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

**MARK-069**. **THE CAPTIVE CHRIST AND THE CIRCLE ROUND HIM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"43.* *And immediately, while He yet spake, cometh Judas, one of the twelve, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. 44. And he that betrayed Him had given them a token, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is He; take Him, and lead Him away safely. 45. And as soon as he was come, he goeth straightway to Him, and saith, Master, Master; and kissed Him. 46. And they laid their hands on Him, and took Him. 47. And one of them that stood by drew a sword, and smote a servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. 48. And Jesus answered and said unto them, Are ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and with staves to take Me? 49. I was daily with you in the temple teaching, and ye took Me not: but the scriptures must be fulfilled. 50. And they all forsook Him, and fled. 51. And there followed Him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young man laid hold on Him: 52. And he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked. 53. And they led Jesus away to the high priest: and with him were assembled all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes. 54. And Peter followed Him afar off, even into the palace of the high priest: and he sat with the servants, and warmed himself at the fire."*

*Mark 14:43-54*

A comparison of the three first Gospels in this section shows a degree of similarity, often verbal, which is best accounted for by supposing that a common (oral?) Gospel, which had become traditionally fixed by frequent and long repetition, underlies them all. Mark's account is briefest, and grasps with sure instinct the essential points; but, even in his brevity, he pauses to tell of the young man who so nearly shared the Lord's apprehension. The canvas is narrow and crowded; but we may see unity in the picture, if we regard as the central fact the sacrilegious seizure of Jesus, and the other incidents and persons as grouped round it and Him, and reflecting various moods of men's feelings towards Him.

**I. The avowed and hypocritical enemies of incarnate love.**

Again we have Mark's favourite straightway, so frequent in the beginning of the Gospel, and occurring twice here, vividly painting both the sudden inburst of the crowd which Interrupted Christ's words and broke the holy silence of the garden, and Judas's swift kiss. He is named--the only name but our Lord's in the section; and the depth of his sin is emphasised by adding one of the twelve. He is not named in the next verse, but gibbeted for immortal infamy by the designation, he that betrayed Him. There is no dilating on his crime, nor any bespattering him with epithets. The passionless narrative tells of the criminal and his crime with unsparing, unmoved tones, which have caught some echo beforehand of the Judge's voice. To name the sinner, and to state without cloak or periphrasis what his deed really was, is condemnation enough. Which of us could stand it? Judas was foremost of the crowd. What did he feel as he passed swiftly into the shadow of the olives, and caught the first sight of Jesus? That the black depths of his spirit were agitated is plain from two things--the quick kiss, and the nauseous repetition of it. Mark says, Straightway ... he kissed Him much. Probably the swiftness and vehemence, so graphically expressed by these two touches, were due, not only to fear lest Christ should escape, and to hypocrisy overacting its part, but to a struggle with conscience and ancient affection, and a fierce determination to do the thing and have it over. Judas is not the only man who has tried to drown conscience by hurrying into and reiterating the sin from which conscience tries to keep him. The very extravagances of evil betray the divided and stormy spirit of the doer. In the darkness and confusion, the kiss was a surer token than a word or a pointing finger would have been; and simple convenience appears to have led to its selection. But what a long course of hypocrisy must have preceded and how complete the alienation of heart must have become, before such a choice was possible! That traitor's kiss has become a symbol for all treachery cloaked in the garb of affection. Its lessons and warnings are obvious, but this other may be added--that such audacity and nauseousness of hypocrisy is not reached at a leap, but presupposes long underground tunnels of insincere discipleship, through which a man has burrowed, unseen by others, and perhaps unsuspected by himself. Much hypocrisy of the unconscious sort precedes the deliberate and conscious.

How much less criminal and disgusting was the rude crowd at Judas's heels! Most of them were mere passive tools. The Evangelist points beyond them to the greater criminals by his careful enumeration of all classes of the Jewish authorities, thus laying the responsibility directly on their shoulders, and indirectly on the nation whom they represented. The semi-tumultuous character of the crowd is shown by calling them a multitude, and by the medley of weapons which they carried. Half-ignorant hatred, which had had ample opportunities of becoming knowledge and love, offended formalism, blind obedience to ecclesiastical superiors, the dislike of goodness--these impelled the rabble who burst into the garden of Gethsemane.

**II. Incarnate love, bound and patient.**

We may bring together verses 46, 48, and 49, the first of which tells in simplest, briefest words the sacrilegious violence done to Jesus, while the others record His calm remonstrance. They laid hands on Him. That was the first stage in outrage--the quick stretching of many hands to secure the unresisting prisoner. They took Him, or, as perhaps we might better render, They held Him fast, as would have been done with any prisoner. Surely, the quietest way of telling that stupendous fact is the best! It is easy to exclaim, and, after the fashion of some popular writers of lives of Christ, to paint fancy pictures. It is better to be sparing of words, like Mark, and silently to meditate on the patient long-suffering of the love which submitted to these indignities, and on the blindness which had no welcome but this for God manifest in the flesh. Both are in full operation to-day, and the germs of the latter are in us all.

Mark confines himself to that one of Christ's sayings which sets in the clearest light His innocence and meek submissiveness. With all its calmness and patience, it is majestic and authoritative, and sounds as if spoken from a height far above the hubbub. Its question is not only an assertion of His innocence, and therefore of his captor's guilt, but also declares the impotence of force as against Him--Swords and staves to take Me!All that parade of arms was out of place, for He was no evil-doer; needless, for He did not resist; and powerless, unless He chose to let them prevail. He speaks as the stainless, incarnate Son of God. He speaks also as Captain of the noble army of martyrs, and His question may be extended to include the truth that force is in its place when used against crime, but ludicrously and tragically out of place when employed against any teacher, and especially against Christianity. Christ, in His persecuted confessors, puts the same question to the persecutors which Christ in the flesh put to His captors.

