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

**MARK-024**. **THE POWER OF FEEBLE FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"25.* *And a certain woman ... 27. When she had heard of Jesus, came in the press behind, and touched His garment. 28. For she said, If I may touch but His clothes, I shall be whole."*

*Mark 5:24, 27-28*

In all the narratives of this miracle, it is embedded in the story of Jairus's daughter, which it cuts in twain. I suppose that the Evangelists felt, and would have us feel, the impression of calm consciousness of power and of leisurely dignity produced by Christ's having time to pause even on such an errand, in order to heal by the way, as if parenthetically, this other poor sufferer. The child's father with impatient earnestness pleads the urgency of her case--She lieth at the point of death; and to him and to the group of disciples, it must have seemed that there was no time to be lost. But He who knows that His resources are infinite can afford to let her die, while He cures and saves this woman. She shall receive no harm, and her sister suppliant has as great a claim on Him. The eyes of all waiton His equal love; He has leisure of heart to feel for each, and fulness of power for all; and none can rob another of his share in the Healer's gifts, nor any in all that dependent crowd jostle his neighbour out of the notice of the Saviour's eye.

The main point of the story itself seems to be the illustration which it gives of the genuineness and power of an imperfect faith, and of Christ's merciful way of responding to and strengthening such a faith. Looked at from that point of view, the narrative is very striking and instructive.

The woman is a poor shrinking creature, broken down by long illness, made more timid still by many disappointed hopes of core, depressed by poverty to which her many doctors had brought her. She does not venture to stop this new Rabbi-physician, as He goes with the rich church dignitary to heal his daughter, but lets Him pass before she can make up her mind to go near Him at all, and then comes creeping up in the crowd behind, puts out her wasted, trembling hand to His garment's hem--and she is whole. She would fain have stolen away with her new-found blessing, but Christ forces her to stand out before the throng, and there, with all their eyes upon her--cold, cruel eyes some of them--to conquer her diffidence and shame, and tell all the truth. Strange kindness that! strangely contrasted with His ordinary care to avoid notoriety, and with His ordinary tender regard for shrinking weakness! What may have been the reason? Certainly it was not for His own sake at all, nor for otherschiefly, but for hers, that He did this. The reason lay in the incompleteness of her faith. It was very incomplete--although it was, Christ answered it. And then He sought to make the cure, and the discipline that followed it, the means of clearing and confirming her trust in Himself.

**I. Following the order of the narrative thus understood, we have here first the great lesson, that very imperfect faith may be genuine faith.**

There was unquestionable confidence in Christ's healing power, and there was earnest desire for healing. Our Lord Himself recognises her faith as adequate to be the condition of her receiving the cure which she desired. Of course, it was a very different thing from the faith which unites us to Christ, and is the condition of our receiving our soul's cure; and we shall never understand the relation of multitudes of the people in the Gospels to Jesus, if we insist upon supposing that the faith to be healed, which many of them had, was a religious, or, as we call it, saving faith. But still, the trust which was directed to Him, as the giver of miraculous temporal blessings, is akin to that higher trust into which it often passed, and the principles regulating the operation of the loftier are abundantly illustrated in the workings of the lower.

