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

**MARK-028**. **CHRIST THWARTED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And He could there do no mighty work, save that He laid His hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And He marvelled because of their unbelief."*

*Mark 6:5,6*

It is possible to live too near a man to see him. Familiarity with the small details blinds most people to the essential greatness of any life. So these fellow-villagers of Jesus in Nazareth knew Him too well to know Him rightly as they talked Him over; they recognised His wisdom and His mighty works; but all the impression that these would have made was neutralised by their acquaintance with His former life, and they said, Why, we have known Him ever since He was a boy. We used to take our ploughs and yokes to Him to mend in the carpenter's shop. His brothers and sisters are here with us. Where did He get His wisdom? So they said; and so it has been ever since. A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country.

Surrounded thus by unsympathetic carpers, Jesus Christ did not exercise His full miraculous power. Other Evangelists tell us of these limitations, but Mark is alone in the strength of his expression. The others say did no mighty works; Mark says could do no mighty works. Startling as the expression is, it is not to be weakened down because it is startling, and if it does not fit in with your conceptions of Christ's nature, so much the worse for the conceptions. Matthew states the reason for this limitation more directly than Mark does, for he says, He did no mighty works because of their unbelief. But Mark suggests the reason clearly enough in his next clause, when he says: He marvelled because of their unbelief. There is another limitation of Christ's nature, He wondered as at an astonishing and unexpected thing, We read that He marvelledtwice: once at great faith, once at great unbelief. The centurion's faith was marvellous; the Nazarenesunbelief was as marvellous. The wild grapesbore clusters more precious than the tended vinesin the vineyard. Faith and unbelief do not depend upon opportunity, but upon the bent of the will and the sense of need.

But I have chosen these words now because they put in its strongest shape a truth of large importance, and of manifold applications--viz., that man's unbelief hampers and hinders Christ's power. Now let me apply that principle in two or three directions.

**I. Let us look at this principle in connection with the case before us in the text.**

You will find that, as a rule and in the general, our Lord's miracles require faith, either on the part of the persons helped, or on the part of those who interceded for them. But whilst that is the rule there are distinct exceptions, as for instance, in the case of the feeding of the thousands, and in the case of the raising of the widow's son of Nain, as well as in other examples. And here we find that, though the prevalent unbelief hindered the flow of our Lord's miraculous power, it did not so hinder it as to stop some little trickle of the stream. He laid His hands on a few sick folk, and healed them. The brook was shrunken as compared with the abundance of the flood recorded in the previous chapter.

Now, why was that? There is no such natural connection between faith and the working of a miracle as that the latter is only possible in conjunction with the former. And the exceptions show us that Jesus Christ was not so limited as that men's unbelief could wholly prevent the flow of His love and His power. But still there was a restriction. And what sort of a could notwas it that thus hampered Him in His work? We know far too little about the conditions of miracle-working to entitle us to dogmatise on such a matter, but I suppose that we may venture to say this, that the working of the miracles was impossiblein the absence of faith and the presence of its opposite, regard being had to the purposes of the miracle and of Christ's whole work. It was not congruous, it was not morally possible, that He should force His benefits upon unwilling recipients.

Now, I need not do more than just in a sentence call attention to the bearing of this fact upon the true notion of the purpose of Christ's miraculous works. A superficial, and, as I think, very vulgar, estimate, says that Christ's miracles were chiefly designed to produce faith in Him and in His mission. If that had been their purpose, the very place for the most abundant exhibition of them would have been the place where unbelief was most pronounced. The atmosphere of non-receptiveness and non-sympathy would have been the very one that ought to have evoked them most. Where the darkness was the deepest, there should the torch have flared. Where the stupor was most complete, there should the rousing shock have been administered. But the very opposite is the case. Where faith is present already, the miracle comes. Where faith is absent, miracles fail. Therefore, though a subsidiary purpose of our Lord's miracles was, no doubt, to evoke faith in His mission, their chief purpose is not to be found in that direction. It was a condescension to men's weakness and obstinacy when He said, If ye believe not Me, believe the works. But the works were signs, symbols, manifestations on the lower material platform of what lie would be and do for men in the higher, and they were the outcome of His own loving heart and ever-flowing compassion, and only secondarily were they taken, and have they ever been taken, when Christian faith has been robust and intelligent, as being evidences of His Messiahship and Divinity.

