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

**MARK-057**. **NOTHING BUT LEAVES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"13.* *And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, He came, if haply He might find any thing thereon: and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves; ... 14. And Jesus ... said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever."*

*Mark 11:13, 14*

The date of this miracle has an important bearing on its meaning and purpose. It occurred on the Monday morning of the last week of Christ's ministry. That week saw His last coming to Israel, if haply He might find any thing thereon. And if you remember the foot-to-foot duel with the rulers and representatives of the nation, and the words, weighty with coming doom, which He spoke in the Temple on the subsequent days, you will not doubt that the explanation of this strange and anomalous miracle is that it is an acted parable, a symbol of Israel in its fruitlessness and in its consequent barrenness to all coming time.

This is the only point of view, as it seems to me, from which the peculiarities of the miracle can either be warranted or explained. It is our Lord's only destructive act. The fig-tree grew by the wayside; probably, therefore, it belonged to nobody, and there was no right of property affected by its loss. He saw it from afar, having leaves, and that was why, three months before the time, He went to look if there were figs on it. For experts tell us that in the fig-tree the leaves accompany, and do not precede, the fruit. And so this one tree, brave in its show of foliage amidst leafless companions, was a hypocrite unless there were figs below the leaves. Therefore Jesus came, if haply He might find anything thereon, and finding nothing, perpetuated the condition which He found, and made the sin its own punishment.

Now all that is plain symbol, and so I ask you to look with me, for a few moments, at these three things--(i) What Christ sought and seeks; (ii) What He found and often finds; (iii) What He did when He found it.

**I. What Christ sought and seeks.**

He came seeking fruit. Now I may just notice, in passing, how pathetically and beautifully this incident suggests to us the true, dependent, weak manhood of that great Lord. In all probability He had just come from the home of Mary and Martha, and it is strange that having left their hospitable abode He should be an hungered. But so it was. And even with all the weight of the coming crisis pressing upon His soul, He was conscious of physical necessities, as one of us might have been, and perhaps felt the more need for sustenance because so terrible a conflict was waiting Him. Nor, I think, need we shrink from recognising another of the characteristics of humanity here, in the limitations of His knowledge and in the real expectation, which was disappointed, that He might find fruit where there were leaves. I do not want to plunge into depths far too deep for any man to find sure footing in, nor seek to define the undefinable, nor to explain how the divine inosculates with the human, but sure I am that Jesus Christ was not getting up a scene in order to make a parable out of His miracle; and that the hunger and the expectancy and the disappointment were all real, however they afterwards may have been turned by Him to a symbolical purpose. And so here we may see the weak Christ, the limited Christ, the true human Christ. But side by side, as is ever the case, with this manifestation of weakness, there comes an apocalypse of power. Wherever you have, in the history of our Lord, some signal exemplification of human infirmity, you have flashed out through the veil, that is, His flesh, some beam of His glory. Thus this hungry Man could say, No fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever; and His bare word, the mere forth-putting and manifestation of His will, had power on material things. That is the sign and impress of divinity.

But I pass from that, which is not my special point now. What did Christ seek? Fruit. And what is fruit in contradistinction to leaves? Character and conduct like His. That is our fruit. All else is leafage. As the Apostle says, Love, joy, hope, peace, righteousness in the Holy Ghost; or, to put it into one word, Christ-likeness in our inmost heart and nature, and Christ-likeness, so far as it may be possible for us, in our daily life, that is the one thing that our Lord seeks from us.

O brethren! we do not realise enough for ourselves, day by day, that it was for this end that Jesus Christ came. The cradle in Bethlehem, the weary life, the gracious words, the mighty deeds, the Cross on Calvary, the open grave, Olivet with His last footprints; His place on the throne, Pentecost, they were all meant for this, to make you and me good men, righteous people, bearing the fruits of holy living and conduct corresponding to His own pattern. Emotions of the selectest kind, religious experience of the profoundest and truest nature, these are blessed and good. They are the blossom which sets into fruit. And they come for this end, that by the help of them we may be made like Jesus Christ. He has yet to learn what is the purpose and the meaning of the Gospel who fixes upon anything else as its ultimate design than the production in us, as the results of the life of Christ dwelling in our hearts, of character and conduct like to His.