The second clause of Christ's remonstrance appeals to their knowledge of Him and His words, and to their attitude towards Him. For several days He had daily been publicly teaching in the Temple. They had laid no hands on Him. Nay, some of them, no doubt, had helped to wave the palm-branches and swell the hosannas. He does not put the contrast of then and now in its strongest form, but spares them, even while He says enough to bring an unseen blush to some cheeks. He would have them ask, Why this change in us, since He is the same? Did He deserve to be hailed as King a few short hours ago? How, then, before the palm-branches are withered, can He deserve rude hands?Men change in their feelings to the unchanging Christ; and they who have most closely marked the rise and fall of the tide in their own hearts will be the last to wonder at Christ's captors, and will most appreciate the gentleness of His rebuke and remonstrance.

The third clause rises beyond all notice of the human agents, and soars to the divine purpose which wrought itself out through them. That divine purpose does not make them guiltless, but it makes Jesus submissive. He bows utterly, and with no reluctance, to the Father's will, which could be wrought out through unconscious instruments, and had been declared of old by half-understanding prophets, but needed the obedience of the Son to be clear-seeing, cheerful, and complete. We, too, should train ourselves to see the hand that moves the pieces, and to make God's will our will, as becomes sons. Then Christ's calm will be ours, and, ceasing from self, and conscious of God everywhere, and yielding our wills, which are the self of ourselves, to Him, we shall enter into rest.

**III. Rash love defending its Lord with wrong weapons (verse 47).**

Peter may have felt that he must do something to vindicate his recent boasting, and, with his usual headlong haste, stops neither to ask what good his sword is likely to do, nor to pick his man and take deliberate aim at him. If swords were to be used, they should do something more effectual than hacking off a poor servant's ear. There was love In the foolish deeds and a certain heroism in braving the chance of a return thrust or capture, which should go to Peter's credit. If he alone struck a blow for his Master, it was because the others were more cowardly, not more enlightened. Peter has had rather hard measure about this matter, and is condemned by some of us who would not venture a tenth part of what he ventured for his Lord then. No doubt, this was blind and blundering love, with an alloy of rashness and wish for prominence; but that is better than unloving enlightenment and caution, which is chiefly solicitous about keeping its own ears on. It is also worse than love which sees and reflects the image of the meek Sufferer whom it loves. Christ and His cause are to be defended by other weapons. Christian heroism endures and does not smite. Not only swords, but bitter words which wound worse than they, are forbidden to Christ's soldier. We are ever being tempted to fight Christ's battles with the world's weapons; and many a defender of the faithin later days, perhaps even in this very enlightened day, has repeated Peter's fault with less excuse than he, and with very little of either his courage or his love.

**IV. Cowardly love forsaking its Lord (verse 50).**

They all forsook Him, and fled. And who will venture to say that he would not have done so too? The tree that can stand such a blast must have deep roots. The Christ whom they forsook was, to them, but a fragment of the Christ whom we know; and the fear which scattered them was far better founded and more powerful than anything which the easy-going Christians of to-day have to resist. Their flight may teach us to place little reliance on our emotions, however genuine and deep, and to look for the security for our continual adherence to Christ, not to our fluctuating feelings, but to His steadfast love. We keep close to Him, not because our poor fingers grasp His hand--for that grasp is always feeble, and often relaxed--but because His strong and gentle hand holds us with a grasp which nothing can loosen. Whoso trusts in his own love to Christ builds on sand, but whoso trusts in Christ's love to him builds on rock.

**V. Adventurous curiosity put to flight (verses 51, 52).**

Probably this young man was Mark. Only he tells the incident, which has no bearing on the course of events, and was of no importance but to the person concerned. He has put himself unnamed in a corner of his picture, as monkish painters used to do, content to associate himself even thus with his Lord. His hastily cast-on covering seems to show that he had been roused from sleep. Mingled love and curiosity and youthful adventurousness made him bold to follow when Apostles had fled. No effort appears to have been made to stop their flight; but he is laid hold of, and, terrified at his own rashness, wriggles himself out of his captorshands. The whole incident singularly recalls Mark's behaviour on Paul's first missionary journey. There are the same adventurousness, the same inconsiderate entrance on perilous paths, the same ignominious and hasty retreat at the first whistle of the bullets. A man who pushes himself needlessly into difficulties and dangers without estimating their force is pretty sure to take to his heels as soon as he feels them, and to cut as undignified a figure as this naked fugitive.

**VI. Love frightened, but following (verse 54).**

Fear had driven Peter but a little way. Love soon drew him and John back. Sudden and often opposite impulses moved Ms conduct and ruffled the surface of his character, but, deep down, the core was loyal love. He followed, but afar off; though afar off, he did follow. If his distance betrayed his terror, his following witnessed his bravery. He is not a coward who is afraid, but he who lets his fear hinder him from duty or drive him to flight. What is all Christian living but following Christ afar off? And do the best of us do more, though we have less apology for our distance than Peter had? Leaving us an example, that ye should follow His stepssaid he, long after, perhaps remembering both that morning and the other by the lake when he was bidden to leave other servantstasks to the Master's disposal, and, for his own part, to follow Him.

His love pushed him into a dangerous place. He was in bad company among the inferior sort of servants huddled around the fire that cold morning, at the lower end of the hall; and as its light flickered on his face, he was sure to be recognised. But we have not now to do with his denial. Rather he is the type of a true disciple, coercing his human weakness and cowardice to yield to the attraction which draws him to his Lord, and restful in the humblest place where he can catch a glimpse of His face, and so be, as he long after alleged it as his chief title to authority to have been, a witness of the sufferings of Christ.