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

**MARK-055**. **A ROYAL PROGRESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"* *... Go your way into the village over against you: and as soon as ye be entered into it, ye shall find a colt tied, whereon never man sat; loose him, and bring him."*

*Mark 11:2*

Two considerations help us to appreciate this remarkable incident of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The first of these is its date. It apparently occurred on the Sunday of the Passion Week. The Friday saw the crosses on Calvary. The night before, Jesus had sat at the modest feast that was prepared in Bethany, where Lazarus was one of the guests, Martha was the busy servant, and Mary poured out the lavish treasures of her love upon His feet. The resurrection of Lazarus had created great popular excitement; and that excitement is the second consideration which throws light upon this incident. The people had rallied round Christ, and, consequently, the hatred of the official and ecclesiastical class had been raised to boiling-point. It was at that time that our Lord deliberately presented Himself before the nation as the Messiah, and stirred up still more this popular enthusiasm. Now, if we keep these two things in view, I think we shall be at the right point from which to consider the whole incident. To it, and not merely to the words which I have chosen as our starting-point, I wish to draw attention now. I am mistaken if there are not in it very important and practical lessons for ourselves.

**I. First, note that deliberate assumption by Christ of royal authority.**

I shall have a good deal to say presently about the main fact which bears upon that, but in the meantime I would note, in passing, a subsidiary illustration of it, in the errand on which He sent these messengers to the little village over againstthem; and in the words which He put into their mouths. They were to go, and, without a word, to loose and bring away the colt fastened at a door, where it was evidently waiting the convenience of its owner to mount it. If, as was natural, any objection or question was raised, they were to answer exactly as servants of a king would do, if he sent them to make requisition on the property of his subjects, The Lord hath need of him.

I do not dwell on our Lord's supernatural knowledge as coming out here; nor on the fact that the owner of the colt was probably a partial disciple, perhaps a secret one--ready to recognise the claim that was made. But I ask you to notice here the assertion, in act and word, of absolute authority, to which all private convenience and rights of possession are to give way unconditionally. The Sovereign's need is a sovereign reason. What He requires He has a right to take. Well for us, brethren, if we yield as glad, as swift, and as unquestioning obedience to His claims upon us, and upon our possessions, as that poor peasant of Bethphage gave in the incident before us! But there is not only the assertion, here, of absolute authority, but note how, side by side with this royal style, there goes the acknowledgment of poverty. Here is a pauper King, who having nothing yet possesses all things. The Lord--that is a great title--hath need of him--that is a strange verb to go with such a nominative. But this little sentence, in its two halves of authority and of dependence, puts into four words the whole blessed paradox of the life of Jesus Christ upon earth. Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor; and being Lord and Owner of all things, yet owed His daily bread to ministering women, borrowed a boat to preach from, a house wherein to lay His head, a shroud and a winding-sheet to enfold His corpse, a grave in which to lie, and from which to rise, the Lord of the dead and of the living.

Not only so, but there is another thought suggested by these words. The accurate, or, at least, the probable reading, of one part of the third verse is given in the Revised Version, Say ye that the Lord hath need of him, and straightway he will send him back hither. That is to say, these last words are not Christ's assurance to His two messengers that their embassy would succeed, but part of the message which He sends by them to the owner of the colt, telling him that it was only a loan which was to be returned. Jesus Christ is debtor to no man. Anything given to Him comes back again. Possessions yielded to that Lord are recompensed a hundredfold in this life, if in nothing else in that there is a far greater sweetness in that which still remains. What I gave I have, said the wise old epitaph. It is always true. Do you not think that the owner of the patient beast, on which Christ placidly paced into Jerusalem on His peaceful triumph, would be proud all his days of the use to which his animal had been put, and would count it as a treasure for the rest of its life? If you and I will yield our gifts to Him, and lay them upon His altar, be sure of this, that the altar will ennoble and will sanctify all that is laid upon it. All that we have rendered to Him gains fragrance from His touch, and comes back to us tenfold more precious because He has condescended to use it.

So, brethren, He still moves amongst us, asking for our surrender of ourselves and of our possessions to Him, and pledging Himself that we shall lose nothing by what we give to Him, but shall be infinitely gainers by our surrender. He still needs us. Ah! if He is ever to march in triumph through the world, and be hailed by the hosannas of all the tribes of the earth, it is requisite for that triumph that His children should surrender first themselves, and then all that they are, and all that they have, to Him. To us there comes the message, The Lord hath need of you. Let us see that we answer as becomes us.

