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

**MARK-012**. **AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"6.* *And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodlans against Him, how they might destroy Him. 7. But Jesus withdrew Himself with His disciples to the sea: and a great multitude from Galilee followed Him, and from Judea 8. And from Jerusalem, and from Idumaea beyond Jordan; and they about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they had heard what great things He did, came unto Him. 9. And He spake to His disciples, that a small ship should wait on Him because of the multitude, lest they should throng Him. 10. For he had healed many; insomuch that they pressed upon Him for to touch Him, as many as had plagues. 11. And unclean spirits, when they saw Him, fell down before Him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God. 12. And He straitly charged them that they should not make Him known. 13. And He goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto Him whom He would: and they came unto Him. 14. And He ordained twelve, that they should be with Him, and that He might send them forth to preach, 15. And to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out devils: 16. And Simon He surnamed Peter; 17. And James the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James; and He surnamed them Boanerges, which is, The sons of thunder: 18. And Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus Thaddaeus Simon the Canaanite, 19. And Judas Iscariot, which also betrayed Him: and they went into an house."*

*Mark 3:6-19*

A common object of hatred cements antagonists into strange alliance. Hawks and kites join in assailing a dove. Pharisees and Herod's partisans were antipodes; the latter must have parted with all their patriotism and much of their religion, but both parties were ready to sink their differences in order to get rid of Jesus, whom they instinctively felt to threaten destruction to them both. Such alliances of mutually repellent partisans against Christ's cause are not out of date yet. Extremes join forces against what stands in the middle between them.

Jesus withdrew from the danger which was preparing, not from selfish desire to preserve life, but because His hourwas not yet come. Discretion is sometimes the better part of valour. To avoid peril is right, to fly from duty is not. There are times when Luther's Here I stand; I can do nothing else; God help me! Amen, must be our motto; and there are times when the persecuted in one city are bound to flee to another. We shall best learn to distinguish between these times by keeping close to Jesus.

But side by side with official hatred, and in some measure the cause of it, was a surging rush of popular enthusiasm. Pharisees took offence at Christ's breaches of law in his Sabbath miracles. The crowd gaped at the wonders, and grasped at the possibility of cures for their afflicted. Neither party in the least saw below the surface. Mark describes two multitudes--one made up of Galileans who, he accurately says, followed Him; while the other came to Himfrom further afield. Note the geographical order in the list: the southern country of Judea, and the capital; then the trans-Jordanic territories beginning with Idumea in the south, and coming northward to Perea; and then the north-west bordering lands of Tyre and Sidon. Thus three parts of a circle round Galilee as centre are described. Observe, also, how turbid and impure the full stream of popular enthusiasm was.

Christ's gracious, searching, illuminating words had no attraction for the multitude. The great things He diddrew them with idle curiosity or desire for bodily healing. Still more impure was the motive which impelled the evil spiritsto approach Him, drawn by a strange fascination to gaze on Him whom they knew to be their conqueror, and hated as the Son of God. Terror and malice drove them to His presence, and wrung from them acknowledgment of His supremacy. What intenser pain can any hell have than the clear recognition of Christ's character and power, coupled with fiercely obstinate and utterly vain rebellion against Him? Note, further, our Lord's recoil from the tumult. He had retired before cunning plotters; He withdrew from gaping admirers, who did not know what they were crowding to, nor cared for His best gifts. It was no fastidious shrinking from low natures, nor any selfish wish for repose, that made Him take refuge in the fisherman's little boat. But His action teaches us a lesson that the best Christian work is hindered rather than helped by the popularitywhich dazzles many, and is often mistaken for success. Christ's motive for seeking to check rather than to stimulate such impure admiration, was that it would certainly increase the rulers antagonism, and might even excite the attention of the Roman authorities, who had to keep a very sharp outlook for agitations among their turbulent subjects. Therefore Christ first took to the boat, and then withdrew into the hills above the lake.

In that seclusion He summoned to Him a small nucleus, as it would appear, by individual selection. These would be such of the multitudeas He had discerned to be humble souls who yearned for deliverance from worse than outward diseases or bondage, and who therefore waited for a Messiah who was more than a physician or a patriot warrior. A personal call and a personal yielding make true disciples. Happy we if our history can be summed up in He called them unto Him, and they came. But there was an election within the chosen circle.

The choice of the Twelve marks an epoch in the development of Christ's work, and was occasioned, at this point of time, by both the currents which we find running so strong at this point in it. Precisely because Pharisaic hatred was becoming so threatening, and popular enthusiasm was opening opportunities which He singly could not utilise, He felt His need both for companions and for messengers. Therefore He surrounded Himself with that inner circle, and did it then, The appointment of the Apostles has been treated by some as a masterpiece of organisation, which largely contributed to the progress of Christianity, and by others as an endowment of the Twelve with supernatural powers which are transmitted on certain outward conditions to their successors, and thereby give effect to sacraments, and are the legitimate channels for grace. But if we take Mark's statement of their function, our view will be much simpler. The number of twelve distinctly alludes to the tribes of Israel, and implies that the new community is to be the true people of God.

The Apostles were chosen for two ends, of which the former was preparatory to the latter. The latter was the more important and permanent, and hence gave the office its name. They were to be with Christ, and we may fairly suppose that He wished that companionship for His own sake as well as for theirs. No doubt, the primary purpose was their training for their being sent forth to preach. But no doubt, also, the lonely Christ craved for companions, and was strengthened and soothed by even the imperfect sympathy and unintelligent love of these humble adherents. Who can fail to hear tones which reveal how much He hungered for companions in His grateful acknowledgment, Ye are they which have continued with Me in My temptations? It still remains true that we must be with Christmuch and long before we can go forth as His messengers.

Note, too, that the miracle-working power comes last as least important. Peter had understood his office better than some of his alleged successors, when he made its qualification to be having been with Jesus during His life, and its office to be that of being witnesses of His resurrection (Acts i.).

The list of the Apostles presents many interesting points, at which we can only glance. If compared with the lists in the other Gospels and in Acts, it brings out clearly the division into three groups of four persons each. The order in which the four are named varies within the limits of each group; but none of the first four are ever in the lists degraded to the second or third group, and none of these are ever promoted beyond their own class. So there were apparently degrees among the Twelve, depending, no doubt, on spiritual receptivity, each man being as close to the Lord, and gifted with as much of the sunshine of His love, as he was fit for.

Further, their places in relation to each other vary. The first four are always first, and Peter is always at their head; but in Matthew and Luke, the pairs of brothers are kept together, while, in Mark, Andrew is parted from his brother Simon, and put last of the first four. That place indicates the closer relation of the other three to Jesus, of which several instances will occur to every one. But Mark puts James before John, and his list evidently reflects the memory of the original superiority of James as probably the elder. There was a time when John was known as James's brother. But the time came, as Acts shows, when John took precedence, and was closely linked with Peter as the two leaders. So the ties of kindred may be loosened, and new bonds of fellowship created by similarity of relation to Jesus. In His kingdom, the elder may fall behind the younger. Rank in it depends on likeness to the king.

The surname of Boanerges, Sons of Thunder, given to the brothers, can scarcely be supposed to commemorate a characteristic prior to discipleship. Christ does not perpetuate old faults in his servantsnew names. It must rather refer to excellences which were heightened and hallowed in them by following Jesus. Probably, therefore, it points to a certain majesty of utterance. Do we not hear the boom of thunder-peals in the prologue to John's Gospel, perhaps the grandest words ever written?

In the second quartet, Bartholomew is probably Nathanael; and, if so, his conjunction with Philip is an interesting coincidence with John 1:45, which tells that Philip brought him to Jesus. All three Gospels put the two names together, as if the two men had kept up their association; but, in Acts, Thomas takes precedence of Bartholomew, as if a closer spiritual relationship had by degrees sprung up between Philip, the leader of the second group, and Thomas, which slackened the old bond. Note that these two, who are coupled in Acts, are two of the interlocutors in the final discourses in the upper room (John 14.). Mark, like Luke, puts Matthew before Thomas; but Matthew puts himself last, and adds his designation of publican,--a beautiful example of humility.

The last group contains names which have given commentators trouble. I am not called on to discuss the question of the identity of the James who is one of its members. Thaddeus is by Luke called Judas, both in his Gospel and in the Acts; and by Matthew, according to one reading, Lebbaeus. Both names are probably surnames, the former being probably derived from a word meaning breast, and the latter from one signifying heart. They seem, therefore, to be nearly equivalent, and may express large-heartedness.

Simon the Canaanite(Auth. Ver.) is properly the Cananaen(Rev. Ver.). There was no alien in blood among the Twelve. The name is a late Aramaic word meaning zealot. Hence Luke translates it for Gentile readers. He was one of the fanatical sect who would not have anything to do with Rome, and who played such a terrible part in the final catastrophe of Israel. The baser elements were purged out of his fiery enthusiasm when he became Christ's man. The hallowing and curbing of earthly passion, the ennobling of enthusiasm, are achieved when the pure flame of love to Christ burns up their dross.

Judas Iscariot closes the list, cold and venomous as a snake. Enthusiasm in him there was none. The problem of his character is too complex to be entered on here. But we may lay to heart the warning that, if a man is not knit to Christ by heart's love and obedience, the more he comes into contact with Jesus the more will he recoil from Him, till at last he is borne away by a passion of detestation. Christ is either a sure foundation or a stone of stumbling.