The imperfections, then, of this woman's faith were many. It was intensely ignorant trust. She dimly believes that, somehow or other, this miracle-working Rabbi will heal her, but the cure is to be a piece of magic, secured by material contact of her finger with His robe. She has no idea that Christ's will, or His knowledge, much less His pitying love, has anything to do with it. She thinks that she may get her desire furtively, and may carry it away out of the crowd, and He, the source of it, be none the wiser, and none the poorer, for the blessing which she has stolen from Him. What utter blank ignorance of Christ's character and way of working! What complete misconception of the relation between Himself and His gift! What low, gross, superstitious ideas! Yes, and with them all what a hunger of intense desire to be whole; what absolute assurance of confidence that one finger-tip on His robe was enough! Therefore she had her desire, and her Lord recognised her faith as true, foolish and unworthy as were the thoughts which accompanied it! Thank God! the same thing is true still, or what would become of any of us? There may be a real faith in Christ, though there be mixed with it many and grave errors concerning His work, and the manner of receiving the blessings which He bestows. A man may have a very hazy apprehension of the bearing and whole scope of even Scripture declarations concerning the profounder aspects of Christ's person and work, and yet be holding fast to Him by living confidence. I do not wish to underrate for one moment the absolute necessity of clear and true conceptions of revealed truth, in order to a vigorous and fully developed faith; but, while there can be no faith worth calling so, which is not based upon the intellectual reception of truth, there may be faith based upon the very imperfect intellectual reception of very partial truth. The power and vitality of faith are not measured by the comprehensiveness and clearness of belief. The richest soil may bear shrunken and barren ears; and on the arid sand, with the thinnest layer of earth, gorgeous cacti may bloom out, and fleshy aloes lift their sworded arms, with stores of moisture to help them through the heat. It is not for us to say what amount of ignorance is destructive of the possibility of real confidence in Jesus Christ. But for ourselves, feeling how short a distance our eyesight travels, and how little, after all our systems, the great bulk of men in Christian lands know lucidly and certainly of theological truth, and how wide are the differences of opinion amongst us, and how soon we come to towering barriers, beyond which our poor faculties can neither pass nor look, it ought to be a joy to us all, that a faith which is clouded with such ignorance may yet be a faith which Christ accepts. He that knows and trusts Him as Brother, Friend, Saviour, in whom he receives the pardon and cleansing which he needs and desires, may have very much misconception and error cleaving to him, but Christ accepts him. If at the beginning His disciples know but this much, that they are sick unto death, and have tried without success all other remedies, and this more, that Christ will heal them; and if their faith builds upon that knowledge, then they will receive according to their faith. By degrees they will be taught more; they will be brought to the higher benches in His school; but, for a beginning, the most cloudy apprehension that Christ is the Saviour of the world, and my Saviour, may become the foundation of a trust which will bind the heart to Him and knit Him to the heart in eternal union. This poor woman received her healing, although she said, If I may touch but the hem of His garment, I shall be whole.

Her error was akin to one which is starting into new prominence again, and with which I need not say that I have no sort of sympathy,--that of people who attach importance to externals as means and channels of grace, and in whose system the hem of the garment and the touch of the finger are apt to take the place which the heart of the wearer and the grasp of faith should hold. The more our circumstances call for resistance to this error, the more needful is it to remember that, along with it and uttering itself through it, may be a depth of devout trust in Christ, which should shame us. Many a poor soul that clasps the base of the crucifix clings to the cross; many a devout heart, kneeling before the altar, sees through the incense-smoke the face of the Christ. The faith that is tied to form, though it be no faith for a man, though in some respects it darken God's Gospel, and bring it down to the level of magical superstition, may yet be, and often is, accepted by Him whose merciful eye recognised, and whose swift power answered, the mistaken trust of her who believed that healing lay in the fringes of His robe, rather than in the pity of His heart.