But there is another consideration that I would like to suggest in reference to this limitation of our Lord's power, by reason of the prevalence of an atmosphere of unbelief, and that is that it is a pathetic proof of His manhood's being influenced by all the emotions and circumstances that influence us. We all know how hearts expand in the warm atmosphere of affection and sympathy, and shut themselves up like tender flowerets when the cold east wind blows. And just as a great orator subtly feels the sympathy of his audience, and is buoyed up by it to higher flights, while in the presence of cold and indifferent and critical hearers his tongue stammers, and he falls beneath himself, so we may reverently say Jesus Christ could not put forth His mightiest and most abundant miraculous powers when the cold wind of unbelieving criticism blew in His face.

If that is true, what a glimpse it gives us of the conditions of His earthly life, and how wonderful it makes that love which, though it was hampered, was never stifled by the presence of scorn and malice and of hatred. He is our Brother, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; and even when the divinity within was in possession of the power of working the miracle, the humanity in which it dwelt felt the presence of the cold frost and closed its petals. He could do no mighty works, and it was because of their unbelief.

**II. But now, secondly, let us apply this principle in regard to Christ's working on ourselves.**

I have said that there was no such natural connection between faith and miracle as that miracle was absolutely impossible in the absence of faith. But when we lift the thought into the higher region of our religious and spiritual life, we do come across an absolute impossibility. There, in regard to all that appertains to the inward life of a soul, Christ can do no mighty works, in the absence of our faith. By faith, I mean, of course, not the mere intellectual reception of the Christian narratives or of the Christian doctrines as true, but I mean what the Bible means by it always, a process subsequent to that intellectual reception--viz., the motion of the will and of the heart towards Christ. Faith is belief, but belief is not faith. Faith is belief plus trust. And it is that which is the condition of all Christ's gifts being received by any of us.

Now, a great many people seem to think that what Jesus Christ brings to the world, and offers to each of us, is simply the escape from the penal consequences of our past transgressions. If you conceive salvation to be nothing else than shutting the doors of an outward hell, and opening the doors of an outward Heaven, I can quite understand why you should boggle at the thought that faith is a condition of these. For if salvation is such a material, external, and forensic matter as that, then I do not see why God should not have given it to everybody, without any conditions at all. But if you will understand rightly what Christ's gifts are, you will see that they cannot be bestowed upon men irrespective of the condition of their wills, desires, and hearts.

For what is salvation? What are the blessings that Jesus Christ bestows? A new life, a new love, new desires, a new direction of the whole being, a new spirit within us. These are the gifts; and how can these be given to a man if he has not trust in the Giver? Salvation is at bottom that a man's will shall be harmonised with the will of God. But if a man has not faith, his will is discordant with the will of God, and how can it be harmonised and discordant at the same time? What are the powers by which Christ works upon men's hearts? His truth, His love, His Spirit. How can a truth operate if it is not believed? How can love bless and cherish if it is not trusted? How can the Spirit hallow and cleanse if it is not yielded to? The condition is inherent in the nature of God the Giver, of man the receiver, and of the gifts bestowed.

And so we understand the metaphors that put that inevitable connection in various forms. Faith is a door. How can you enter if the door be fast closed? He knocks; if any man opens He comes in. If a man does not open,

He can but listen at the gate,

And hear the household jar within.

Faith is the connection between the fountain and the reservoir. If there be no such connection, how can the reservoir be filled? Faith is the hand with stretched-out empty palms, and widespread fingers for the reception of the gifts. How can the gifts be put into it if it hangs listless by the side, or in obstinately closed and pushed behind the back? He can do no mighty workson an unbelieving soul.

Now, brethren, let me insist, in one sentence, on this solemn truth; God would save every man if He could, faith or no faith. But the condition which brings faith into connection with salvation as its necessary prerequisite is no arbitrary condition. The love of God cannot alter it. In the nature of things it must be so. He that believeth shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be condemned. That is no result of an artificial scheme, but of the necessities of the case.