But then, more important is the other instance here of this assertion of royal authority. I have already said that we shall not rightly understand it unless we take into full account the state of popular feeling at the time. We find in John's Gospel great stress laid on the movement of curiosity and half-belief which followed on the resurrection of Lazarus. He tells us that crowds came out from Jerusalem the night before to gaze upon the Lifebringer and the quickened man. He also tells us that another enthusiastic crowd flocked out of Jerusalem before Jesus sent for the colt to the neighbouring village. We are to keep in mind, therefore, that what He did here was done in the midst of a great outburst of popular enthusiasm. We are to keep in mind, too, the season of Passover, when religion and patriotism, which were so closely intertwined in the life of the Jews, were in full vigorous exercise. It was always a time of anxiety to the Roman authorities, lest this fiery people should break out into insurrection. Jerusalem at the Passover was like a great magazine of combustibles, and into it Jesus flung a lighted brand amongst the inflammable substances that were gathered there. We have to remember, too, that all His life long He had gone exactly on the opposite tack. Remember how He betook Himself to the mountain solitudes when they wanted to make Him a king. Remember how He was always damping down Messianic enthusiasm. But here, all at once, He reverses His whole conduct, and deliberately sets Himself to make the most public and the most exciting possible demonstration that He was King of Israel.

For what was it that He did? Our Evangelist here does not quote the prophecy from Zechariah, but two other Evangelists do. Our Lord then deliberately dressed Himself by the mirror of prophecy, and assumed the very characteristics which the prophet had given long ago as the mark of the coming King of Zion. If He had wanted to excite a popular commotion, that is what He would have done.

Why did He act thus? He was under no illusion as to what would follow. For the night before He had said: She hath come beforehand to anoint My body for the burial. He knew what was close before Him in the future. And, because He knew that the end was at hand, He felt that, once at least, it was needful that He should present Himself solemnly, publicly, I may almost say ostentatiously, before the gathered nation, as being of a truth the Fulfiller and the fulfilment of all the prophecies and the hopes built upon them that had burned in Israel, with a smoky flame indeed, but for so many ages. He also wanted to bring the rulers to a point. I dare not say that He precipitated His death, or provoked a conflict, but I do say that deliberately, and with a clear understanding of what He was doing, He took a step which forced them to show their hand. For after such a public avowal of who He was, and such public hosannas surging round His meek feet as He rode into the city, there were but two courses open for the official class: either to acknowledge Him, or to murder Him. Therefore He reversed His usual action, and deliberately posed, by His own act, as claiming to be the Messiah long prophesied and long expected.

Now, what do you think of the man that did that? If He did it, then either He is what the rulers called Him, a deceiver, swollen with inordinate vanity and unfit to be a teacher, or else we must fall at His feet and say Rabbi! Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel. I venture to believe that to extol Him and to deny the validity of His claims is in flagrant contradiction to the facts of His life, and is an unreasonable and untenable position.

**II. Notice the revelation of a new kind of King and Kingdom.**

Our Evangelist, from whom my text is taken, has nothing to say about Zechariah's prophecy which our Lord set Himself to fulfil. He only dwells on the pathetic poverty of the pomp of the procession. But other Evangelists bring into view the deeper meaning of the incident. The centre-point of the prophecy, and of Christ's intentional fulfilment of it, lies in the symbol of the meek and patient animal which He bestrode. The ass was, indeed, used sometimes in old days by rulers and judges in Israel, but the symbol was chosen by the prophet simply to bring out the peacefulness and the gentleness inherent in the Kingdom, and the King who thus advanced into His city. If you want to understand the meaning of the prophet's emblem, you have only to remember the sculptured slabs of Assyria and Babylon, or the paintings on the walls of Egyptian temples and tombs, where Sennacherib or Rameses ride hurtling in triumph in their chariots, over the bodies of prostrate foes; and then to set by the side of these, Rejoice! O daughter of Zion; thy King cometh unto thee riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass. If we want to understand the significance of this sweet emblem, we need only, further, remember the psalm that, with poetic fervour, invokes the King: Gird Thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Most Mighty, and in Thy majesty ride prosperously ... and Thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things. Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the King's enemies; the people fall under Thee. That is all that that ancient singer could conceive of the triumphant King of the world, the Messiah; a conqueror, enthroned in His chariot, and the twanging bowstring, drawn by His strong hand, impelling the arrow that lodged in the heart of His foes. And here is the fulfilment. Go ye into the village over against you, and ye shall find a colt tied ... And they set Him thereon. Christ's kingdom, like its King, has no power but gentleness and the omnipotence of patient love.

