touch without a word; sometimes by a word and a touch and a vehicle, as in the saliva that was put on the tongue and in the ears of the deaf, and on the eyes of the blind; sometimes by a vehicle without a word, without a touch, without His presence, as when He said, Go wash in the pool of Siloam, and he washed and was clean. So the divine worker varies infinitely and at pleasure, yet not arbitrarily but for profound, even if not always discoverable, reasons, the methods of His miracle-working power, in order that we may learn by these varieties of ways that He is tied to no way; and that His hand, strong and almighty, uses methods and tosses aside methods according to His pleasure, the methods being vitalised when they are used by His will, and being nothing at all in themselves.

The very variety of His methods, then, teaches us that the true cause in every case is His own bare will. A simple word is the highest and most adequate expression of that will. His word is all-powerful: and that is the very signature of divinity. Of whom has it been true from of old that He spake and it was done, He commanded and it stood fast? Do you believe in a Christ whose bare will, thrown among material things, makes them all plastic, as clay in the potter's hands, whose mouth rebukes the demons and they flee, rebukes death and it looses its grasp, rebukes the tempest and there is a calm, rebukes disease and there comes health? But this use of Christ's touch as apparent means for conveying His miraculous power also serves as an illustration of a principle which is exemplified in all His revelation, namely, the employment in condescension to men's weakness, of outward means as the apparent vehicles of His spiritual power. Just as by the material vehicle sometimes employed for cure, He gave these poor sense-bound natures a ladder by which their faith in His healing power might climb, so in the manner of His revelation and communication of His spiritual gifts, there is provision for the wants of us men, who ever need some body for spirit to make itself manifest by, some form for the ethereal reality, some tabernaclefor the sun. Sacraments, outward ceremonies, forms of worship, are vehicles which the Divine Spirit uses in order to bring His gifts to the hearts and the minds of men. They are like the touch of the Christ which heals, not by any virtue in itself, apart from His will which chooses to make it the apparent medium of healing. All these externals are nothing, as the pipes of an organ are nothing, until His breath is breathed through them, and then the flood of sweet sound pours out.

Do not despise the material vehicles and the outward helps which Christ uses for the communication of His healing and His life, but remember that the help that is done upon earth, He does it all Himself. Even Christ's touch is nothing, if it were not for His own will which flows through it.

**III. Consider Christ's touch as a shadow and symbol of the very heart of His work.**

Go back to the past history of this man. Ever since his disease declared itself no human being had touched him. If he had a wife he had been separated from her; if he had children their lips had never kissed his, nor their little hands found their way into his hard palm. Alone he had been walking with the plague-cloth over his face, and the cry Unclean!on his lips, lest any man should come near him. Skulking in his isolation, how he must have hungered for the touch of a hand! Every Jew was forbidden to approach him but the priest, who, if he were cured, might pass his hand over the place and pronounce him clean. And here comes a Man who breaks down all the restrictions, stretches a frank hand out across the walls of separation, and touches him. What a reviving assurance of love not yet dead must have come to the man as Christ grasped his hand, even if he saw in Him only a stranger who was not afraid of him and did not turn from him! But beside this thrill of human sympathy, which came hope--bringing to the leper, Christ's touch had much significance, if we remember that, according to the Mosaic legislation, the priest and the priest alone was to lay his hands on the tainted skin and pronounce the leper whole. So Christ's touch was a priest's touch. He lays His hand on corruption and is not tainted. The corruption with which He comes in contact becomes purity. Are not these really the profoundest truths as to His whole work in the world? What is it all but laying hold of the leper and the outcast and the dead--His sympathy leading to His identification of Himself with us in our weakness and misery? That sympathetic life-bringing touch is put forth once for all in His Incarnation and Death. He taketh hold of the seed of Abraham, says the Epistle to the Hebrews, looking at our Lord's work under this same metaphor, and explaining that His laying hold of men was His being made in all points like unto His brethren. Just as he took hold of the fevered woman and lifted her from her bed; or, as He thrust His fingers into the deaf ears of that poor man stopped by some impediment, so, in analogous fashion, He becomes one of those whom He would save and help. In His assumption of humanity and in His bowing of His head to death, we behold Him laying hold of our weakness and entering into the fellowship of our pains and of the fruit of sin.

