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

**MARK-020**. **THE TOILING CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"They took Him even as He was in the ship. ... And He was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow."*

*Mark 4:36, 38*

Among the many loftier characteristics belonging to Christ's life and work, there is a very homely one which is often lost sight of; and that is, the amount of hard physical exertion, prolonged even to fatigue and exhaustion, which He endured.

Christ is our pattern in a great many other things more impressive and more striking; and He is our pattern in this, that in the sweat of His browHe did His work, and knew not only what it was to suffer, but what it was to toil for man's salvation. And, perhaps, if we thought a little more than we do of such a prosaic characteristic of His life as that, it might invest it with some more reality for us, besides teaching us other large and important lessons.

I have thrown together these two clauses for our text now, simply for the sake of that one feature which they both portray so strikingly.

They took Him even as He was in the ship. Now many expositors suppose that in the very form of that phrase there is suggested the extreme of weariness and exhaustion which He suffered, after the hard day's toil. Whether that be so or no, the swiftness of the move to the little boat, although there was nothing in the nature of danger or of imperative duty to hurry Him away, and His going on board without a moment's preparation, leaving the crowd on the beach, seem most naturally accounted for by supposing that He had come to the last point of physical endurance, and that His frame, worn out by the hard day's work, needed one thing--rest.

And so, the next that we see of Him is that, as soon as He gets into the ship He falls fast asleep on the wooden pillow--a hard bed for His head!--in the stern of the little fishing boat, and there He lies so tired--let us put it into plain prose and strip away the false veil of big words with which we invest that nature--so tired that the storm does not awake Him; and they have to come to Him, and lay their hands upon Him, and say to Him, Master, carest Thou not that we perish?before compassion again beat back fatigue, and quickened Him for fresh exertions.

This, then, is the one lesson which I wish to consider now, and there are three points which I deal with in pursuance of my task. I wish to point out a little more in detail the signs that we have in the Gospels of this characteristic of Christ's work--the toilsomeness of His service; then to consider, secondly, the motives which He Himself tells us impelled to such service; and then, finally, the worth which that toil bears for us.

**I. First, then, let me point out some of the significant hints which the gospel records give us of the toilsomeness of Christ's service.**

Now we are principally indebted for these to this Gospel by Mark, which ancient tradition has set forth as being especially and eminently the Gospel of the Servant of God, therein showing a very accurate conception of its distinguishing characteristics. Just as Matthew's Gospel is the Gospel of the King, regal in tone from beginning to end; just as Luke's is the Gospel of the Man, human and universal in its tone; just as John's is the Gospel of the Eternal Word, so Mark's is the Gospel of the Servant. The inscription written over it all might be, Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God. Behold my Servant whom I uphold.

And if you will take this briefest of all the Gospels, and read it over from that point of view, you will be surprised to discover what a multitude of minute traits make up the general impression, and what a unity is thereby breathed into the narrative.

For instance, did you ever observe the peculiar beginning of this Gospel? There are here none of the references to the prophecies of the King, no tracing of His birth through the royal stock to the great progenitor of the nation, no adoration by the Eastern sages, which we find in Matthew, no miraculous birth nor growing childhood as in Luke, no profound unveiling of the union of the Word with God before the world was, as in John; but the narrative begins with His baptism, and passes at once to the story of His work. The same ruling idea accounts for the uniform omission of the title Lordwhich in Mark's Gospel is never applied to Christ until after the resurrection. There is only one apparent exception, and there good authorities pronounce the word to be spurious. Even in reports of conversations which are also given in the other Gospels, and where Lordoccurs, Mark, of set purpose, omits it, as if its presence would disturb the unity of the impression which he desires to leave. You will find the investigation of the omissions in this Gospel full of interest, and remarkably tending to confirm the accuracy of the view which regards it as the Gospel of the Servant.

Notice then these traits of His service which it brings out.

The first of them I would suggest is--how distinctly it gives the impression of swift, strenuous work. The narrative is brief and condensed. We feel, all through these earlier chapters, at all events, the presence of the pressing crowd coming to Him and desiring to be healed, and but a word can be spared for each incident as the story hurries on, trying to keep pace with His rapid service of quick-springing compassion and undelaying help. There is one word which is reiterated over and over again in these earlier chapters, remarkably conveying this impression of haste and strenuous work; Mark's favourite word is straightway, immediately, forthwith, anon, which are all translations of one expression. You will find, if you glance over the first, second, or third chapters at your leisure, that it comes in at every turn. Take these instances which strike one's eye at the moment. Straightway they forsook their nets; Straightway He entered into the synagogue; Immediately His fame spread abroad throughout all the region; Forthwith they entered into the house of Simon's mother; Anon, they tell Him of her; Immediately the fever left her. And so it goes on through the whole story, a picture of a constant succession of rapid acts of mercy and love. The story seems, as it were, to pant with haste to keep up with Him as He moves among men, swift as a sunbeam, and continuous in the outflow of His love as are these unceasing rays.

