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

**MATTHEW-006. THE HERALD OF THE KING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea¬ 2. And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. 3. For this is He that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. 4. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. 5. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea¬ and all the region round about Jordan, 6. And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. 7. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8. Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: 9. And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. 10. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the flre, 11. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to clean he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: 12. Whose fan is in His hand, and He will throughly purge His floor, and gather His wheat into the garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

*Matthew 3:1-12*

Matthew's Gospel is emphatically the Gospel of the kingdom. The keynote sounded in the story of the Magi dominates the whole. We have stood by the cradle of the King, and seen the homage and the dread which surrounded it. We have seen the usurper's hatred and the divine guardianship. Now we hear the voice of the herald of the King. This section may be conveniently treated as falling into two parts: the first, from verse 1 to verse 6, a general outline of the Baptist's person and work; the second, from verse 7 to end, a more detailed account of his preaching.

**I. We have an outline sketch of the herald and of his work.**

The voice of prophecy had fallen silent for four hundred years. Now, when it is once more heard, it sounds in exactly the same key as when it ceased. Its last word had been the prediction of the day of the Lord, and of the coming of Elijah once more. John was Elijah over again. There were the same garb, the same isolation, the same fearlessness, the same grim, gaunt strength, the same fiery energy of rebuke which bearded kings in the full fury of their self-will. Elijah, Ahab, and Jezebel have their doubles in John, Herod, and Herodias. The closing words of Malachi, which Matthew, singularly enough, does not quote, are the best explication of the character and work of the Baptist. His portrait is flung on the canvas with the same startling abruptness with which Elijah is introduced. Matthew makes no allusion to his relationship to Jesus, has nothing to say about his birth or long seclusion in the desert. He gives no hint that his vague expression in these days covers thirty years. John leaps, as it were, into the arena full grown and full armed. His work is described by one word--preaching; out of which all modern associations, which have too often made it a synonym for long-winded tediousness and toothless platitudes, must be removed. It means proclaiming, or acting as a herald, and implies the uplifted voice and the brief, urgent message of one who runs before the chariot, and shouts, The king! the king!

His message is summed up in two sentences, two blasts of the trumpet: the call to repentance, and the rousing proclamation that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In the former he but reproduces the tone of earlier prophecy, when he insists on a thorough change of disposition and a true sorrow for sin. But he advances far beyond his precursors in the latter, which is the reason for repentance. They had seen the vision of the kingdom and the King, but not nigh. He has to peal into the drowsy ears of a generation which had almost forgotten the ancient hope, that it was at the very threshold. Like some solitary stern crag which catches the light of the sun yet unrisen but hastening upwards, long before the shadowed valleys, John flamed above his generation all aglow with the light, as the witness that in another moment it would spring above the eastern horizon. But he sees that this is no joyful message to them. Nothing is more remarkable in his preaching than the sombre hues with which his expectation of the day of the Lord is coloured. To what purpose is the day of the Lord to you? It is darkness and not light; it is to be judgment, therefore repentance is the preparation.

The gleam and purity of lofty spiritual ideas are soon darkened, as a film forms on quicksilver after short exposure. John's contemporaries thought that the kingdom of heaven meant exclusive privileges, and their rule over the heathen. They had all but lost the thought that it meant first God's rule over their wills, and their harmony with the glad obedience of heaven. They had to be rudely shaken out of their self-complacency and taught that the livery of the King was purity, and the preparation for His coming, penitence.

The next touch in this outline sketch is John's fulfilment of prophecy. Matthew probably knew that wonderfully touching and lowly answer of his to the deputation from the ecclesiastical authorities, which at once claimed prophetic authority and disclaimed personal importance, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. The prophecy in its original application refers to the preparation of a path in the desert, for Jehovah coming to redeem His people from captivity. The use made of it by Matthew, and endorsed by all the evangelists, rests on the principle, without which we have no clue to the significance of the Old Testament, that the history of Israel is prophetic, and that the bondage and deliverance are types of the sorer captivity from which Christ redeems, and of the grander deliverance which He effects.

Our evangelist gives a vivid picture of the asceticism of John, which was one secret, as our Lord pointed out, of his hold on the people. The more luxuriously self-indulgent men are, the more are they fascinated by religious self-denial. A man clothed in soft raiment would have drawn no crowds. A religious teacher must be clearly free from sensual appetites and love of ease, if he is to stir the multitude. John's rough garb and coarse food were not assumed by him to create an impression. He was no mere imitator of the old prophets, though he wore a robe like Elijah's. His asceticism was the expression of his severe, solitary spirit, detached from the delights of sense, and even from the softer play of loves, because the coming kingdom flamed ever before him, and the age seemed to him to be rotting and ready for the fire. There is no need to bring in irrelevant learning about Essenes to account for his mode of life. The thoughts which burned in him drove him into the wilderness. He who was possessed with them could not come eating and drinking, and might well seem to sense-bound wonderers as if some demonic force, other than ordinary motives, tyrannised over him.