I suppose I ought to apologise for talking such commonplace platitudes as these, but, brethren, the most commonplace truths are usually the most important and the most impotent. And no platitudeis a platitude until you have brought it so completely into your lives that there is no room for a fuller working of it out. So I come to you, Christian men and women, real and nominal, now with this for my message, that Jesus Christ seeks from you this first and foremost, that you shall be good men and women according to the pattern that has been showed us in the Mount, according to the likeness of His own stainless perfection.

And do not forget that Jesus Christ hungers for that goodness. That is a strange, and infinitely touching, and absolutely true thing. He is only satisfied, and the hunger of His heart appeased, when He sees of the travail of His soulin the righteousness of His servants. I passed a day or two ago, in a country place, a great field on which there was stuck up a board that said, ----'s trial ground for seeds. This world is Christ's trial ground for seeds, where He is testing you and me to see whether it is worth while cultivating us any more, and whether we can bring forth any fruit to perfectionfit for the lips and the refreshment of the Owner and Lord of the vineyard Christ longs for fruit from us. And--strange and wonderful, and yet true--the breadthat He eats is the service of His servants. That, amongst other things, is what is meant by the ancient institution of sacrifice, the food of the gods. Christ's food is the holiness and obedience of His children. He comes to us, as He came to that fig-tree, seeking from us this fruit which He delights in receiving. Brethren, we cannot think too much of Christ's unspeakable gift in itself and in its consequences; but we may easily think too little, and I am sure that a great many of us do think too little, of Christ's demands. He is not an austere man, reaping where He did not sow; but having sowed so much, He does look for the harvest. He comes to us with the heart-moving appeal, I have given all to thee; what givest thou to Me?My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill; and he fenced it and planted it, and built a tower and a wine-press in it--and what then?--and he looked that it should bring forth grapes. Christ comes to each of you professing Christians, and asks, What fruit hast thou borne after all My sedulous husbandry?

**II. Now note, in the next place, what Christ found.**

Nothing but leaves. I have already said that we are told that the habit of growth of these trees is that the fruit accompanies, and sometimes precedes, the leaves. Whether it is so or no, let me remind you that leaves are an outcome of the life as well as fruit, and that they benefit the tree, and assist in the production of the fruit which it ought to bear. And so the symbol suggests things that are good in themselves, ancillary and subsidiary to the production of fruit, but which sometimes tend to such disproportionate exuberance of growth as that all the life of the tree runs to leaf, and there is riot a berry to be found on it.

And if you want to know what such things are, remember the condition of the rulers of Israel at that time. They prided themselves upon their nominal, external, hereditary connection with a system of revelation, they trusted in mere ritualisms, they had ossified religion into theology, and degraded morality into casuistry. They thought that because they had been born Jews, and circumcised, and because there was a daily sacrifice going on in the Temple, and because they had Rabbis who could split hairs ad infinitum, therefore they were the temple of the Lord, and God's chosen.

And that is exactly what hosts of pagans, masquerading as Christians, are doing in all our so-called Christian lands, and in all our so-called Christian congregations. In any community of so-called Christian people there is a little nucleus of real, earnest, God-fearing folk, and a great fringe of people whose Christianity is mostly from the teeth outward, who have a nominal and external connection with religion, who have been baptizedand are communicants, who think that religion lies mainly in coming on a Sunday, and with more or less toleration and interest listening to a preacher's words and joining in external worship, and all the while the weightier matters of the law--righteousness, justice, and the love of God--they leave untouched. What describes such a type of religion with more piercing accuracy than nothing but leaves? External connection with God's Church is a good thing. It is meant to make us better men and women. If it does not, it is a bad thing. Acts of worship, more or less elaborate--for it is not the elaboration of ceremonial, but the mistaken view of it, that does the harm--acts of worship may be helpful, or may be absolute barriers to real religious life. They are becoming so largely to-day. The drift and trend of opinion in some parts of so-called Christendom is in the direction of outward ceremonial. And I, for one, believe that there are few things doing more harm to the Christian character of England to-day than the preposterous recurrence to a reliance on the mere externals of worship. Of course we Dissenters pride ourselves on having no complicity with the sacramentarian errors which underlie these. But there may be quite as much of a barrier between the soul and Christ, reared by the bare worship of Nonconformists, or by the no-worship of the Society of Friends. If the absence of form be converted into a form, as it often is, there may be as lofty and wide a barrier raised by these as by the most elaborate ritual of the highest ceremonial that exists in Christendom. And so I say to you, dear brethren, seeing that we are all in danger of cleaving to externals and substituting these which are intended to be helps to the production of godly life and character, it becomes us all to listen to the solemn word of exhortation that comes out of my text, and to beware lest our religion runs to leaf instead of setting into fruit.

It does so with many of us; that is a certainty. I am thinking about no individual, about no individuals, but I am only speaking common sense when I say that amongst as many people as I am now addressing there will be an appreciable proportion who have no notion of religion as anything beyond a more or less imperative and more or less unwelcome set of external observances.

**III. And so, lastly, let me ask you to notice what Christ did.**

I do not need to trouble myself nor you with vindicating the morality of this miracle against the fantastic objections that often have been made against it; nor need I say a word more than I have already said about its symbolical meaning. Israel was in that week being asked for the last time to bring forth fruitto the Lord of the vineyard. The refusal bound barrenness on the synagogue and on the nation, if not absolutely for ever, at all events until it shall turn to the Lord, and partake again of the root and fatnessfrom which it has been broken off. What thirsty lips since that week have ever got any good out of Rabbinism and Judaism? No figshave grown on that thistle. The world has passed it by, and left all its subtle casuistries and painfully microscopic studies of the letter of Scripture--with utter oblivion of its spirit--left them all severely and wisely alone. Judaism is a dead tree.

And is there nothing else in this incident? No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever; the punishment of that fruitlessness was confirmed and eternal barrenness. There is the lesson that the punishment of any Bin is to bind the sin upon the doer of it.

But, further, the church or the individual whose religion runs to leaf is useless to the world. What does the world care about the ceremonials and the externals of worship, and a painful orthodoxy, and the study of the letter of Scripture? Nothing. A useless church or a Christian, from whom no man gets any fruit to cool a thirsty, parched lip, is only fit for what comes after the barrenness, and that is, that every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. The churches of England, and we, as integral parts of these, have solemn duties lying upon us to-day; and if we cannot help our brethren, and feed and nourish the hungry and thirsty hearts and souls of mankind, then--then! the sooner we are plucked up and pitched over the vineyard wall, which is the fate of the barren vine, the better for the world and the better for the vineyard.

The fate of Judaism teaches, to all of us professing Christians, very solemn lessons. If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee. What has become of the seven churches of Asia Minor? They hardened into chattering theological orthodoxy, and all the blood of them went to the surface, so to speak. And so down came the Mohammedan power--which was strong then because it did believe in a God, and not in its own belief about a God--and wiped them off the face of the earth. And so, brethren, we have, in this miracle, a warning and a prophecy which it becomes all the Christian communities of this day, and the individual members of such, to lay very earnestly to heart.

But do not let us forget that the Evangelist who does not tell us the story of the blasted fig-tree does tell us its analogue, the parable of the barren fig-tree, and that in it we read that when the fiat of destruction had gone forth, there was one who said, Let it alone this year also that I may dig about it, ... and if it bear fruit, well! If not, after that thou shalt cut it down. So the barren tree may become a fruitful tree, though it has hitherto borne nothing but leaves. Your religion may have been all on the surface and in form, but you can come into touch with Him in whom is our life and from whom comes our fruitfulness. He has said to each of us, As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.