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

**MARK-058**. **DISHONEST TENANTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And He began to speak unto them by parables. A certain man planted a vineyard, and set an hedge about it, and digged a place for the winefat, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country. 2. And at the season he sent to the husbandmen a servant, that he might receive from the husbandmen of the fruit of the vineyard. 3. And they caught him, and beat him, and sent him away empty. 4. And again he sent unto them another servant; and at him they cast stones, and wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully handled. 5. And again he sent another; and him they killed, and many others; beating some, and killing some 6. Having yet therefore one son, his well beloved, he sent him also last unto them, saying, They will reverence my son. 7. But those husbandmen said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours. 8. And they took him, and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard. 9. What shall therefore the lord of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the husbandmen, and will give the vineyard unto others. 10. And have ye not read this scripture: The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner: 11. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? 12. And they sought to lay hold on Him, but feared the people: for they knew that He had spoken the parable against them; and they left Him, and went their way."*

*Mark 12:1-12*

The ecclesiastical rulers had just been questioning Jesus as to the authority by which He acted. His answer, a counter-question as to John's authority, was not an evasion. If they decided whence John came, they would not be at any loss as to whence Jesus came. If they steeled themselves against acknowledging the Forerunner, they would not be receptive of Christ's message. That keen-edged retort plainly indicates Christ's conviction of the rulersinsincerity, and in this parable He charges home on these solemn hypocrites their share in the hereditary rejection of messengers whose authority was unquestionable. Much they cared for even divine authority, as they and their predecessors had shown through centuries! The veil of parable is transparent here. Jesus increased in severity and bold attack as the end drew near.

**I. The parable begins with a tender description of the preparation and allotment of the vineyard.**

The picture is based upon Isaiah's lovely apologue (Isaiah 5:1), which was, no doubt, familiar to the learned officials. But there is a slight difference in the application of the metaphor which in Isaiah means the nation, and in the parable is rather the theocracy as an institution, or, as we may put it roughly, the aggregate of divine revelations and appointments which constituted the religious prerogatives of Israel.

Our Lord follows the original passage in the description of the preparation of the vineyard, but it would probably be going too far to press special meanings on the wall, the wine-press, and the watchman's tower. The fence was to keep off marauders, whether passers-by or the boar out of the wood(Psalm 53:12, 13); the wine-press, for which Mark uses the word which means rather the vat into which the juice from the press proper flowed, was to extract and collect the precious liquid; the tower was for the watchman.

A vineyard with all these fittings was ready for profitable occupation. Thus abundantly had God furnished Israel with all that was needed for fruitful, happy service. What was true of the ancient Church is still more true of us who have received every requisite for holy living. Isaiah's solemn appeal has a still sharper edge for Christians: Judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard that I have not done in it?

The letting of the vineyard to husbandmenmeans the committal to Israel and its rulers of these divine institutions, and the holding them responsible for their fruitfulness. It may be a question whether the tenants are to be understood as only the official persons, or whether, while these are primarily addressed, they represent the whole people. The usual interpretation limits the meaning to the rulers, but, if so, it is difficult to carry out the application, as the vineyard would then have to be regarded as being the nation, which confuses all. The language of Matthew (which threatens the taking of the vineyard and giving it to another nation) obliges us to regard the nation as included in the husbandmen, though primarily the expression is addressed to the rulers.

But more important is it to note the strong expressions for man's quasi-independence and responsibility. The Jew was invested with full possession of the vineyard. We all, in like manner, have intrusted to us, to do as we will with, the various gifts and powers of Christ's gospel. God, as it were, draws somewhat apart from man, that he may have free play for his choice, and bear the burden of responsibility. The divine action was conspicuous at the time of founding the polity of Judaism, and then came long years in which there were no miracles, but all things continued as they were. God was as near as before, but He seemed far off. Thus Jesus has, in like manner, gone into a far country to receive a kingdom and to return; and we, the tenants of a richer vineyard than Israel's, have to administer what He has intrusted to us, and to bring near by faith Him who is to sense far off.

**II. The next scenes paint the conduct of the dishonest vine-dressers.**

We mark the stern, dark picture drawn of the continued and brutal violence, as well as the flagrant unfaithfulness, of the tenants. Matthew's version gives emphasis to the increasing harshness of treatment of the owner's messengers, as does Mark's. First comes beating, then wounding, then murder. The interpretation is self-evident. The servantsare the prophets, mostly men inferior in rank to the hierarchy, shepherds, fig-gatherers, and the like. They came to rouse Israel to a sense of the purpose for which they had received their distinguishing prerogatives, and their reward had been contempt and maltreatment. They had trial of mockings and scourgings, of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, they were slain with the sword.