Again, her trust was very selfish. She wanted health; she did not care about the Healer. She thought much of the blessing in itself, little or nothing of the blessing as a sign of His love. She would have been quite contented to have had nothing more to do with Christ if she could only have gone away cured. She felt but little glow of gratitude to Him whom she thought of as unconscious of the good which she had stolen from Him. All this is a parallel to what occurs in the early stages of many a Christian life. The first inducement to a serious contemplation of Christ is, ordinarily, the consciousness of one's own sore need. Most men are driven to Him as a refuge from self, from their own sin, and from the wages of sin. The soul, absorbed in its own misery, and groaning in a horror of great darkness, sees from afar a great light, and stumbles towards it. Its first desire is deliverance, forgiveness, escape; and the first motions of faith are impelled by consideration of personal consequences. Love comes after, born of the recognition of Christ's great love to which we owe our salvation; but faith precedes love in the natural order of things, however closely love may follow faith; and the predominant motive in the earlier stages of many men's faith is distinctly self-regard. Now, that is all right, and as it was meant to be. It is an overstrained and caricatured doctrine of self-abnegation, which condemns such a faith as wrong. The most purely self-absorbed wish to escape from the most rudely pictured hell may be, and often is, the beginning of a true trust in Christ. Some of our superfine modern teachers who are shocked at Christianity, because it lays the foundation of the loftiest, most self-denying morality in selfishnessof that kind, would be all the wiser for going to school to this story, and laying to heart the lesson it contains, of how a desire no nobler than to get rid of a painful disease was the starting-point of a moral transformation, which turned a life into a peaceful, thankful surrender of the cured self to the service and love of the mighty Healer. But while this faith, for the sake of the blessing to be obtained, is genuine, it is undoubtedly imperfect. Quite legitimate and natural at first, it must grow into something nobler when it has once been answered. To think of the disease mainly is inevitable before the cure, but, after the cure, we should think most of the Physician. Self-love may impel to His feet; but Christ-love should be the moving spring of life thereafter. Ere we have received anything from Him, our whole soul may be a longing to have our gnawing emptiness filled; but when we have received His own great gift, our whole soul should be a thank-offering. The great reformation which Christ produces is, that He shifts the centre for us from ourselves to Himself; and whilst He uses our sense of need and our fear of personal evil as the means towards this, He desires that the faith, which has been answered by deliverance, should thenceforward be a faith which worketh by love. As long as we live, either here or yonder, we shall never get beyond the need for the exercise of the primary form of faith, for we shall ever be compassed by many needs, and dependent for all help and blessedness on Him; but as we grow in experience of His tender might, we should learn more and more that His gifts cannot be separated from Himself. We should prize them most for His sake, and love Him more than we do them. We should be drawn to Him as well as driven to Him. Faith may begin with desiring the blessing rather than the Christ. It must end with desiring Him more than all besides, and with losing self utterly in His great love. Its starting-point may rightly be, Save, Lord, or I perish. Its goal must be, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.

Again, here is an instance of real faith weakened and interrupted by much distrust. There was not a full, calm reliance on Christ's power and love. She dare not appeal to His heart, she shrinks from meeting His eye. She will let Him pass, and then put forth a tremulous hand. Cross-currents of emotion agitate her soul. She doubts, yet she believes; she is afraid, yet emboldened by her very despair; too diffident to cast herself on His pity, she is too confident not to resort to His healing virtue.

And so is it ever with our faith. Its ideal perfection would be that it should be unbroken, undashed by any speck of doubt. But the reality is far different. It is no full-orbed completeness, but, at the best, a growing segment of reflected light, with many a rough place in its jagged outline, prophetic of increase; with many a deep pit of blackness on its silver surface; with many a storm-cloud sweeping across its face; conscious of eclipse and subject to change. And yet it is the light which He has set to rule the night of life, and we may rejoice in its crescent beam. We are often tempted to question the reality of faith in ourselves and others, by reason of the unbelief and disbelief which co-exist with it. But why should we do so? May there not be an inner heart and centre of true trust, with a nebulous environment of doubt, through which the nucleus shall gradually send its attracting and consolidating power, and turn it, too, into firm substance? May there not be a germ, infinitesimal, yet with a real life throbbing in its microscopic minuteness, and destined to be a great tree, with all the fowls of the air lodging in its branches? May there not be hid in a heart a principle of action, which is obviously marked out for supremacy, though it has not yet come to sovereign power and manifestation in either the inward or the outward being? Where do we learn that faith must be complete to be genuine? Our own weak hearts say it to us often enough; and our lingering unbelief is only too ready to hiss into our ears the serpent's whisper, You are deceiving yourself; look at your doubts, your coldness, your forgetfulness: you have no faith at all. To all such morbid thoughts, which only sap the strength of the spirit, and come from beneath, not from above, we have a right to oppose the first great lesson of this story--the reality of an imperfect faith. And, turning from the profitless contemplation of the feebleness of our grasp of Christ's robe to look on Him, the fountain of all spiritual energy, let us cleave the more confidently to Him for every discovery of our own weakness, and cry to Him for help against ourselves, that He would not quench the smoking flax; for the old prayer is never offered in vain, when offered, as at first, with tears, Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.

**II. The second stage of this story sets forth a truth involved in what I have already said, but still needing to be dealt with for a moment by itself--namely, that Christ answers the imperfect faith.**

There was no real connection between the touch of His robe and the cure, but the poor ignorant sufferer thought that there was; and, therefore, Christ stoops to her childish thought, and allows her to prescribe the path by which His gift shall reach her. That thin wasted hand stretched itself up beyond the height to which it could ordinarily reach, and, though that highest point fell far short of Him, He lets His blessing down to her level. He does not say, Understand Me, put away thy false notion of healing power residing in My garment's hem, or I heal thee not. But He says, Dost thou think that it is through thy finger on My robe? Then, through thy finger on My robe it shall be. According to thy faith, be it unto thee.

And so it is ever. Christ's mercy, like water in a vase, takes the shape of the vessel that holds it. On the one hand, His grace is infinite, and is given to every one of us according to the measure of the gift of Christ--with no limitation but His own unlimited fulness; on the other hand, the amount which we practically receive from that inexhaustible store is, at each successive moment, determined by the measure and the purity and the intensity of our faith. On His part there is no limit but infinity, on our sides the limit is our capacity, and our capacity is settled by our desires. His word to us ever is, Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it. Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.

A double lesson, therefore, lies in this thought for us all. First, let us labour that our faith may be enlightened, importunate, and firm: for every flaw in it will injuriously affect our possession of the grace of God. Errors in opinion will hinder the blessings that flow from the truths which we misconceive or reject. Languor of desire will diminish the sum and enfeeble the energy of the powers that work in us. Wavering confidence, crossed and broken, like the solar spectrum, by many a dark line of doubt, will make our conscious possession of Christ's gift fitful. We have a deep well to draw from. Let us take care that the vessel with which we draw is in size proportionate to its depth and our need, that the chain to which it hangs is strong, and that no leaks in it let the full supply run out, nor any stains on its inner surface taint and taste the bright treasure.

And the other lesson is this. There can be no faith so feeble that Christ does not respond to it. The most ignorant, self-regarding, timid trust may unite the soul to Jesus Christ. To desire is to have; and whosoever will, may take of the water of life freely. If you only come to Him, though He have passed, He will stop. If you come trusting and yet doubting, He will forgive the doubt and answer the trust. If you come to Him, knowing but that your heart is full of evil which none save He can cure, and putting out a lame hand--or even a tremulous finger-tip--to touch His garment, be sure that anything is possible rather than that He should turn away your prayer, or His mercy from you.

**III. The last part of this miracle teaches us that Christ corrects and confirms an imperfect faith by the very act of answering it.**

Observe how the process of cure and the discipline which followed are, in Christ's loving wisdom, made to fit closely to all the faults and flaws in the suppliant's faith.

