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

**MARK-063**. **THE ALABASTER BOX by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"6.* *And Jesus said, Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work on Me.... 8. She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint My body to the burying. 9. Verily I say unto you. Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her."*

*Mark 14:6-9*

John's Gospel sets this incident in its due framework of time and place, and tells us the names of the actors. The time was within a week of Calvary, the place was Bethany, where, as John significantly reminds us, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, thereby connecting the feast with that incident; the woman who broke the box of ointment and poured the perfume on the head and feet of Jesus was Mary; the first critic of her action was Judas. Selfishness blames love for the profusion and prodigality, which to it seem folly and waste. The disciples chimed in with the objection, not because they were superior to Mary in wisdom, but because they were inferior in consecration.

John tells us, too, that Martha was amongst them that served. The characteristics of the two sisters are preserved. The two types of character which they respectively represent have great difficulty in understanding and doing justice to one another. Christ understands and does justice to them both. Martha, bustling, practical, utilitarian to the finger-tips, does not much care about listening to Christ's words of wisdom. She has not any very high-strung or finely-spun emotions, but she can busy herself in getting a meal ready; she loves Him with all her heart, and she takes her own way of showing it. But she gets impatient with her sister, and thinks that her sitting at Christ's feet is a dreamy waste of time, and not without a touch of selfishness, taking no care for me, though I have got so much on my back. And so, in like manner, Mary is made out to be a monster of selfishness; Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? She could not serve, she would only have been in Martha's road if she had tried. But she had one precious thing which was her very own, and she caught it up, and in the irrepressible burst of her thankful love, as she saw Lazarus sitting there at the table beside Jesus, she poured the liquid perfume on His head and feet. He casts His shield over the poor, unpractical woman, who did such an utterly useless thing, for which a basin of water and a towel would have served far better. There are a great many useless things which, in Heaven's estimate, are more valuable than a great many apparently more practical ones. Christ accepts the service, and in His deep words lays down three or four principles which it would do us all good to carry with us into our daily lives. So I shall now try to gather from these utterances of our Lord's some great truths about Christian service.

**I. The first of them is the motive which hallows everything.**

She hath wrought a good work on Me. Now that is pretty nearly a definition of what a good work is, and you see it is very unlike our conventional notions of what constitutes a good work. Christ implies that anything, no matter what are its other characteristics, that is onHim, that is to say, directed towards Him under the impulse of simple love to Him, is a good work; and the converse follows, that nothing which has not that saving salt of reference to Him in it deserves the title. Did you ever think of what an extraordinary position that is for a man to take up? Think about Me in what you do, and you will do good. Do anything, no matter what, because you love Me, and it will be lifted up into high regions, and become transfigured; a good work. He took the best that any one could give Him, whether it was of outward possessions or of inward reverence, abject submission, and love and trust. He never said to any man, You are going over the score. You are exaggerating about Me. Stand up, for I also am a Man. He did say once, Why callest thou Me good?not because it was an incorrect attribution, but because it was a mere piece of conventional politeness. And in all other cases, not only does He accept as His rightful possession the utmost of reverence that any man can do Him, and bring Him, but He here implies, if He does not, as He almost does, specifically declare, that to be done for His sake lifts a deed into the region of goodworks.

Have you reflected what such an attitude implies as to the self-consciousness of the Man who took it, and whether it is intelligible, not to say admirable, or rather whether it is not worthy of reprobation, except upon one hypothesis--Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father, and all men honour God when they honour the Incarnate Word? But that is aside from my present purpose.

Is not this conception, that the motive of reverence and love to Him ennobles and sanctifies every deed, the very fundamental principle of Christian morality? All things are sanctified when they are done for His sake. You plunge a poor pebble into a brook, and as the sunlit ripples pass over its surface, the hidden veins of delicate colour come out and glow, and the poor stone looks a jewel, and is magnified as well as glorified by being immersed in the stream. Plunge your work into Christ, and do it for Him, and the giver and the gift will be greatened and sanctified.

