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

**MARK-070**. **THE CONDEMNATION WHICH CONDEMNS THE JUDGES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"55.* *And the chief priests and all the council sought for witness against Jesus to put Him to death; and found none. 56. For many bare false witness against Him, but their witness agreed not together. 57. And there arose certain, and bare false witness against Him, saying, 58. We heard Him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands. 59. But neither so did their witness agree together. 60. And the high priest stood up in their midst, and asked Jesus, saying, Answerest Thou nothing? what is it which these witness against Thee? 61. But He held His peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, and said unto Him, Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? 62. And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of Man, sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. 63. Then the high priest rent his clothes, and saith, What need we any further witnesses? 64. Ye have heard the blasphemy: what think ye? And they all condemned Him to be guilty of death. 65. And some began to spit on Him, and to cover His face, and to buffet Him, and to say unto Him, Prophesy: and the servants did strike Him with the palms of their hands."*

*Mark 14:55-56*

Mark brings out three stages in our Lord's trial by the Jewish authorities--their vain attempts to find evidence against Him, which were met by His silence; His own majestic witness to Himself, which was met by a unanimous shriek of condemnation; and the rude mockery of the underlings. The other Evangelists, especially John, supply many illuminative details; but the essentials are here. It is only in criticising the Gospels that a summary and a fuller narrative are dealt with as contradictory. These three stages naturally divide this paragraph.

**I. The judges with evil thoughts, the false witnesses, and the silent Christ (verses 55-61).**

The criminal is condemned before He is tried. The judges have made up their minds before they sit, and the Sanhedrim is not a court of justice, but a slaughter-house, where murder is to be done under sanction of law. Mark, like Matthew, notes the unanimity of the council, to which Joseph of Arimathea--the one swallow which does not make a summer--appears to have been the only exception; and he probably was absent, or, if present, was silent. He did not consent; but we are not told that he opposed. That ill-omened unanimity measures the nation's sin. Flagrant injustice and corruption in high places is possible only when society as a whole is corrupt or indifferent to corruption. This prejudging of a case from hatred of the accused as a destroyer of sacred tradition, and this hunting for evidence to bolster up a foregone conclusion, are pre-eminently the vices of ecclesiastical tribunals and not of Jewish Sanhedrim or Papal Inquisition only. Where judges look for witnesses for the prosecution, plenty will be found, ready to curry favour by lies. The eagerness to find witnesses against Jesus is witness for Him, as showing that nothing in His life or teaching was sufficient to warrant their murderous purpose. His judges condemn themselves in seeking grounds to condemn Him, for they thereby show that their real motive was personal spite, or, as Caiaphas suggested, political expediency.

The single specimen of the worthless evidence given may be either a piece of misunderstanding or of malicious twisting of innocent words; nor can we decide whether the witnesses contradicted one another or each himself. The former is the more probable, as the fundamental principle of the Jewish law of evidence ('two or three witnesses) would, in that case, rule out the testimony. The saying which they garble meant the very opposite of what they made it mean. It represented Jesus as the restorer of that which Israel should destroy. It referred to His body which is the true Temple; but the symbolic temple made with handsis so inseparably connected with the real, that the fate of the one determines that of the other. Strangely significant, therefore, is it, that the rulers heard again, though distorted, at that moment when they were on their trial, the far-reaching sentence, which might have taught them that in slaying Jesus they were throwing down the Temple and all which centred in it, and that by His resurrection, His own act, He would build up again a new polity, which yet was but the old transfigured, even the Church, which is His body. His work destroys nothing but the works of the devil. He is the restorer of the divine ordinances and gifts which men destroy, and His death and resurrection bring back in nobler form all the good things lost by sin, the desolations of many generations. The history of all subsequent attacks on Christ is mirrored here. The foregone conclusion, the evidence sought as an after-thought to give a colourable pretext, the material found by twisting His teaching, the blindness which accuses Him of destroying what He restores, and fancies itself as preserving what it is destroying, have all reappeared over and over again.

Our Lord's silence is not only that of meekness, as a sheep before her shearers is dumb. It is the silence of innocence, and, if we may use the word concerning Him, of scorn. He will not defend Himself to such judges, nor stoop to repel evidence which they knew to be worthless. But there is also something very solemn and judicial in His locked lips. They had ever been ready to open in words of loving wisdom; but now they are fast closed, and this is the penalty for despising, that He ceases to speak. Deaf ears make a dumb Christ, What will happen when Jesus and His judges change places, as they will one day do? When He says to each, Answerest thou nothing? What is it which these, thy sins, witness against thee?each will be silent with the consciousness of guilt and of just condemnation by His all-knowing justice.

**II. Christ's majestic witness to Himself received with a shriek of condemnation.**

What a supreme moment that was when the head of the hierarchy put this question and received the unambiguous answer! The veriest impostor asserting Messiahship had a right to have his claims examined; but a howl of hypocritical horror is all which Christ's evoke. The high priest knew well enough what Christ's answer would be. Why, then, did he not begin by questioning Jesus, and do without the witnesses? Probably because the council wished to find some pretext for His condemnation without bringing up the real reason; for it looked ugly to condemn a man for claiming to be Messias, and to do it without examining His credentials. The failure, however, of the false witnesses compelled the council to show their hands, and to hear and reject our Lord solemnly and, so to speak, officially, laying His assertion of dignity and office before them, as the tribunal charged with the duty of examining His proofs. The question is so definite as to imply a pretty full and accurate knowledge of our Lord's teaching about Himself. It embraces two points--office and nature; for the Christand the Son of the Blessedare not equivalents. The latter title points to our Lord's declarations that He was the Son of God, and is an instance of the later Jewish superstition which avoided using the divine name. Loving faith delights in the name of the Lord. Dead formalism changes reverence into dread, and will not speak it.