The last point in this brief résumé of John's work is the universal excitement which it produced. He did not come out of the desert with his message. If men would hear it, they must go to him. And they went. All the southern portion of the country seemed to empty itself into the wilderness. Sleeping national hopes revived, the awe of the coming judgment seized all classes. It was so long since a fiery soul had scattered flaming words, and religious teachers had for so many centuries been mumbling the old well-worn formulas, and splitting hairs, that it was an apocalypse to hear once more the accent of conviction from a man who really believed every word he said, and himself thrilled with the solemn truths which he thundered. Wherever a religious teacher shows that he has John's qualities, as our Lord in His eulogium analysed them--namely, unalterable resolution, like an iron pillar, and not like a reed shaken with the wind, conspicuous superiority to considerations of ease and comfort, a direct vision of the unseen, and a message from God, the crowds will go out to see him; and even if the enthusiasm be shallow and transient, some spasm of conviction will pass across many a conscience, and some will be pointed by him to the King.

**II. The second portion of this section is a more detailed account of John's preaching, which Matthew gives as addressed to the Pharisees and Sadducees.**

We are not to suppose that at any time John had a congregation exclusively made up of such; nor that these words were addressed to them only. What is emphasised is the fact that among the crowds were many of both these parties, the religious aristocrats who represented two tendencies of mind bitterly antagonistic, and each unlikely to be drawn to the prophet. Self-righteous pedants who had turned religion into a jumble of petty precepts, and very superior persons who keenly appreciated the good things of this world, and were too enlightened to have much belief in anything, and too comfortable to be enthusiasts, were not hopeful material. If they were drawn into the current, it must have run strong indeed. These representatives of the highest and coldest classes of the nation had the very same red-hot words flung at them as the mob had. Luke tells us that the first words in this summary were spoken to the people. Both representations are true. All fared alike. So they should, and so they always will, if a real prophet has to talk to them. John's salutation is excessively rough and rude. Honeyed words were not in his line; he had not lived in the desert for all these years, and held converse with God and his own heart, without having learned that his business was to smite on conscience with a strong hand, and to tear away the masks which hid men from themselves. The whole spirit of the old prophets was revived in his brusque, almost fierce, address to such very learned, religious, and distinguished personages. Isaiah in his day had called their predecessors rulers of Sodom; John was not scolding when he called his hearers ye offspring of vipers but charging them with moral corruption and creeping earthliness.

The summary of his preaching is like a succession of lightning flashes. We can but note in a word or two each flash as it flames and strikes. The remarkable thing about his teaching is that, in his hands, the great hope of Israel became a message of terror, the proclamation of the impending kingdom passed into a denunciation of the wrath to come, set forth with a tremendous wealth of imagery as the axe lying at the root of the trees, the fan winnowing the wheat from the chaff, the destroying fire. That wrath was inseparable from the coming of the King; for His righteous reign necessarily meant punishment of unrighteousness. So all the older prophets had said, and John was but carrying on their testimony. So Christ has said. No more terrible warnings of the certain judgment of evil which is involved in His merciful work, have ever been given, than fell from the lips into which grace was poured. We need to-day a clearer discernment of the truth which flamed before John's eyes, that the full proclamation of the kingdom of heaven must include the plain teaching of the wrath to come.

Next comes the urgent demand for reformation of life as the sign of real repentance. John's exhortation does not touch the deepest ground for repentance which is laid in the heart-softening love of God manifested in the sacrifice of His Son, but is based wholly on the certainty of judgment. So far, it is incomplete; but the demand for righteous living as the only test of religious emotion is fully Christian, and needed in this generation as much as it ever was. All preachers and others concerned in revivals may well learn a lesson, and while they follow John in seeking to arouse torpid consciences by the terrors which are a part of the gospel, should not forget to demand, not merely an emotional repentance, but the solid fruits which alone guarantee the worth of the emotion.

The next flash strikes the lofty structure of confidence in their descent. John knows that every man in that listening crowd believes that his birth secured him joy and dominion when Messiah came. So he wrenches away this shield against which his sharpest arrows were blunted. What a murmur of angry denial must have met his contemptuous, audacious denial of their trusted privilege! The pebbles on the Jordan beach, or the loose rocks scattered so plentifully over the desert, could be made as good sons of Abraham as they. A glimpse of the transference of the kingdom to the despised Gentiles passed across his vision. And in these far-reaching words lay the anticipation, not only of the destruction of all Jewish exclusiveness, but of the miracles of quickening to be wrought on the stony hearts of those beyond its pale.

Once more with a new emblem the immediate beginning of the judgment is proclaimed, and its principles and issues are declared. The sharp axe lies at the roots of the tree, ready to be lifted and buried in its bark. The woodman's eye is looking over the forest; he marks with the fatal red line the worthless trees, and at once the swinging blows come down, and the timber is carted away to be burned. The trees are men. The judgment is an individualising one, and all-embracing. Nothing but actual righteousness of life will endure. All else will be destroyed.