If Christiannations, as they are called, and Churches had kept the significance of that emblem in mind, do you think that their hosannas would have gone up so often for conquerors on the battlefields; or that Christian communities would have been in complicity with war and the glorifying thereof, as they have been? And, if Christian churches had remembered and laid to heart the meaning of this triumphal entry, and its demonstration of where the power of the Master lay, would they have struck up such alliances with worldly powers and forms of force as, alas! have weakened and corrupted the Church for hundreds of years? Surely, surely, there is no more manifest condemnation of war and the warlike spirit, and of the spirit which finds the strength of Christ's Church in anything material and violent, than is that solitary instance of His assumption of royal state when thus He entered into His city. I need not say a word, brethren, about the nature of Christ's kingdom as embodied in His subjects, as represented in that shouting multitude that marched around Him. How Caesar in his golden house in Rome would have sneered and smiled at the Jewish peasant, on the colt, and surrounded by poor men, who had no banners but the leafy branches from the trees, and no pomp to strew in his way but their own worn garments! And yet these were stronger in their devotion, in their enthusiastic conviction that He was the King of Israel and of the whole earth, than Caesar, with all his treasures and with all his legions and their sharp swords. Christ accepts poor homage because He looks for hearts; and whatever the heart renders is sweet to Him. He passes on through the world, hailed by the acclamations of grateful hearts, needing no bodyguard but those that love Him; and they need to bear no weapons in their hands, but their mission is to proclaim with glad hearts hosannas to the King that cometh in the name of the Lord.

There is one more point that I may note. Another of the Evangelists tells us that it was when the humble cortège swept round the shoulder of Olivet, and caught sight of the city gleaming in the sunshine, across the Kedron valley, that they broke into the most rapturous of their hosannas, as if they would call to the city that came in view to rejoice and welcome its King. And what was the King doing when that sight burst upon Him, and while the acclamations eddied round Him? His thoughts were far away. His eyes with divine prescience looked on to the impending end, and then they dimmed, and filled with tears; and He wept over the city.

That is our King; a pauper King, a meek and patient King, a King that delights in the reverent love of hearts, a King whose armies have no swords, a King whose eyes fill with tears as He thinks of men's woes and cries. Blessed be such a King!

**III. Lastly, we have the Royal visitation of the Temple.**

Our Evangelist has no word to speak about the march of the procession down into the valley, and up on the other side, and through the gate, and into the narrow streets of the city that was movedas they passed through it. His language sounds as if he considered that our Lord's object in entering Jerusalem at all was principally to enter the Temple. He looked round on all thingsthat were there. Can we fancy the keen observance, the recognition of the hidden bad and good, the blazing indignation, and yet dewy pity, in those eyes? His visitation of the Temple was its inspection by its Lord. And it was an inspection in order to cleanse. To-day He looked; to-morrow He wielded the whip of small cords. His chastisement is never precipitate. Perfect knowledge wields His scourge, and pronounces condemnation.

Brethren, Jesus Christ comes to us as a congregation, to the church to which we belong, and to us individually, with the same inspection. He whose eyes are a flame of fire, says to His churches to-day, I know thy works. What would He think if He came to us and tested us?

In the incident of my text He was fulfilling another ancient prophecy, which says, The Lord shall suddenly come to His Temple, and ... sit as a refiner of silver ... like a refiner's fire and as fuller's soap ... and He shall purify the sons of Levi.... Then shall the offering of Jerusalem be pleasant, as in the days of old.

We need nothing more, we should desire nothing more earnestly, than that He would come to us: Search me, O Christ, and know me. And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Jesus Christ is the King of England as truly as of Zion; and He is your King and mine. He comes to each of us, patient, meek, loving; ready to bless and to cleanse. Dear brother, do you open your heart to Him? Do you acknowledge Him as your King? Do you count it your highest honour if He will use you and your possessions, and condescend to say that He has need of such poor creatures as we are? Do you cast your garments in the way, and say: Ride on, great Prince? Do you submit yourself to His inspection, to His cleansing? Remember, He came once on a colt, the foal of an ass, meek, and having salvation. He will come on the white horse, in righteousness to judge and to make warand with power to destroy.

Oh! I beseech you, welcome Him as He comes in gentle love, that when He comes in judicial majesty you may be among the armies of heaven that follow after, and from immortal tongues utter rapturous and undying hosannas.