Sham reverence, feigned ignorance, affected wish for information, the false show of judicial impartiality, and other lies and vices not a few, are condensed in the question; and the fact that the judge had to ask it and hear the answer, is an instance of a divine purpose working through evil men, and compelling reluctant lips to speak words the meaning and bearing of which they little know. Jesus could not leave such a challenge unanswered. Silence then would have been abandonment of His claims. It was fitting that the representatives of the nation should, at that decisive moment, hear Him declare Himself Messiah. It was not fitting that He should be condemned on any other ground. In that answer, and its reception by the council, the nation's rejection of Jesus is, as it were, focused and compressed. This was the end of centuries of training by miracle, prophet and psalmist--the saddest instance in man's long, sad history of his awful power to frustrate God's patient educating! Our Lord's majestic I am, in one word answers both parts of the question, and then passes on, with strange calm and dignity, to point onwards to the time when the criminal will be the judge, and the judges will stand at His bar. The Son of Man, His ordinary designation of Himself, implies His true manhood, and His representative character, as perfect man, or, to use modern language, the realised idealof humanity. In the present connection, its employment in the same sentence as His assertion that He is the Son of God goes deep into the mystery of His twofold nature, and declares that His manhood had a supernatural origin and wielded divine prerogatives. Accordingly there follows the explicit prediction of His assumption of the highest of these after His death. The Cross was as plain to Him as ever; but beyond it gleamed the crown and the throne. He anticipates sitting on the right hand of power, which implies repose, enthronement, judicature, investiture with omnipotence, and administration of the universe. He anticipates coming in the clouds of heaven, which distinctly claims to be the future Judge of the world. His hearers could scarcely fail to discern the reference to Daniel's prophecy.

Was ever the irony of history more pungently exemplified than in an Annas and Caiaphas holding up hands of horror at the blasphemiesof Jesus? They rightly took His words to mean more than the claim of Messiahship as popularly understood. To say that He was the Christ was not blasphemy, but a claim demanding examination; but to say that He, the Son of Man, was Son of God and supreme Judge was so, according to their canons. How unconsciously the exclamation, What need we further witnesses?betrays the purpose for which the witnesses had been sought, as being simply His condemnation! They were neededto compass His death, which the council now gleefully feels to be secured. So with precipitate unanimity they vote. And this was Israel's welcome to their King, and the outcome of all their history! And it was the destruction of the national life. That howl of condemnation pronounced sentence on themselves and on the whole order of which they were the heads. The prisoner's eyes alone saw then what we and all men may see now--the handwriting on the wall of the high priest's palace: Weighed in the balance, and found wanting.

**III. The savage mockers and the patient Christ (verse 65).**

There is an evident antithesis between the allof verse 64 and the someof verse 65, which shows that the inflictors of the indignities were certain members of the council, whose fury carried them beyond all bounds of decency. The subsequent mention of the servantsconfirms this, especially when we adopt the more accurate rendering of the Revised Version, received Him with blows. Mark's account, then, is this: that, as soon as the unanimous howl of condemnation had beep uttered, some of the judges'(!) fell upon Jesus with spitting and clumsy ridicule and downright violence, and that afterwards He was handed over to the underlings, who were not slow to copy the example set them at the upper end of the hall.

It was not an ignorant mob who thus answered His claims, but the leaders and teachers--the crème de la crème of the nation. A wild beast lurks below the Pharisee's long robes and phylacteries; and the more that men have changed a living belief in religion for a formal profession, the more fiercely antagonistic are they to every attempt to realise its precepts and hopes. The religiousmen who mock Jesus in the name of traditional religion are by no means an extinct species. It is of little use to shudder at the blind cruelty of dead scribes and priests. Let us rather remember that the seeds of their sins are in us all, and take care to check their growth. What a volcano of hellish passion bursts out here! Spitting expresses disgust; blinding and asking for the names of the smiters is a clumsy attempt at wit and ridicule; buffeting is the last unrestrained form of hate and malice. The world has always paid its teachers and benefactors in such coin; but all other examples pale before this saddest, transcendent instance. Love is repaid by hate; a whole nation is blind to supreme and unspotted goodness; teachers steeped in law and prophetscannot see Him of and for whom law and prophets witnessed and were, when He stands before them. The sin of sins is the failure to recognise Jesus for what He is. His person and claims are the touchstone which tries every beholder of what sort He is.

How wonderful the silent patience of Jesus! He withholds not His face from shame and spitting. He gives His back to the smiters. Meek endurance and passive submission are not all which we have to behold there. This is more than an uncomplaining martyr. This is the sacrifice for the world's sin; and His bearing of all that men can inflict is more than heroism. It is redeeming love. His sad, loving eyes, wide open below their bandage, saw and pitied each rude smiter, even as He sees us all. They were and are eyes of infinite tenderness, ready to beam forgiveness; but they were and are the eyes of the Judge, who sees and repays His foes, as those who smite Him will one day find out.