The coming of the kingdom implied the coming of the King. John knew that the King was a man, and that He was at the door. So his sermon reaches its climax in the ringing proclamation of His advent. The first noticeable feature in it is the utter humility of the dauntless prophet before the yet veiled Sovereign. All the fiery force, the righteous scorn and anger, the unflinching bravery, melt into meek submission. He knows the limits of his own power, and gladly recognises the infinite superiority of the coming One. He never moved from that lowly attitude. Even when his followers tried to stir up base jealousy in him at being distanced by the Christ, who, as they suggested, owed His first recognition to him, all that his immovable self-abnegation cared to answer was, He must increase, but I must decrease. He was glad to fade in the light of the Sun that he loved. What a wealth of suppressed emotion and lowly love there is in the words so pathetic from the lips of the lonely ascetic, whom no home joys had ever cheered: He that hath the bride is the bridegroom... . My joy is fulfilled!

Note, too, the grand conception of the gifts of the King. John knew that his baptism was, like the water in which he immersed, cold, and incapable of giving life. It symbolised, but did not effect, cleansing, any more than his preaching righteousness could produce righteousness. But the King would come, bringing with Him the gift of a mighty Spirit, whose quick energy, transforming dead matter into its own likeness, burning out the foul stains from character, and melting cold hearts into radiant warmth, should do all that his poor, cold, outward baptism only shadowed. Form and substance of this great promise gather up many Old Testament utterances. From of old, fire had been the emblem of the divine nature, not only, nor chiefly, as destructive, but rather as life-giving, cleansing, gladdening, fructifying, transforming. From of old, the promise of a divine Spirit poured out on all flesh had been connected with the kingdom of Messiah; and John but reiterates the uniform voice of prophecy, even as he anticipates the crowning gift of the gospel, in this saying.

Note, further, the renewed prophecy of judgment. There is something very solemn in the stern refrain at the end of each of three consecutive verses,--with fire. The first and the third refer to the destructive fire; the second, to the cleansing Spirit. But the fire that destroys is not unconnected with that which purifies. And the very same divine flame, if welcomed and yielded to, works purity, and if repelled and scorned, consumes. The rustic simplicity of the figures of the husbandman with his winnowing-shovel, the threshing-floor exposed to every wind, the stored wheat, the rootless, lifeless, worthless chaff, and the fierce fire in some corner of the autumn field where it is utterly burned up--needs no comment. They add nothing but another vivid picture to the thoughts already dealt with. But the question arises as to the whole of the representation of judgment here: Does it look beyond the present world? I see no reason for supposing that John was speaking about anything but the sifting and destroying which would attend the coming of the looked-for kingdom on earth. The principles which he laid down are, no doubt, true for both worlds; but the application of them which his prophetic mission embraced, lies on this side of the grave.

Note, further, the limitations in John's knowledge of the King. His prophecy unites, as contemporaneous, events which, in fact, are widely separate,--the coming of Christ, and the judgments which He executes, whether on Israel or in the final great day of the Lord. There is no perspective in prophecy. The future is foreshortened, and great gulfs of centuries are passed over, as, standing on a plain, we see it as continuous, though it may really be cleft by deep ravines. He did not know what manner of time the spirit which was in him did signify. No doubt his expectations were correct, in so far as Christ's coming really sifted and separated, and was the rising and the falling of many; but it was not attended by such tokens as John inferred. Hence we can understand his doubts when in prison, and learn that a prophet was often mistaken as to the meaning of his message.

Again, while we have here a clear prediction of the Spirit as bestowed by Christ, we find no hint of His work as the sacrifice for sin, through whom the guilt which no repentance and no outward baptism could touch was taken away. The Gospel of John gives us later utterances of the Baptist's, by which we learn that he advanced beyond the point at which he stood here. Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world, was his message after Christ's baptism. It is the last, highest voice of prophecy. The proclamation of a kingdom of heaven, of a king mighty and righteous, whose coming kindled a fire of judgment, and a blessed fire of purifying, into one or other of which all men must be plunged, contained elements of terror, as well as of hope. It needed completion by that later word.

When John stretched out his forefinger, and with awe-struck voice bade his hearers look at Jesus coming to him, prophecy had done its work. The promise had been gradually concentrated on the nation, the tribe, the house, and now it falls on the person. The dove narrows its circling flight till it lights on His head. The goal has been reached, too, in the clear declaration of Messiah's work. He is King, Giver of the Spirit, Judge, but He is before all else the Sacrifice for the world's sins. Therefore he to whom it was given to utter that great saying was a prophet, and more than a prophet; and when he had spoken it, there was nothing more for him to do but to decrease. He was like the breeze before sunrise, which springs up, as crying The dawn! the dawn! and dies away.