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

**MARK-013**. **HE IS BESIDE HIMSELF by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And when His friends heard of it, they went out to lay hold on Him: for they said, He is beside Himself."*

*Mark 3:21*

There had been great excitement in the little town of Capernaum in consequence of Christ's teachings and miracles. It had been intensified by His infractions of the Rabbinical Sabbath law, and by His appointment of the twelve Apostles. The sacerdotal party in Capernaum apparently communicated with Jerusalem, with the result of bringing a deputation from the Sanhedrim to look into things, and see what this new rabbi was about. A plot for His assassination was secretly on foot. And at this juncture the incident of my text, which we owe to Mark alone of the Evangelists, occurs. Christ's friends, apparently the members of His own family--sad to say, as would appear from the context, including His mother--came with a kindly design to rescue their misguided kinsman from danger, and laying hands upon Him, to carry Him off to some safe restraint in Nazareth, where He might indulge His delusions without doing any harm to Himself. They wish to excuse His eccentricities on the ground that He is not quite responsible--scarcely Himself; and so to blunt the point of the more hostile explanation of the Pharisees that He is in league with Beelzebub.

Conceive of that! The Incarnate Wisdom shielded by friends from the accusation that He is a demoniac by the apology that He is a lunatic! What do you think of popular judgment? But this half-pitying, half-contemptuous, and wholly benevolent excuse for Jesus, though it be the words of friends, is like the words of His enemies, in that it contains a distorted reflection of His true character. And if we will think about it, I fancy that we may gather from it some lessons not altogether unprofitable.

**I. The first point, then, that I make, is just this--there was something in the character of Jesus Christ which could be plausibly explained to commonplace people as madness.**

A well-known modern author has talked a great deal about the sweet reasonableness of Jesus Christ. His contemporaries called it simple insanity; if they did not say He hath a devil, as well as He is mad.

Now, if we try to throw ourselves back to the life of Jesus Christ, as it was unfolded day by day, and think nothing about either what preceded in the revelation of the Old Covenant, or what followed in the history of Christianity, we shall not be so much at a loss to account for such explanations of it as these of my text. Remember that charges like these, in all various keys of contempt or of pity, or of fierce hostility, have been cast against all innovators, against every man that has broken a new path; against all teachers that have cut themselves apart from tradition and encrusted formulas; against every man that has waged war with the conventionalisms of society; against all idealists who have dreamed dreams and seen visions; against every man that has been touched with a lofty enthusiasm of any sort; and, most of all, against all to whom God and their relations to Him, the spiritual world and their relations to it, the future life and their relations to that, have become dominant forces and motives in their lives.

The short and easy way with which the world excuses itself from the poignant lessons and rebukes which come from such lives is something like that of my text, He is beside himself. And the proof that he is beside himself is that he does not act in the same fashion as these incomparably wise people that make up the majority in every age. There is nothing that commonplace men hate like anything fresh and original. There is nothing that men of low aims are so utterly bewildered to understand, and which so completely passes all the calculus of which they are masters, as lofty self-abnegation. And wherever you get men smitten with such, or with anything like it, you will find all the low-aimed people gathering round them like bats round a torch in a cavern, flapping their obscene wings and uttering their harsh croaks, and only desiring to quench the light.

One of our cynical authors says that it is the mark of a genius that all the dullards are against him. It is the mark of the man who dwells with God that all the people whose portion is in this life with one consent say, He is beside himself.

And so the Leader of them all was served in His day; and that purest, perfectest, noblest, loftiest, most utterly self-oblivious, and God-and-man-devoted life that ever was lived upon earth, was disposed of in this extremely simple method, so comforting to the complacency of the critics--either He is beside Himself, or He hath a devil.