Just as He touches the leper and in unpolluted, or the fever patient and receives no contagion, or the dead and draws no chill of mortality into His warm hand, so He becomes like His brethren in all things, yet without sin. Being found in the likeness of sinful flesh, He knows no sin, but wears His manhood unpolluted and dwells among men blameless and harmless, the Son of God, without rebuke. Like a sunbeam passing through foul water untarnished and unstained; or like some sweet spring rising in the midst of the salt sea, which yet retains its freshness and pours it over the surrounding bitterness, so Christ takes upon Himself our nature and lays hold of our stained hands with the hand that continues pure while it grasps us, and will make us purer if we grasp it.

Brethren, let your touch answer to His; and as He lays hold of us, in His incarnation and His death, let the hand of our faith clasp His outstretched hand, and though our hold be as faltering and feeble as that of the trembling, wasted fingers which one timid woman once laid on His garment's hem, the blessing which we need will flow into our veins from the contact. There will be cleansing for our leprosy, sight for our blindness, life driving out death from its throne in our hearts, and we shall be able to recount our joyful experience in the old Psalmist's triumphant strains--He sent me from above, He laid hold upon me, He drew me out of many waters.

**IV. Finally, we may look upon these incidents as being in a very important sense a pattern for us.**

No good is to be done by any man to his fellows except at the cost of true sympathy which leads to identification and contact. The literal touch of your hand would do more good to some poor outcasts than much solemn advice, or even much material help flung to them as from a height above them. A shake of the hand might be more of a means of grace than a sermon, and more comforting than ever so many free breakfasts and blankets given superciliously.

And, symbolically, we may say that we must be willing to take those by the hand whom we wish to help; that is to say, we must come down to their level, try to see with their eyes, and to think their thoughts, and let them feel that we do not think our purity too fine to come beside their filth, nor shrink from them With repugnance, however we may show disapproval and pity for their sin. Much work done by Christian people has no effect, nor ever will have, because it has peeping through it a poorly concealed I am holier than thou. An instinctive movement of repugnance has ruined many a well-meant effort.

Christ has come down to us, and has taken all our nature upon Himself. If there is an outcast and abandoned soul on earth which may not feel that Jesus has laid a loving and healing touch on him, Jesus is not the Saviour for the world. He shrinks from none, He unites Himself with all, therefore He is able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by Him. His conduct is the pattern and the law for us. A Church is a poor affair if it is not a body of people whose experience of Christ's pity and gratitude for the life which has become theirs through His wondrous making Himself one with them, compels them to do the like in their degree for the sinful and the outcast. Thank God, there are many in every communion who know that constraint of the love of Christ. But the world will not be healed of its sickness till the great body of Christian people awakes to feel that the task and honour of each of them is to go forth bearing Christ's pity certified by their own.

The sins of professing Christian countries are largely to be laid at the door of the Church. We are idle when we ought to be at work. We pass by on the other sidewhen bleeding brethren lie with wounds gaping to be bound up by us. And even when we are moved to service by Christ's love, and try to do something for our fellows, our work is often tainted by a sense of our own superiority, and we patronise when we should sympathise, and lecture when we should beseech.

We must be content to take lepers by the hand, if we would help them to purity, and to let every outcast feel the warmth of our pitying, loving grasp, if we would draw them into the forsaken Father's House. Lay your hands on the sinful as Christ did, and they will recover. All your holiness and hope come from Christ's laying hold of you. Keep hold of Him, and make His great pity and loving identification of Himself with the world of sinners and sufferers, your pattern as well as your hope, and your touch, too, will have virtue. Keeping hold of Him who has taken hold of us, you too may be able to say, Ephphatha, be opened, or to lay your hand on the leper, and he will be cleansed.