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

**MARK-078**. **FIRST TO MARY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven devils."*

*Mark 16:9*

A great pile of legend has been built on the one or two notices of Mary Magdalene in Scripture. Art, poetry, and philanthropy have accepted and inculcated these, till we almost feel as if they were bits of the Bible. But there is not the shadow of a foundation for them. She has generally been identified with the woman in Luke's Gospel who was a sinner. There is no reason at all for that identification. On the contrary, there is a reason against it, in the fact that immediately after that narrative she is named as one of the little band of women who ministered to Jesus.

Here is all that we know of her: that Christ cast out the seven devils; that she became one of the Galilean women, including the mothers of Jesus and of John, who ministered to Him of their substance; that she was one of the Marys at the Cross and saw the interment; that she came to the sepulchre, heard the angel's message, went to John with it, came back and stood without at the sepulchre, saw the Lord, and, having heard His voice and clasped His feet, returned to the little company, and then she drops out of the narrative and is no more named. That is all. It is enough. There are large lessons in this fact which Mark (or whoever wrote this chapter) gives with such emphasis, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene.

Think what the Resurrection is--how stupendous and wonderful! Who might have been expected to be its witnesses? But see! the first eye that beholds is this poor sin-stained woman's. What a distance between the two extremes of her experience--devil-ridden and gazing on the Risen Saviour!

**I. An example of the depth to which the soul of man can descend.**

This fact of possession is very obscure and strange. I doubt whether we can understand it. But I cannot see how we can bring it down to the level of mere disease without involving Jesus Christ in the charge of consciously aiding in upholding what, if it be not an awful truth, is one of the grimmest, ghastliest superstitions that ever terrified men.

In all ways He gives in His adhesion to the fact of demoniacal possession. He speaks to the demons, and of them, rebukes them, holds conversations with them, charges them to be silent. He distinguishes between possession and diseases. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead--these commands bring together forms of sickness running its course; why should He separate from them His next command and endowment, cast out devils, unless because He regarded demoniacal possession as separate from sickness in any form? He sees in His casting of them out the triumph over the personal power of evil. I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. But while the fact seems to be established, the thing is only known to us by its signs. These were madness, melancholy, sometimes dumbness, sometimes fits and convulsions; the man was dominated by an alien power; there was a strange, awful double consciousness; We are many, My name is Legion. There was absolute control by this alien power, which like some parasitical worm had rooted itself within the poor wretch, and there lived upon his blood and life juices--only that it lived in the spirit, dominated the will, and controlled the nature.

Probably there had always been the yielding to the impulse to sin of some sort, or at any rate the man had opened the door for the devil to come in.

This woman had been in the deepest depths of this awful abyss. Seven is the numerical symbol of completeness, so she had been utterly devil-ridden. And she had once been a little child in some Galilean home, and parents had seen her budding beauty and early, gentle, womanly ways. And now, think of the havoc! the distorted face, the foul words, the blasphemous thoughts! And is this worse than our sinful case? Are not the devils that possess us as real and powerful?

**II. An example of the cleansing power of Christ.**

We know nothing about how she had come under His merciful eye, nor any of the circumstances of her healing, but only that this woman, with whom the serpent was so closely intertwined, as in some pictures of Eve's temptation, was not beyond His reach, and was set free. Note-- There is no condition of human misery which Christ cannot alleviate.

* None is so sunk in sin that He cannot redeem them.
* For all in the world there is hope.
* Look on the extremest forms of sin. We can regard them all with the assurance that Christ can cleanse them--prostitutes, thieves, respectable worldlings.
* None is so bad as to have lost His love.
* None is so bad as to be excluded from the purpose of His death.
* None is so bad as to be beyond the reach of His cleansing power.
* None has wandered so far that he cannot come back.
* Think of the earliest believers--a thief, a woman that was a sinner, this Mary, a Zacchaeus, a persecuting Paul, a rude, rough jailer, etc.
* Remember Paul's description of a class of the Corinthian saints--'such were some of you.

As long as man is man, so long is God ready to receive him back. There is no place where sun does not shine. No heart is given over to irremediable hardness. None ever comes to Christ in vain.

* The Saviour is greater than all our sins.
* The deliverance is more than sufficient for the worst.
* God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham.
* Ezekiel's vision of dry bones.

**III. An example of how the remembrance of past and pardoned sin may be a blessing.**

Mary evidently tried always to be beside Him. The cure had been perfect, but perhaps there was a tremulous fear, as in the man that prayed that he might be with Him.

And so, look how all the notices give us one picture of a heart set on Him. There were—

* Consciousness of weakness, that made her long for His presence as a security.
* Deep love, that made her long for His presence as a joy.
* Thankful gratitude, that made her long for opportunities to serve Him.

And this is what the remembrance of Jesus should be to us.

**IV. An example of how the most degraded may rise highest in fellowship with Christ.**

Firstto her, because she needed Him and longed for Him.

Now this is but an illustration of the great principle that by God's mercy sin when it is hated and pardoned may be made to subserve our highest joys.

It is not sin which separates us from God, but it is unpardoned sin. Not that the more we sin the more we are fit for Him, for all sin is loss. There are ways in which even forgiven and repented sin may injure a man. But there is nothing in it to hinder our coming close to the Saviour and enjoying all the fulness of His love, so that if we use it rightly it may become a help.

If it leads us to that clinging of which we have just spoken, then we shall come nearer to God for it.

* The divine presence is always given to those who long for it.
* Sin may help to kindle such longings.
* He who has been almost dead in the wilderness will keep near the guide. The man that has been starved with cold in Arctic night will prize the glory and grace of sunshine in fairer lands.
* Instances in Church history--Paul, Augustine, Bunyan.
* Publicans and harlots go into the kingdom before you.
* The noblest illustration is in heaven, where men lead the song of Redemption.
* God uses sin as a black background on which the brightest rainbow tints of His mercy are displayed.

You can come to this Saviour whatever you have been. I say to no man, Sin, for it does not matter. But I do say, If you are conscious of sin, deep, dark, damning, that makes no barrier between you and God. You may come all the nearer for it if you will let your past teach you to long for His love and to lean on Him.

He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, and those who stand nearest the throne and lead the anthems of heaven, and look up with undazzled angelsfaces to the God of their joy, whose name blazes on their foreheads, all these were guilty, sinful men. But they have washed their robes and made them white. There will be in heaven some of the worst sinners that ever lived on earth. There will not be one out of whom He has not cast seven devils.