The indictment is the same as that by which Stephen wrought the Sanhedrim into a paroxysm of fury. To make such a charge as Jesus did, in the very Temple courts, and with the already hostile priests glaring at Him while He spoke, was a deliberate assault on them and their predecessors, whose true successors they showed themselves to be. They had just been solemnly questioning Him as to His authority. He answers by thus passing in review the uniform treatment meted by them and their like to those who came with God's manifest authority.

If a mere man had spoken this parable, we might admire the magnificent audacity of such an accusation. But the Speaker is more than man, and we have to recognise the judicial calmness and severity of His tone. Israel's history, as it shaped itself before His pure eyes and perfect judgment, was one long series of divine favours and of human ingratitude, of ample preparations for righteous living and of no result, of messengers sent and their contumelious rejection. We wonder at the sad monotony of such requital. Are we doing otherwise?

**III. Then comes the last effort of the Owner, the last arrow in the quiver of Almighty Love.**

Two things are to be pondered in this part of the parable. First, that wonderful glimpse into the depths of God's heart, in the hope expressed by the Owner of the vineyard, brings out very clearly Christ's claim, made there before all these hostile, keen critics, to stand in an altogether singular relation to God. He asserts His Sonship as separating Him from the class of prophets who are servants only, and as constituting a relationship with the Father prior to His coming to earth. His Sonship is no mere synonym for His Messiahship, but was a fact long before Bethlehem; and its assertion lifts for us a corner of the veil of cloud and darkness round the throne of God. Not less striking is the expression of a frustrated hope in they will reverence My Son. Men can thwart God's purpose. His divine charity hopeth all things. The mystery thus sharply put here is but that which is presented everywhere in the co-existence of God's purposes and man's freedom.

The other noteworthy point is the corresponding casting of the vine-dressersthoughts into words. Both representations are due to the graphic character of parable; both crystallise into speech motives which were not actually spoken. It is unnecessary to suppose that even the rulers of Israel had gone the awful length of clear recognition of Christ's Messiahship, and of looking each other in the face and whispering such a fiendish resolve. Jesus is here dragging to light unconscious motives. The masses did wish to have their national privileges and to avoid their national duties. The rulers did wish to have their sway over minds and consciences undisturbed. They did resent Jesusinterference, chiefly because they instinctively felt that it threatened their position. They wanted to get Him out of the way, that they might lord it at will. They could have known that He was the Son, and they suppressed dawning suspicions that He was. Alas! they have descendants still in many of us who put away His claims, even while we secretly recognise them, in order that we may do as we like without His meddling with us! The rulerscalculation was a blunder. As Augustine says, They slew Him that they might possess, and, because they slew, they lost. So is it always. Whoever tries to secure any desired end by putting away his responsibility to render to God the fruit of his thankful service, loses the good which he would fain clutch at for his own. All sin is a mistake.

The parable passes from thinly veiled history to equally transparent prediction. How sadly and how unshrinkingly does the meek yet mighty Victim disclose to the conspirators His perfect knowledge of the murder which they were even now hatching in their minds! He foresees all, and will not lift a finger to prevent it. Mark puts the killingbefore the casting out of the vineyard, while Matthew and Luke invert the order of the two things. The slaughtered corpse was, as a further indignity, thrown over the wall, by which is symbolically expressed His exclusion from Israel, and the vine-dressersdelusion that they now had secured undisturbed possession.

**IV. The last point is the authoritative sentence on the evil-doers.**

Mark's condensed account makes Christ Himself answer His own question. Probably we are to suppose that, with hypocritical readiness, some of the rulers replied, as the other Evangelists represent, and that Jesus then solemnly took up their words. If anything could have enraged the rulers more than the parable itself, the distinct declaration of the transference of Israel's prerogatives to more worthy tenants would do so. The words are heavy with doom. They carry a lesson for us. Stewardship implies responsibility, and faithlessness, sooner or later, involves deprivation. The only way to keep God's gifts is to use them for His glory. The grace of God, says Luther somewhere, is like a flying summer shower. Where are Ephesus and the other apocalyptic churches? Let us take heed lest, if God spared not the natural branches, He also spare not us.

Jesus leaves the hearers with the old psalm ringing in their ears, which proclaimed that the stone which the builders rejected becomes the head stone of the corner. Other words of the same psalm had been chanted by the crowd in the procession on entering the city. Their fervour was cooling, but the prophecy would still be fulfilled. The builders are the same as the vine-dressers; their rejection of the stone is parallel with slaying the Son.

But though Jesus foretells His death, He also foretells His triumph after death. How could He have spoken, almost in one breath, the prophecy of His being slain and cast out of the vineyard, and that of His being exalted to be the very apex and shining summit of the true Temple, unless He had been conscious that His death was indeed not the end, but the centre, of His work, and His elevation to universal and unchanging dominion?