But, brethren, if we take this point of view, and look to the motive, and not to the manner or the issues, or the immediate objects, of our actions, as determining whether they are good or no, it will revolutionise a great many of our thoughts, and bring new ideas into much of our conventional language. A good workis not a piece of beneficence or benevolence, still less is it to be confined to those actions which conventional Christianity has chosen to dignify by the name. It is a designation that should not be clotted into certain specified corners of a life, but be extended over them all. The things which more specifically go under such a name, the kind of things that Judas wanted to have substituted for the utterly useless, lavish expenditure by this heart that was burdened with the weight of its own blessedness, come, or do not come, under the designation, according as there is present in them, not only natural charity to the poor whom ye have always with you, but the higher reference of them to Christ Himself. All these lower forms of beneficence are imperfect without that. And instead of, as we have been taught by authoritative voices of late years, the service of man being the true service of God, the relation of the two terms is precisely the opposite, and it is the service of God that will effloresce into all service of man. Judas did not do much for the poor, and a great many other people who are sarcastic upon the folly, the uncalculating impulsesof Christian love, with its wasteful expenditure, and criticise us because we are spending time and energy and love upon objects which they think are moonshine and mist, do little more than he did, and what beneficence they do exercise has to be hallowed by this reference to Jesus before it can aspire to be beneficence indeed.

I sometimes wish that this generation of Christian people, amid its multifarious schemes of beneficence, with none of which would one interfere for a moment, would sometimes let itself go into manifestations of its love to Jesus Christ, which had no use at all except to relieve its own burdened heart. I am afraid that the lower motives, which are all right and legitimate when they are lower, are largely hustling the higher ones into the background, and that the river has got so many ponds to fill, and so many canals to trickle through, and so many plantations to irrigate and make verdant, that there is a danger of its falling low at its fountain, and running shallow in its course. One sometimes would like to see more things done for Him that the world would call utter folly, and prodigal waste, and absolutely useless. Jesus Christ has a great many strange things in His treasure-house--widowsmites, cups of water, Mary's broken vase--has He anything of yours? She hath wrought a good work on Me.

**II. Now, there is another lesson that I would gather from our Lord's apologising for Mary, and that is the measure and the manner of Christian service.**

She hath done what she could; that is generally read as if it were an excuse. So it is, or at least it is a vindication of the manner and the direction of Mary's expression of love and devotion. But whilst it is an apologia for the form, it is a high demand in regard to the measure.

She hath done what she could. Christ would not have said that if she had taken a niggardly spoonful out of the box of ointment, and dribbled that, in slow and half-grudging drops, on His head and feet. It was because it all went that it was to Him thus admirable. I think it is John Foster who says, Power to its last particle is duty. The question is not how much have I done, or given, but could I have done or given more? We Protestants have indulgences of our own; the guinea or the hundred guineas that we give in a certain direction, we some of us seem to think, buy for us the right to do as we will with all the rest. But she hath done what she could. It all went. And that is the law for us Christian people, because the Christian life is to be ruled by the great law of self-sacrifice, as the only adequate expression of our recognition of, and our being affected by, the great Sacrifice that gave Himself for us.

Give all thou canst! High Heaven rejects the lore

Of nicely calculated less or more.

But whilst thus there is here a definite demand for the entire surrender of ourselves and our activities to Jesus Christ, there is also the wonderful vindication of the idiosyncrasy of the worker, and the special manner of her gift. It was not Mary's mé´©er to serve at the table, nor to do any practical thing. She did not know what there was for her to do; but something she must do. So she caught up her alabaster box, and without questioning herself about the act, let her heart have its way, and poured it out on Christ. It was the only thing she could do, and she did it. It was a very useless thing. It was an entirely unnecessary expenditure of the perfume. There might have been a great many practical purposes found for it, but it was her way.

