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

**MARK-068**. **THE SLEEPING APOSTLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Simon, sleepest thou!"*

*Mark 14:37*

It is a very old Christian tradition that this Gospel is in some sense the Apostle Peter's. There are not many features in the Gospel itself which can be relied on as confirming this idea. Perhaps one such may be found in this plaintive remonstrance, which is only preserved for us here. Matthew's Gospel, indeed, tells us that the rebuke was addressed to Peter, but blunts the sharp point of it as directed to him, by throwing it into the plural, as if spoken to all the three slumberers: What, could ye not watch with Me one hour? To Matthew, the special direction of the words was unimportant, but Peter could never forget how the Master had come out from the shadow of the olives to him lying there in the moonlight, and stood before him worn with His solitary agony, and in a voice yet tremulous from His awful conflict, had said to him, so lately loud in his professions of fidelity, Sleepest thou?

It was but an hour or two since he had been saying, and meaning, I will lay down my life for Thy sake, and this was what all that fervour had come to. No wonder if there is almost a tone of surprise discernible in our Lord's word, as if He who marvelled at the unbeliefof those who were not His followers, marvelled still more at the imperfect sympathy of those who were, and marvelled most of all at such a sudden ebb of such a flood of devotion. Surprise and sorrow, the pain of a loving heart thrown back upon itself, the sharp pang of feeling how much less one is loved than one loves, the pleading with His forgetful servant, rebuke without anger, all breathe through the question, so pathetic in its simplicity, so powerful to bow in contrition by reason of its very gentleness and self-restraint.

The record of this Evangelist proves how deep it sank into the impulsive, loving heart of the apostle, and yet the denials in the high priest's palace, which followed so soon, show how much less power it had on him on the day when it was spoken, than it gained as he looked back on it through the long vista of years that had passed, when he told the story to Mark.

The first lesson to be gathered from these words is drawn from the name by which our Lord here addresses the apostle: Simon, sleepest thou?

Now the usage of Mark's Gospel in reference to this apostle's name is remarkably uniform and precise. Both his names occur in Mark's catalogue of the Apostles: Simon he surnamed Peter. He is never called by both again, but before that point he is always Simon, and after it he is always Peter, except in this verse. The other Evangelists show similar purpose, for the most part, in their interchange of the names. Luke, for instance, always calls him Simon up to the same point as Mark, except once where he uses the form Simon Peter, and thereafter always Peter, except in Christ's solemn warning, Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you, and in the report of the tidings that met the disciples on their return from Emmaus, The Lord hath appeared to Simon. So Matthew calls him Simon in the story of the first miraculous draught of fishes, and in the catalogue of Apostles, and afterwards uniformly Peter, except in Christ's answer to the apostle's great confession, where He names him Simon Bar Jona, in order, as would appear, to bring into more solemn relief the significance of the immediately following words, Thou art Peter. In John's Gospel, again, we find the two forms Simon Peterand the simple Peterused throughout with almost equal frequency, while Simonis only employed at the very beginning, and in the heart-piercing triple question at the end, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?

The conclusion seems a fair one from these details that, on the whole, the name Simon brings into prominence the natural unrenewed humanity, and the name Peter suggests the Apostolic office, the bold confessor, the impulsive, warm-hearted lover and follower of the Lord. And it is worth noticing that, with one exception, the instances in which he is called by his former name, after his designation to the apostolate, occur in words addressed to him by our Lord.

He had given the name, and surely His withdrawal of it was meant to be significant, and must have struck with boding, rebuking emphasis on the ear and conscience of the apostle. Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you: Remember thy human weakness, and in the sore conflict that is before thee, trust not to thine own power. Simon, sleepest thou? Can I call thee Peter now, when thou hast not cared for My sorrow enough to wake while I wrestled? Is this thy fervid love? Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me? Thou wast Peter because thou didst confess Me; thou hast fallen back to thine old level by denying Me. It is not enough that in secret I should have restored thee to My love. Here before thy brethren, thou must win back thy forfeited name and place by a confession as open as the denial, and thrice repeated like it. Once thou hast answered, but still thou art "Simon." Twice thou hast answered, but not yet can I call thee "Peter." Thrice thou hast answered, by each reply effacing a former denial, and now I ask no more. Take back thine office; henceforth thou shalt be called "Cephas" as before.

And so it was. In the Acts of the Apostles, and in Paul's letters, Peteror Cephasentirely obliterates Simon. Only for ease in finding him, the messengers of Cornelius are to ask for him in Joppa by the name by which he would be known outside the Church, and his old companion James begins his speech to the council at Jerusalem by referring with approbation to what Simeonhad said, as if he liked to use the old name, that brought back memories of the far-off days in Galilee, before they had known the Master.

Very touching, too, is it to notice how the apostle himself, while using the name by which he was best known in the Church, in the introduction to his first Epistle, calls himself Simon Peterin his second, as if to the end he felt that the old nature clung to him, and was not yet, so long as he was in this tabernacle, wholly subdued under the dominion of the better self, which his Master had breathed into him.

So we see that a bit of biography and an illustration of a large truth are wrapped up for us in so small a matter as the apparently fortuitous use of one or other of these names. I do not suppose that in every instance where either of them occur, we can explain their occurrence by a reference to such thoughts. But still there is an unmistakable propriety in several instances in the employment of one rather than the other, and we may fairly suggest the lesson as put hero in a picturesque form, which Paul gives us in definite words, The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. The better and the worse nature contend in all Christian souls, or, as our Lord says with such merciful leniency in this very context, The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. However real and deep the change which passes over us when Christ is formed in us, it is only by degrees that the transformation spreads through our being. The renewing process follows upon the bestowment of the new life, and works from its deep inward centre outwards and upwards to the circumference and surface of our being, on condition of our own constant diligence and conflict.