And yet, is not the saying a witness to the presence in that wondrous and gentle career of an element entirely unlike what exists in the most of mankind? Here was a new star in the heavens, and the law of its orbit was manifestly different from that of all the rest. That is what eccentricmeans--that the life to which it applies does not move round the same centre as do the other satellites, but has a path of its own. Away out yonder somewhere, in the infinite depths, lay the hidden point which drew it to itself and determined its magnificent and overwhelmingly vast orbit. These men witness to Jesus Christ, even by their half excuse, half reproach, that His was a life unique and inexplicable by the ordinary motives which shape the little lives of the masses of mankind. They witness to His entire neglect of ordinary and low aims; to His complete absorption in lofty purposes, which to His purblind would-be critics seem to be delusions and fond imaginations that could never be realised. They witness to what His disciples remembered had been written of Him, The zeal of Thy house hath eaten Me up; to His perfect devotion to man and to God. They witness to His consciousness of a mission; and there is nothing that men are so ready to resent as that. To tell a world, engrossed in self and low aims, that one is sent from God to do His will, and to spread it among men, is the sure way to have all the heavy artillery and the lighter weapons of the world turned against one.

These characteristics of Jesus seem then to be plainly implied in that allegation of insanity--lofty aims, absolute originality, utter self-abnegation, the continual consciousness of communion with God, devotion to the service of man, and the sense of being sent by God for the salvation of the world. It was because of these that His friends said, He is beside Himself.

These men judged themselves by judging Jesus Christ. And all men do. There are as many different estimates of a great man as there are people to estimate, and hence the diversity of opinion about all the characters that fill history and the galleries of the past. The eye sees what it brings and no more. To discern the greatness of a great man, or the goodness of a good one, is to possess, in lower measure, some portion of that which we discern. Sympathy is the condition of insight into character. And so our Lord said once, He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, because he is a dumb prophet himself, and has a lower power of the same gift in him, which is eloquent on the prophet's lips.

In like manner, to discern what is in Christ is the test of whether there is any of it in myself. And thus it is no mere arbitrary appointment which suspends your salvation and mine on our answer to this question, What think ye of Christ?The answer will be--I was going to say--the elixir of our whole moral and spiritual nature. It will be the outcome of our inmost selves. This ploughshare turns up the depths of the soil. That is eternally true which the grey-bearded Simeon, the representative of the Old, said when he took the Infant in his arms and looked down upon the unconscious, placid, smooth face. This Child is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. Your answer to that question discloses your whole spiritual condition and capacities. And so to judge Christ is to be judged by Him; and what we think Him to be, that we make Him to ourselves. The question which tests us is not merely, Whom do men say that I am?It is easy to answer that; but this is the all-important interrogation, Whom do ye say that I am?I pray that we may each answer as he to whom it was first put answered it, Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel!

**II. Secondly, mark the similarity of the estimate which will be passed by the world on all Christ's true followers.**

The same elements exist to-day, the same intolerance of anything higher than the low level, the same incapacity to comprehend simple devotion and lofty aims, the same dislike of a man who comes and rebukes by his silent presence the vices in which he takes no part. And it is a great deal easier to say, Poor fool! enthusiastic fanatic!than it is to lay to heart the lesson that lies in such a life.

The one thing, or at least the principal thing, which the Christianity of this generation wants is a little more of this madness. It would be a great deal better for us who call ourselves Christians if we had earned and deserved the world's sneer, He is beside himself. But our modern Christianity, like an epicure's rare wines, is preferred iced. And the last thing that anybody would think of suggesting in connection with the demeanour--either the conduct or the words--of the average Christian man of this day is that his religion had touched his brain a little.

But, dear friends, go in Christ's footsteps and you will have the same missiles flung at you. If a church or an individual has earned the praise of the outside ring of godless people because its or his religion is reasonable and moderate; and kept in its proper place; and not allowed to interfere with social enjoyments, and political and municipal corruptions, and the like, then there is much reason to ask whether that church or man is Christian after Christ's pattern. Oh, I pray that there may come down on the professing Church of this generation a baptism of the Spirit; and I am quite sure that when that comes, the people that admire moderation and approve of religion, but like it to be kept in its own place, will be all ready to say, when they hear the sons and the daughters prophesying, and the old men seeing visions, and the young men dreaming dreams, and the fiery tongues uttering their praises of God, These men are full of new wine!Would we were full of the new wine of the Spirit! Do you think any one would say of your religion that you were beside yourself, because you made so much of it? They said it about your Master, and if you were like Him it would be said, in one tone or another, about you. We are all desperately afraid of enthusiasm to-day. It seems to me that it is the want of the Christian Church, and that we are not enthusiastic because we don't half believe the truths that we say are our creed.