She had thought of the healing energy as independent of the Healer's knowledge and will. Therefore His very first word shows her that He is aware of her mute appeal, and conscious of the going forth from Him of the power that cures--Who touched Me?As was said long ago, the multitudes thronged Him, but the woman touched. Amidst all the jostling of the unmannerly crowd that trod with rude feet on His skirts, and elbowed their way to see this new Rabbi, there was one touch unlike all the rest; and, though it was only that of the finger-tip of a poor woman, wasted to skin and bone with twelve yearsweakening disease, He knew it; and His will and love sent forth the virtuewhich healed. May we not fairly apply this lesson to ourselves? Christ is, as most of us, I suppose, believe, Lord of all creatures, administering the affairs of the universe; the steps of His throne and the precincts of His court are thronged with dependants whose eyes wait upon Him, and who are fed from His stores; and yet my poor voice may steal through that chorus-shout of petition and praise, and His ear will detect its lowest note, and will separate the thin stream of my prayer from the great sea of supplication which rolls to His seat, and will answer me. My hand uplifted among the millions of empty and imploring palms that are raised towards the heaven will receive into its clasping fingers the special blessing for my special wants.

Again, she had been selfish in her faith, had not cared for any close personal relation with Him; and so she was taught that He was in all His gifts, and that He was more than all His gifts. He compels her to come to His feet that she may learn His heart, and may carry away a blessing not stolen, but bestowed

With open love, not secret cure,

The Lord of hearts would bless.

And thus is laid the foundation for a personal bond between her and Christ, which shall be for the joy of her life, and shall make of that life a thankful sacrifice to Him, the Healer.

Thus it is with us all. We may go to Him, at first, with no thought but for ourselves. But we have not to carry away His gift hidden in our hands. We learn that it is a love-token from Him. And so we find in His answer to faith the true and only cure for all self-regard; and moved by the mercies of Christ, are led to do what else were impossible--to yield ourselves as living sacrificesto Him.

Again, she had shrunk from publicity. Her womanly diffidence, her enfeebled health, the shame of her disease, all made her wish to hide herself and her want from His eye, and to hide herself and her treasure from men. She would fain steal away unnoticed, as she hoped she had come. But she is dragged out before all the thronging multitude, and has to tell the whole. The answer to her faith makes her bold. In a moment she is changed from timidity to courage; a tremulous invalid ready to creep into any corner to escape notice, she stretched out her hand--the instant after, she knelt at His feet in the spirit of a confessor. This is Christ's most merciful fashion of curing our cowardice--not by rebukes, but by giving us, faint-hearted though we be, the gift which out of weakness makes us strong. He would have us testify to Him before men, and that for our own sakes, since faith unacknowledged, like a plant in the dark, is apt to become pale and sickly, and bear no bright blossoms nor sweet fruit. But, ere He bids us own His name, He pours into our hearts, in answer to our secret appeal, the health of His own life, and the blissful consciousness of that great gift which makes the tongue of the dumb sing. Faith at first may be very timid, but faith will grow bold to witness of Him and not be ashamed, in the exact proportion in which it is genuine, and receives from Christ of His fulness.

And then--with a final word to set forth still more clearly that she had received the blessing from His love, not from His magical power, and through her confidence, not through her touch--Daughter! thy faith--not thy finger--hath made thee whole; go in peace and be whole--Jesus confirms by His own authoritative voice the furtive blessing, and sends her away, perhaps to see Him no more, but to live in tranquil security, and in her humble home to guard the gift which He had bestowed on her imperfect faith, and to perfect--we may hope--the faith which He had enlightened and strengthened by the over-abundance of His gift.

Dear friends, this poor woman represents us all. Like her, we are sick of a sore sickness, we have spent our substance in trying physicians of no value, and are nothing the better, but rather the worse. Oh! is it not strange that you should need to be urged to go to the Healer to whom she went? Do not be afraid, my brother, of telling Him all your pain and pining--He knows it already. Do not be afraid that your hand may not reach Him for the crowd, or that your voice may fail to fall on His ear. Do not be afraid of your ignorance, do not be afraid of your wavering confidence and many doubts. All these cannot separate you from Him who Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses. Fear but one thing--that He pass on to carry life and health to other souls, ere you resolve to press to His feet. Fear but one thing--that whilst you delay, the hem of the garment may be swept beyond the reach of your slow hand. Imperfect faith may bring salvation to a soul: hesitation may ruin and wreck a life.