Again, we see in Christ's service, toil prolonged to the point of actual physical exhaustion. The narrative before us is the most striking instance of that which we meet with. It had been a long wearying day of work. According to this chapter, the whole of the profound parables concerning the kingdom of God had immediately preceded the embarkation. But even these, with their explanation, had been but a part of that day's labours. For, in Matthew's account of them, we are told that they were spoken on the same day as that on which His mother and brethren came desiring to speak with Him,--or, as we elsewhere read, with hostile intentions to lay hold on Him as mad and needing restraint. And that event, which we may well believe touched deep and painful chords of feeling in His human heart, and excited emotions more exhausting than much physical effort, occurred in the midst of an earnest and prolonged debate with emissaries from Jerusalem, in the course of which He spoke the solemn words concerning blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, and Satan casting out Satan, and poured forth some of His most terrible warnings, and some of His most beseeching entreaties. No wonder that, after such a day, the hard pillow of the boat was a soft resting-place for His wearied head; no wonder that, as the evening quiet settled down on the mountain-girdled lake, and the purple shadows of the hills stretched athwart the water, He slept; no wonder that the storm which followed the sunset did not wake Him; and beautiful, that wearied as He was, the disciplescry at once rouses Him, and the fatigue which shows His manhood gives place to the divine energy which says unto the sea, Peace! be still. The lips which, a moment before, had been parted in the soft breathing of wearied sleep, now open to utter the omnipotent word--so wonderfully does He blend the human and the divine, the form of a servantand the nature of God.

We see, in Christ, toil that puts aside the claims of physical wants. Twice in this Gospel we read of this The multitude cometh together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. There were many coming, and they had no leisure so much as to eat.

We see in Christ's service a love which is at every man's beck and call, a toil cheerfully rendered at the most unreasonable and unseasonable times. As I said a moment or two ago, this Gospel makes one feel, as none other of these narratives do, the pressure of that ever-present multitude, the whirling excitement that eddied round the calm centre. It tells us, for instance, more than once, how Christ, wearied with His toil, feeling in body and in spirit the need of rest and still communion, withdrew Himself from the crowd. He once departed alone that He might seek God in prayer; once He went with His wearied disciples apart into a desert place to rest awhile. On both occasions the retirement is broken in upon before it is well begun. The sigh of relief in the momentary rest is scarcely drawn, and the burden laid down for an instant, when it has to be lifted again. His solitary prayer is interrupted by the disciples, with All men seek for Thee, and, without a murmur or a pause, He buckles to His work again, and says, Let us go into the next towns that I may preach there also; for therefore am I sent.

When He would carry His wearied disciples with Him for a brief breathing time to the other side of the sea, and get away from the thronging crowd, the people saw Him departing, and ran afoot out of all cities, and, making their way round the head of the lake, were all there at the landing place before Him. Instead of seclusion and repose He found the same throng and bustle. Here they were, most of them from mere curiosity, some of them no doubt with deeper feelings; here they were, with their diseased and their demoniacs, and as soon as His foot touches the shore He is in the midst of it all again. And He meets it, not with impatience at this rude intrusion on His privacy, not with refusals to help. Only one emotion filled His heart. He forgot all about weariness, and hunger, and retirement, and He was moved with compassion towards them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd, and He began to teach them many things. Such a picture may well shame our languid, self-indulgent service, may stir us to imitation and to grateful praise.

There is only one other point which I touch upon for a moment, as showing the toil of Christ, and that is drawn from another Gospel. Did you ever notice the large space occupied in Matthew's Gospel by the record of the last day of His public ministry, and how much of all that we know of His mission and message, and the future of the world and of all men, we owe to the teaching of these four-and-twenty hours? Let me put together, in a word, what happened on that day.

It included the conversation with the chief priests and elders about the baptism of John, the parable of the householder that planted a vineyard and digged a winepress, the parables of the kingdom of heaven, the controversy with the Herodians about the tribute money, the conversation with the Sadducees about the resurrection, with the Pharisee about the great commandment in the law, the silencing of the Pharisees by pointing to the 110th Psalm, the warning to the multitude against the scribes and Pharisees who were hypocrites, protracted and prolonged up to that wail of disappointed love, Behold! your house is left unto you desolate. And, as though that had not been enough for one day, when He is going home from the Temple to find, for a night, in that quiet little home of Bethany, the rest that He wants, as He rests wearily on the slopes of Olivet, the disciples come to Him, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming?and there follows all that wonderful prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world, the parable of the fig tree, the warning not to suffer the thief to come, and the promise of reward for the faithful and wise servant, the parable of the ten virgins, and in all probability the parable of the king with the five talents; and the words, that might be written in letters of fire, that tell us the final course of all things, and the judgment of life eternal and death everlasting! All this was the work of one of the days of the Son of Man. Of Him it was prophesied long ago, For Jerusalem's sake I will not rest; and His life on earth, as well as His life in heaven, fulfils the prediction--the one by the toilsomeness of His service, the other by the unceasing energy of His exalted power. He toiled unwearied here, He works unresting there.