True, If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; but also, and precisely because he is, therefore the daily and hourly exhortation is, Put on the new man. The leaven is buried in the dough, and must be well kneaded up with it if the whole is to be leavened. Peter is still Simon, and sometimes seems to be so completely Simon that he has ceased to be Peter. He continues Simon Peter to his own consciousness to the very end, however his brethren call him. The struggle between the two elements in his nature makes the undying interest of his story, and brings him nearer to us than any of the other disciples are. We, too, have to wage the conflict between the old nature and the new; for us, too, the worse part seems too often to be the stronger, if not the only part. The Master has often to speak to us, as if His merciful all-seeing eye could discern in us nothing of our better selves which are in truth Himself, and has to question our love. We, too, have often to feel how little those who think best of us know what we are. But let us take heart and remember that from every fall it is possible to rise by penitence and secret converse with Him, and that if only we remember to the end our lingering weakness, and giving all diligence, cleave to Him, an entrance shall be ministered unto us abundantly into His everlasting kingdom.

We may briefly notice, too, some other lessons from this slumbering apostle.

Let us learn, for instance, to distrust our own resolutions. An hour or two at the most had passed since the eager protestation, Though all should deny Thee, yet will not I. I will lay down my life for Thy sake. It had been most honestly said, at the dictate of a very loving heart, which in its enthusiasm was over-estimating its own power of resistance, and taking no due account of obstacles. The very utterance of the rash vow made him weaker, for some of his force was expended in making it. The uncalculating, impulsive nature of the man makes him a favourite with all readers, and we sympathise with him, as a true brother, when we hear him blurting out his big words, followed so soon by such a contradiction in deeds. He is the same man all through his story, always ready to push himself into dangers, always full of rash confidence, which passes at once into abject fear when the dangers which he had not thought about appear.

His sleep in the garden, following close on his bold words in the upper chamber, is just like his eager wish to come to Christ on the water, followed by his terror. He desires to be singled out from the others; he desires to be beside his Master, and then as soon as he feels a dash of spray on his cheek, and the heaving of that uneasy floor beneath him, all his confidence collapses and he shrieks to Christ to save him. It is just like his thrusting himself into the high priest's palace--no safe place, and bad company for him by the coal fire--and then his courage oozing out at his fingersends as soon as a maidservant's sharp tongue questioned him. It is just like his hearty welcome of the heathen converts at Antioch, and his ready breaking through Jewish restrictions, and then his shrinking back into his old shell again, as soon as certain came down from Jerusalem.

And in it all, he is one of ourselves. We have to learn to distrust all our own resolutions, and to be chary of our vows. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. So, aware of our own weakness, and the flutterings of our own hearts, let us not mortgage the future, nor lightly say I will--but rather let us turn our vows into prayers,

Nor confidently say,

"I never will deny Thee, Lord"

But, "Grant I never may.'

Let us note, too, the slight value of even genuine emotion. The very exhaustion following on the strained emotions which these disciples had been experiencing had sent them to sleep. Luke, in his physician-like way, tells us this, when he says that they slept for sorrow. We all know how some great emotion which we might have expected would have held our eyes waking, lulls to slumber. Men sleep soundly on the night before their execution. A widow leaves her husband's deathbed as soon as he has passed away, and sleeps a dreamless sleep for hours. The strong current of emotion sweeps through us, and leaves us dry. Sheer exhaustion and collapse follow its intenser forms. And even in its milder, nothing takes so much out of a man as emotion. Reaction always follows, and people are in some degree unfitted for sober work by it. Peter, for example, was all the less ready for keeping awake, and for bold confession, because of the vehement emotions which had agitated him in the upper chamber. We have, therefore, to be chary, in our religious life, of feeding the flames of mere feeling. An unemotional Christianity is a very poor thing, and most probably a spurious and unreal thing. But a merely emotional Christianity is closely related to practical unholiness, and leads by a very short straight road to windy wordy insincerity and conscious hypocrisy. Emotion which is firmly based upon an intelligent grasp of God's truth, and which is at once translated into action, is good. But unless these two conditions be rigidly observed, it darkens the understanding and enfeebles the soul.

Lastly, notice how much easier it is to purpose and to do great things than small ones.

I have little doubt that if the Roman soldiers had called on Peter to have made good his boast, and to give up his life to rescue his Master, he would have been ready to do it. We know that he was ready to fight for Him, and in fact did draw a sword and offer resistance. He could die for Him, but he could not keep awake for Him. The great thing he could have done, the little thing he could not do.

Brethren, it is far easier once in a way, by a dead lift, to screw ourselves up to some great crisis which seems worthy of a supreme effort of enthusiasm and sacrifice, than it is to keep on persistently doing the small monotonies of daily duty. Many a soldier will bravely rush to the assault in a storming-party, who would tremble in the trenches. Many a martyr has gone unblenching to the stake for Christ, who had found it far harder to serve Him in common duties. It is easier to die for Him than to watch with Him. So let us listen to His gentle voice, as He speaks to us, not as of old in the pauses of His agony, and His locks wet with the dews of the night, but bending from His throne, and crowned with many crowns: Sleepest them? Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation.