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

**MARK-050**. **CHRIST ON THE ROAD TO THE CROSS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And they were in the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them: and they were amazed; and as they followed they were afraid."*

*Mark 10:32*

We learn from John's Gospel that the resurrection of Lazarus precipitated the determination of the Jewish authorities to put Christ to death; and that immediately thereafter there was held the council at which, by the advice of Caiaphas, the formal decision was come to. Thereupon our Lord withdrew Himself into the wilderness which stretches south and east of Jerusalem; and remained there for an unknown period, preparing Himself for the Cross. Then, full of calm resolve, He came forth to die. This is the crisis in our Lord's history to which my text refers. The graphic narrative of this Evangelist sets before us the little company on the steep rocky mountain road that leads up from Jericho to Jerusalem; our Lord, far in advance of His followers, with a fixed purpose stamped upon His face, and something of haste in His stride, and that in His whole demeanour which shed a strange astonishment and awe over the group of silent and uncomprehending disciples.

That picture has not attracted the attention that it deserves. I think if we ponder it with sympathetic imagination helping us, we may get from it some very great lessons and glimpses of our Lord's inmost heart in the prospect of His Cross. And I desire simply to set forth two or three of the aspects of Christ's character which these words seem to me to suggest.

**I. We have here, then, first, what, for want of a better name, I would call the heroic Christ.**

I use the word to express simply strength of will brought to bear in the resistance to antagonism; and although that is a side of the Lord's character which is not often made prominent, it is there, and ought to have its due importance.

We speak of Him, and delight to think of Him, as the embodiment of all loving, gracious, gentle virtues, but Jesus Christ as the ideal man unites in Himself what men are in the habit, somewhat superciliously, of calling the masculine virtues, as well as those which they somewhat contemptuously designate the feminine. I doubt very much whether that is a correct distinction. I think that the heroism of endurance, at all events, is far more an attribute of a woman than of a man. But be that as it may, we are to look to Jesus Christ as presenting before us the very type of all which men call heroism in the sense that I have explained, of an iron will, incapable of deflection by any antagonism, and which coerces the whole nature to obedience to its behests.

There is nothing to be done in life without such a will. To be weak is to be miserable, doing or suffering. And our Master has set us the example of this; that unless there run through a man's life, like the iron framework on the top of the spire of Antwerp Cathedral, on which graceful fancies are strung in stone, the rigid bar of an iron purpose that nothing can bend, the life will be nought and the man will be a failure. Christ is the pattern of heroic endurance, and reads to us the lesson to resist and persist, whatever stands between us and our goal.

So here, the Cross before Him flung out no repelling influence towards Him, but rather drew Him to itself. There is no reason that I can find for believing the modern theory of the rationalistsschool that our Lord, in the course of His mission, altered His plan, or gradually had dawning upon His mind the conviction that to carry out His purposes He must be a martyr. That seems to me to be an entire misreading of the Gospel narrative which sets before us much rather this, that from the beginning of our Lord's public career there stood unmistakably before Him the Cross as the goal. He entertained no illusions as to His reception. He did not come to do certain work, and, finding that He could not do it, accepted the martyr's death; but He came for the twofold purpose of serving by His life, and of redeeming by His death. He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for the many. And this purpose stood clear before Him, drawing Him to itself all through His career.

But, further, Christ's character teaches us what is the highest form of such strength and tenacity, viz., gentleness. There is no need to be brusque, obstinate, angular, self-absorbed, harsh, because we are fixed and determined in our course. These things are the caricatures and the diminutions, not the true forms nor the increase, of strength. The most tenacious steel is the most flexible, and he that has the most fixed and definite resolve may be the man that has his heart most open to all human sympathies, and is strong with the almightiness of gentleness, and not with the less close-knit strength of roughness and of hardness. Christ, because He is perfect love, is perfect power, and His will is fixed because it is love that fixes it. So let us take the lesson that the highest type of strength is strength in meekness, and that the Master who, I was going to say, kept His strength of will under, but I more correctly say, manifested His strength of will through, His gentleness, is the pattern for us.

**II. Then again, we see here not only the heroic, but what I may call the self-sacrificing Christ.**

We have not only to consider the fixed will which this incident reveals, but to remember the purpose on which it was fixed, and that He was hastening to His Cross. The very fact of our Lord's going back to Jerusalem, with that decree of the Sanhedrim still in force, was tantamount to His surrender of Himself to death. It was as if, in the old days, some excommunicated man with the decree of the Inquisition pronounced against him had gone into Rome and planted himself in the front of the piazza before the buildings of the Holy Office, and lifted up his testimony there. So Christ, knowing that this council has been held, that this decree stands, goes back, investing of set purpose His return with all the publicity that He can bring to bear upon it. For this once He seems to determine that He will cause His voice to be heard in the streets; He makes as much of a demonstration as the circumstances will allow, and so acts in a manner opposite to all the rest of His life. Why? Because He had determined to bring the controversy to an end. Why? Was He flinging away His life in mere despair? Was He sinfully neglecting precautions? Was the same fanaticism of martyrdom which has often told upon men, acting upon Him? Were these His reasons? No, but He recognised that now that hourof which He spoke so much had come, and of His own loving will offered Himself as our Sacrifice.

It is all-important to keep in view that Christ's death was His own voluntary act. Whatever external forces were brought to bear in the accomplishment of it, He died because He chose to die. The cordswhich bound this sacrifice to the horns of the altar were cords woven by Himself.

So I point to the incident of my text, as linking in along with the whole series of incidents marking the last days of our Lord's life, in order to stamp upon His death unmistakably this signature, that it was His own act. Therefore the publicity that was given to His entry; therefore His appearance in the Temple; therefore the increased sharpness and unmistakableness of His denunciations of the ruling classes, the Pharisees and the scribes. Therefore the whole history of the Passion, all culminating in leaving this one conviction, that He had power to lay down His life, that neither Caiaphas nor Annas, nor Judas, nor the band, nor priests, nor the Council, nor Pilate, nor Herod, nor soldiers, nor nails, nor cross, nor all together, killed Jesus, but that Jesus died because He would. The self-sacrifice of the Lord was not the flinging away of the life that He ought to have preserved, nor carelessness, nor the fanaticism of a martyr, nor the enthusiasm of a hero and a champion, but it was the voluntary death of Him who of His own will became in His death the oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Love to us, and obedience to the Father whose will He made His own, were the cords that bound Christ to the Cross on which He died. His sacrifice was voluntary; witness this fact that when He saw the Cross at hand He strode before His followers to reach that, the goal of His mission.

**III. I venture to regard the incident as giving us a little glimpse of what I may call the shrinking Christ.**

Do we not see here a trace of something that we all know? May not part of the reason for Christ's haste have been that desire which we all have, when some inevitable grief or pain lies before us, to get it over soon, and to abbreviate the moments that lie between us and it? Was there not something of that feeling in our Lord's sensitive nature when He said, for instance, I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened until it be accomplished? I am come to send fire upon the earth, and O! how I wish that it were already kindled!Was there not something of the same feeling, which we cannot call impatient, but which we may call shrinking from the Cross, and therefore seeking to draw the Cross nearer, and have done with it, in the words which He addressed to the betrayer, That thou doest, do quickly, as if He were making a last appeal to the man's humanity, and in effect saying to him, If you have a heart at all, shorten these painful hours, and let us have it over? And may we not see, in that swift advance in front of the lagging disciples, some trace of the same feeling which we recognise to be so truly human? Christ did shrink from His Cross. Let us never forget that He recoiled from it, with the simple, instinctive, human shrinking from pain and death which is a matter of the physical nervous system, and has nothing to do with the will at all. If there had been no shrinking from it there had been no fixed will. If there had been no natural instinctive drawing back of the physical nature and its connections from the prospect of pain and death, there had been none of the heroism of which I am speaking. Though it does not become us to dogmatise about matters of which we know so little, I think we may fairly say that that shrinking never rose up into the regions of Christ's will; never became a desire; never became a purpose. Howsoever the ship might be tossed by the waves, the will always kept its level equilibrium. Howsoever the physical nature might incline to this side or to that, the will always kept parallel with the great underlying divine will, the Father's purpose which He had come to effect. There was shrinking which was instinctive and human, but it never disturbed the fixed purpose to die. It had so much power over Him as to make Him march a little faster to the Cross, but it never made Him turn from it. And so He stands before us as the Conqueror in a real conflict, as having yielded Himself up by a real surrender, as having overcome a real difficulty, for the joy that was set before Him, having endured the Cross, despising the shame.

**IV. So, lastly, I would see here the lonely Christ.**

In front of His followers, absorbed in the thought of what was drawing so near, gathering together His powers in order to be ready for the struggle, with His heart full of the love and the pity which impelled Him, He is surrounded as with a cloud which shuts Him out from their sight, as afterwards the cloud of glory received Him.

What a gulf there was between them and Him, between their thoughts and His, as He passed up that rocky way! What were they thinking about? By the way they had disputed amongst themselves which of them should be the greatest. So far did they sympathise with the Master! So far did they understand Him! Talk about men with unappreciated aims, heroes that have lived through a lifetime of misunderstanding and never have had any one to sympathise with them! There never was such a lonely man in the world as Jesus Christ. Never was there one that carried so deep In His heart so great a purpose and so great a love, which none cared a rush about. And those that were nearest Him, and loved Him best, loved Him so blunderingly and so blindly that their love must often have been quite as much of a pain as of a joy.

In His Passion that solitude reached the point of agony. How touching in its unconscious pathos is His pleading request, Tarry ye here, and watch with Me!How touching in their revelation of a subsidiary but yet very real addition to His pains are His words, All ye shall be offended because of Me this night. Oh, dear brethren! every human soul has to go down into the darkness alone, however close may be the clasping love which accompanies us to the portal; but the loneliness of death was realised by Jesus Christ in a very unique and solemn manner. For round Him there gathered the clouds of a mysterious agony, only faintly typified by the darkness of eclipse which hid the material sun in the universe, what time He died.

And all this solitude, the solitude of unappreciated aims, and unshared purposes, and misunderstood sorrow during life, and the solitude of death with its elements ineffable of atonement;--all this solitude was borne that no human soul, living or dying, might ever be lonely any more. Lo! I, whom you all left alone, am with you, who left Me alone, even till the end of the world.

So, dear brethren, ponder that picture that I have been trying very feebly to set before you, of the heroic, self-sacrificing, shrinking, solitary Saviour. Take Him as your Saviour, your Sacrifice, your Pattern; and hear Him saying, If any man serve Me, let him follow Me, and where I am there shall also My servant be.

An old ecclesiastical legend conies into my mind at the moment, which tells how an emperor won the true Cross in battle from a pagan king, and brought it back, with great pomp, to Jerusalem; but found the gate walled up, and an angel standing before it, who said, Thou bringest back the Cross with pomp and splendour. He that died upon it had shame for His companion; and carried it on His back, barefooted, to Calvary. Then, says the chronicler, the emperor dismounted from his steed, cast off his robes, lifted the sacred Rood on his shoulders, and with bare feet advanced to the gate, which opened of itself, and he entered in.

We have to go up the steep rocky road that leads from the plain where the Dead Sea is, to Jerusalem. Let us follow the Master, as He strides before us, the Forerunner and the Captain of our salvation.