**II. In the second place, let me ask you to notice how we get from our Lord's own words a glimpse into the springs of this wonderful activity.**

There are three points which distinctly come out in various places in the Gospels as His motives for such unresting sedulousness and continuance of toil. The first is conveyed by such words as these: I must work the works of Him that sent Me. Let us preach to other cities, also: for therefore am I sent. Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work. All these express one thought. Christ lived and toiled, and bore weariness and exhaustion, and counted every moment as worthy to be garnered up and precious, as to be filled with deeds of love and kindness, because wherever He went, and to whatsoever He set His hand, He had the one consciousness of a great task laid upon Him by a loving Father whom He loved, and whom, therefore, it was His joy and His blessedness to serve.

And, remember that this motive made the life homogeneous--of a piece. In all the variety of service, one spirit was expressed, and, therefore, the service was one. No matter whether He were speaking words of grace or of rebuke, or working works of power and love, or simply looking a look of kindness on some outcast, or taking a little child in His arms, or stilling with the same arms outstretched the wild uproar of the storm--it was all the same. To Him life was all one. There was nothing great, nothing small; nothing so insignificant that it could be done negligently; nothing so hard that it surpassed His power. The one motive made all duties equal; obedience to the Father called forth His whole energy at every moment. To Him life was not divided into a set of tasks of varying importance, some of which could be accomplished with a finger's touch, and some of which demanded a dead lift and strain of all the muscles. But whatsoever His hand found to do He did with His might and that because He felt, be it great or little, that it all came, if I may so say, into the day's work, and all was equally great because the Father that sent Him had laid it upon Him.

There is one thing that makes life mighty in its veriest trifles, worthy in its smallest deeds, that delivers it from monotony, that delivers it from insignificance. All will be great, and nothing will be overpowering, when, living in communion with Jesus Christ, we say as He says, My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me.

And then, still further, another of the secret springs that move His unwearied activity, His heroism of toil, is the thought expressed in such words as these:--While I am in the world I am the light of the world. I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work.

Jesus Christ manifested on earth performs indeed a work--the mightiest which He came to do--which was done precisely then when the night did come--namely, the work of His death, which is the atonement and propitiation for the sins of the world. And, further, the night, when no man can work, was not the end of His activity for us; for He carries on His work of intercession and rule, His work of bestowing the gifts purchased by His blood, amidst the glories of heaven; and that perpetual application and dispensing of the blessed issues of His death He has Himself represented as greater than the works, to which His death put a period, in which He healed the bodies and spoke to the hearts of those who heard, and lived a perfect life here upon this sinful earth. But yet even He recognised the brief hour of sunny life as being an hour that must be filled with service, and recognised the fact that there was a task that He could only do when He lived the life of a man upon earth. And so, if I might so say, He was a miser of the moments, and carefully husbanding and garnering up every capacity and every opportunity. He toiled with the toil of a man who has a task before him, that must be done before the clock strikes six, and who sees the hands move over the dial, and by every glance that he casts at it is stimulated to intenser service and to harder toil. Christ felt that impulse to service which we all ought to feel--The night cometh; let me fill the day with work.

And then there is a final motive which I need barely touch. He was impelled to His sedulous service not only by loving, filial obedience to the divine law, and by the consciousness of a limited and defined period into which all the activity of one specific kind must be condensed, but also by the motive expressed in such words as these, in which this Gospel is remarkably rich, And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth His hand and touched him. Thus, along with that supreme consecration, along with that swift ardour that will fill the brief hours ere nightfall with service, there was the constant pity of that beating heart that moved the diligent hand. Christ, if I may so say, could not help working as hard as He did, so long as there were so many men round about Him that needed His sympathy and His aid.