Again, let me remind you that the measure of our faith is the measure of our possession of these gifts. Our Lord more than once put the whole doctrine of this matter, in regard, however, to the lower plane of miracle, when He said, According to your faith be it unto you, Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it. We have an inheritance like that of men who get a piece of land in some mining district: so much as we peg out and claim is ours, and no more.

Let me narrate a parable of my own making. There was once a king who told all his people that on a given day the fountain in the market-place in the centre of the city would flow with wine and other precious liquors, and that every man was free to bring his vessel and carry away as much as he would. The man that brought a tiny wineglass got a glassful; the man that brought a gallon pitcher got that full. The measure of your desires is the measure of your possessions of Christ's power. Our faith determines the amount of His cleansing, healing, vivifying energy which will reside in us. The width of the bore of the water-pipe that is laid down settles the amount of water that will come into your cistern. The water may be high outside the lock. If the lock-gate be kept fast closed, the height of the water outside produces no raising of the low level of that within, If you open a chink of the gate a trickle will pass through, and if you fling the gates wide the levels will be the same on both sides. The only limit of our possession of God is our faith and desire. The true limit is His own boundlessness. It is possible that a man may be filled with all the fulness of God; but the real working limit for each of us is our own faith. So, brethren, endless progress is possible for us, on condition of continual trust.

**III. Lastly, let us apply this principle in regard to Christ's working through His people.**

Jesus Christ cannot work mightily through a feebly believing Church. And here is the reason why Christianity has taken so long to do so little in this world of ours; and why nineteen centuries after the Cross and Pentecost there remaineth yet so much land to be possessed. Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in your own selves. We hinder Christ from doing His work through us by reason of our own unbelief. The men that have done most for the Lord Jesus, and for their fellows in this world, have been of all sorts, of all conditions, of all grades of intellectual ability and acquirement; some of them scholars, some of them tinkers, some of them philosophers, some of them next door to fools. They have belonged to different communions and have held different ecclesiastical and theological dogmas, and sometimes, alas! they have not been able to discern each other's Christlike lineaments. But there is one thing in which they have all been alike, and that is that they have been men of faith, intense, operative, perpetual. And that is why they have succeeded. If we were what we might be, full of faith. we should, as the Acts of the Apostles teaches us, by its collocation in the description of one of its characters, be full of the Holy Spirit and of power.

Brethren, you hear a great deal to-day about new ways of Christian working, about the necessity of adapting the forms of setting forth Christ's truth to the spirit of the age, and new ideas. Adopt new methods if you like; methods are not sacred. Fashion new forms of presenting Christian truths if you please; our forms are only forms. But you may alter your methods and you may modify your dogmas as you like, and you will do nothing to move the world unless the Church is again baptized with the Divine Spirit, which will only be the case if the Church again puts forth a far mightier faith than it exercises to-day. If only we will trust Jesus Christ absolutely, and live near Him by our faith, His power will flow into us, and of us, too, it will be said, through faith they wrought righteousness ... subdued kingdoms ... waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. But if the low level of average Christian faith in all the churches is not elevated, then the attempts to conquer the world by half-believing Christians will meet with the old fate, and the man in whom the evil spirit was will leap upon them and overcome them, and say, Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?Why could we not cast him out?And He answered and said unto them, Because of your unbelief.

Brethren, we may starve in the midst of plenty, if we lock our lips. We can be like some obstinate black rock, washed over for ever by the Atlantic surges, and yet so close-grained that only the surface is moistened, and, an inch within, it is dry. Neither life, nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, is able to separate you from the love and power of God which are in Christ Jesus our Lord, But you can separate yourselves, and you do separate yourselves, by your unbelief. The all-sufficiency of Christ's redemption, and the yearning of His love to bless each of us individually, will be nothing to us if we lift up between Him and us the black barrier of unbelief, and so dam back the stream that was meant to give life to all the world and life to us. Christ infinitely desires to bless us, but He cannot unless we trust Him. I beseech you, do not let this be the epitaph on your tombstone:--Christ could there do no mighty work because of his unbelief.