One more word. Christian men and women have to make up their minds to go on in the path of devotion, conformity to Christ's pattern, self-sacrificing surrender, without minding one bit what is said about them. Brethren, I do not think Christian people are in half as much danger of dropping the standard of the Christian life by reason of the sarcasms of the world, as they are by reason of the low tone of the Church. Don't you take your ideas of what a reasonable Christian life is from the men round you, howsoever they may profess to be Christ's followers. And let us keep so near the Master that we may be able to say, With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man's judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord. Never mind, though they say, Beside himself!Never mind, though they say, Oh! utterly extravagant and impracticable. Better that than to be patted on the back by a world that likes nothing so well as a Church with its teeth drawn, and its claws cut; which may be made a plaything and an ornament by the world. And that is what much of our modern Christianity has come to be.

**III. Lastly, notice the sanity of the insane.**

I have only space to put before you three little pictures, and ask you what you think of them. I dare say the originals might be found among us without much search.

Here is one. Suppose a man who, like the most of us, believes that there is a God, believes that he has something to do with Him, believes that he is going to die, believes that the future state is, in some way or other, and in some degree, one of retribution; and from Monday morning to Saturday night he ignores all these facts, and never allows them to influence one of his actions. May I venture to speak direct to this hypothetical person, whose originals are dotted about in my audience? It would be the very same to you if you said Noinstead of Yesto all these affirmations. The fact that there is a God does not make a bit of difference to what you do, or what you think, or what you feel. The fact that there is a future life makes just as little difference. You are going on a voyage next week, and you never dream of getting your outfit. You believe all these things, you are an intelligent man--you are very likely, in a great many ways, a very amiable and pleasant one; you do many things very well; you cultivate congenial virtues, and you abhor uncongenial vices; but you never think about God; and you have made absolutely no preparation whatever for stepping into the scene in which you know that you are to live.

Well, you may be a very wise man, a student with high aims, cultivated understanding, and all the rest of it. I want to know whether, taking into account all that you are, and your inevitable connection with God, and your certain death and certain life in a state of retribution--I want to know whether we should call your conduct sanity or insanity? Which? Take another picture. Here is a man that believes--really believes--the articles of the Christian creed, and in some measure has received them into his heart and life. He believes that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for him upon the Cross, and yet his heart has but the feeblest tick of pulsating love in answer. He believes that prayer will help a man in all circumstances, and yet he hardly ever prays. He believes that self-denial is the law of the Christian life, and yet he lives for himself. He believes that he is here as a pilgrimand as a sojourner, and yet his heart clings to the world, and his hand would fain cling to it, like that of a drowning man swept over Niagara, and catching at anything on the banks. He believes that he is sent into the world to be a lightof the world, and yet from out of his self-absorbed life there has hardly ever come one sparkle of light into any dark heart. And that is a picture, not exaggerated, of the enormous majority of professing Christians in so-called Christian lands. And I want to know whether we shall call that sanity or insanity? The last of my little miniatures is that of a man who keeps in close touch with Jesus Christ, and so, like Him, can say, Lo! I come; I delight to do Thy will, O Lord. Thy law is within my heart. He yields to the strong motives and principles that flow from the Cross of Jesus Christ, and, drawn by the mercies of God, gives himself a living sacrificeto be used as God will. Aims as lofty as the Throne which Christ His Brother fills; sacrifice as entire as that on which his trembling hope relies; realisation of the unseen future as vivid and clear as His who could say that He was in Heavenwhilst He walked the earth; subjugation of self as complete as that of the Lord's, who pleased not Himself, and came not to do His own will--these are some of the characteristics which mark the true disciple of Jesus Christ. And I want to know whether the conduct of the man who believes in the love that God hath to him, as manifested in the Cross, and surrenders his whole self thereto, despising the world and living for God, for Christ, for man, for eternity--whether his conduct is insanity or sanity? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.