**III. So much then for the motives; and now a word finally as to the worth of this toil for us.**

I do not stay to elucidate one consideration that might be suggested, viz., how precious a proof it is of Christ's humanity. We find it easier to bring home His true manhood to our thoughts, when we remember that He, like us, knew the pressure of physical fatigue. Not only was it a human spirit that wept and rejoiced, that was moved with compassion, and sometimes with indignation, but it was a human body, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, that, wearied with walking in the burning sun, sat on the margin of the well; that was worn out and needed to sleep; that knew hunger, as is testified by His sending the disciples to buy meat; that was thirsty, as is testified by His saying, Give Me to drink. The true corporeal manhood of Jesus Christ, and the fact that that manhood is the tabernacle of God--without these two facts the morality and the teaching of Christianity swing loose in vacuo, and have no holdfast in history, nor any leverage by which they can move men's hearts! But, when we know that the common necessities of fatigue, and hunger, and thirst belonged to Him, then we gratefully and reverently say, Forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he also Himself took part of the same.

This fact of Christ's toil is of worth to us in other ways.

Is not that hard work of Jesus Christ a lesson for us, brethren, in our daily tasks and toils--a lesson which, if it were learnt and practised, would make a difference not only on the intensity but upon the spirit with which we labour? A great deal of fine talk is indulged in about the dignity of labour and the like. Labour is a curse until communion with God in it, which is possible through Jesus Christ, makes it a blessing and a joy. Christ, in the sweat of His brow, won our salvation; and our work only becomes great when it is work done in, and for, and by Him.

And what do we learn from His example? We learn these things: the plain lesson, first,--task all your capacity and use every minute in doing the duty that is plainly set before you to do. Christian virtues are sometimes thought to be unreal and unworldly things. I was going to say the root of them, certainly the indispensable accompaniment for them all, is the plain, prosaic, most unromantic virtue of hard work.

And beyond that, what do we learn? The lesson that most toilers in England want. There is no need to preach to the most of us to work any harder, in one department of work at any rate; but there is great need to remind us of what it was that at once stirred Jesus Christ into energy and kept Him calm in the midst of labour--and that was that everything was equally and directly referred to His Father's will. People talk nowadays about missions. The only thing worth giving that name to is the missionwhich He gives us, who sends us into the world not to do our own will, but to do the will of Him that sent us. There is a fatal monotony in all our lives--a terrible amount of hard drudgery in them all. We have to set ourselves morning after morning to tasks that look to be utterly insignificant and disproportionate to the power that we bring to bear upon them, so that men are like elephants picking up pins with their trunks; and yet we may make all our commonplace drudgery great, and wondrous, and fair, and full of help and profit to our souls, if, over it all--our shops, our desks, our ledgers, our studies, our kitchens, and our nurseries--we write, My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me. We may bring the greatest principles to bear upon the smallest duties.

What more do we learn from Christ's toil? The possible harmony of communion and service. His labour did not break His fellowship with God. He was ever in the secret place of the Most High, even while He was in the midst of crowds. He has taught us that it is possible to be in the house of the Lordall the days of our lives, and by His ensample, as by His granted Spirit, encourages us to aim at so serving that we shall never cease to behold, and so beholding that we shall never cease to serve our Father. The life of contemplation and the life of practice, so hard to harmonise in our experience, perfectly meet in Christ.

What more do we learn from our Lord's toils? The cheerful constant postponement of our own ease, wishes, or pleasure to the call of the Father's voice, or to the echo of it in the sighing of such as be sorrowful. I have already referred to the instances of His putting aside His need for rest, and His desire for still fellowship with God, at the call of whoever needed Him. It was the same always. If a Nicodemus comes by night, if a despairing father forces his way into the house of feasting, if another suppliant finds Him in a house, where He would have remained hid, if they come running to Him in the way, or drop down their sick before Him through the very roof--it is all the same. He never thinks of Himself, but gladly addresses Himself to heal and bless. How such an example followed would change our lives and amaze and shake the world!--I come, not to do Mine own will. Even Christ pleased not Himself.

But that toil is not only a pattern for our lives; it is an appeal to our grateful hearts. Surely a toiling Christ is as marvellous as a dying Christ. And the immensity and the purity and the depth of His love are shown no less by this, that He labours to accomplish it, than by this, that He dies to complete it. He will not give blessings which depend upon mere will, and can be bestowed as a king might fling a largess to a beggar without effort, and with scarce a thought, but blessings which He Himself has to agonise and to energise, and to lead a life of obedience, and to die a death of shame, in order to procure. I will not offer burnt-offering to God of that which doth cost me nothing, says the grateful heart. But in so saying it is but following in the track of the loving Christ, who will not give unto man that which cost Him nothing, and who works, as well as dies, in order that we may be saved.

And, O brethren! think of the contrast between what Christ has done to save us, and what we do to secure and appropriate that salvation! He toiled all His days, buying our peace with His life, going down into the mine and bringing up the jewels at the cost of His own precious blood. And you and I stand with folded arms, too apathetic to take the rich treasures that are freely given to us of God! He has done everything, that we may have nothing to do, and we will not even put out our slack hands to clasp the grace purchased by His blood, and commended by His toil! Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.