Christ says to each of us, Be yourselves, take circumstances, capacities, opportunities, individual character, as laying down the lines along which yon have to travel. Do not imitate other people. Do not envy other people; be yourselves, and let your love take its natural expression, whatever folk round you may snarl and sneer and carp and criticise. She hath done what she could, and so He accepts the gift.

Engineers tell us that the steam-engine is a very wasteful machine, because so little of the energy is brought into actual operation. I am afraid that there are a great many of us Christian people like that, getting so much capacity, and turning out so little work. And there are a great many more of us who simply pick up the kind of work that is popular round us, and never consult our own bent, nor follow this humbly and bravely, wherever it will take us. She hath done what she could.

**III. And now the last thought that I would gather from these words is as to the significance and the perpetuity of the work which Christ accepts.**

She hath come beforehand to anoint My body to the burying. I do not suppose that such a thought was in Mary's mind when she snatched up her box of ointment, and poured it out on Christ's head. But it was a meaning that He, in His tender pity and wise love and foresight, put into it, pathetically indicating, too, how the near Cross was filling His thought, even whilst He sat at the humble rustic feast in Bethany village.

He puts meaning into the service of love which He accepts. Yes, He always does. For all the little bits of service that we can bring get worked up into the great whole, the issues of which lie far beyond anything that we conceive, Thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain ... and God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him. We cast the seed into the furrows. Who can tell what the harvest is going to be? We know nothing about the great issues that may suddenly, or gradually, burst from, or be evolved out of, the small deeds that we do. So, then, let us take care of the end, so to speak, which is under our control, and that is the motive. And Jesus Christ will take care of the other end that is beyond our control, and that is the issue. He will bring forth what seemeth to Him good, and we shall be as much astonished when we get yonderat what has come out of what we did here, as poor Mary, standing there behind Him, was when He translated her act into so much higher a meaning than she had seen in it.

Lord! when saw we Thee hungry and fed Thee?We do not know what we are doing. We are like the Hindoo weavers that are said to weave their finest webs in dark rooms; and when the shutters come down, and not till then, shall we find out the meanings of our service of love.

Christ makes the work perpetual as well as significant by declaring that in the whole world this shall be preached for a memorial of her. Have not the poorgot far more good out of Mary's box of ointment than the three hundred pence that a few of them lost by it? Has it not been an inspiration to the Church ever since? The house was filled with the odour of the ointment. The fragrance was soon dissipated in the scentless air, but the deed smells sweet and blossoms for ever. It is perpetual in its record, perpetual in God's remembrance, perpetual in its results to the doer, and in its results in the world, though these may be indistinguishable, just as the brook is lost in the river and the river in the sea.

But did you ever notice that the Evangelist who records the promise of perpetual remembrance of the act does not tell us who did it, and that the Evangelists who tell us who did it do not record the promise of perpetual remembrance? Never mind whether your deed is labelled with your address or not, God knows to whom it belongs, and that is enough. As Paul says in one of his letters, other my fellow-labourers also, whose names are in the Book of Life. Apparently he had forgotten the names, or perhaps did not think it needful to occupy space in his letter with detailing them, and so makes that graceful, half-apologetic suggestion that they are inscribed on a more august page. The work and the worker are associated in that Book, and that is enough.

Brethren, the question of Judas is far more fitting when asked of other people than of Christians. To what purpose is this waste?may well be said to those of you who are taking mind, and heart, and will, capacity, and energy, and all life, and using it for lower purposes than the service of God, and the manifestation of loving obedience to Jesus Christ. Why do ye spend money for that which is not bread?Is it not waste to buy disappointments at the price of a soul and of a life? Why do ye spend that money thus? Whose image and superscription hath it?Whose name is stamped upon our spirits? To whom should they be rendered? Better for us to ask ourselves the question to-day about all the godless parts of our lives, To what purpose is this waste?than to have to ask it yonder! Everything but giving our whole selves to Jesus Christ is waste. It is not waste to lay ourselves and our possessions at His feet. He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for My sake, the same shall find it.