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

**MATTHEW-010. THE VICTORY OF THE KING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. 2. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He was afterward an hungred. 3. And when the tempter came to Him, he said, If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. 4. But He answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. 5. Then the devil taketh Him up into the holy city, and setteth Him on a pinnacle of the temple, 6. And saith unto Him, If Thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down: for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee: and in their hands they shall bear Thee up, lest at any time Thou dash Thy foot against a stone. 7. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. 8. Again, the devil taketh Him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; 9. And saith unto Him, All these things will I give Thee, if Thou wilt fall down and worship me. 10. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve. 11. Then the devil leaveth Him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto Him."*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

Every word of the first verses of this narrative is full of meaning. Then marks the immediate connection, not only in time but in causation, between the baptism and the temptation. The latter followed necessarily on the former. Of the Spirit--then God does lead His Son into temptation. For us all, as for Christ, it is true that, though God does not tempt as wishing us to fall, He does so order our lives that they carry us into places where the metal of our religion is tried. To be tempted--then a pure, sinless human nature is capable of temptation, and the King has to begin his career by a battle. Of the devil--then there is a dark kingdom of evil, and a personal head of it, the prince of darkness. He knows His rival, and yet He knows him but partially. He strides out to meet him in desperate duel, as Goliath did the stripling whom he despised; and both hosts pause and gaze. To a sinless nature no temptation can arise from within, but must be presented from without.

We leave untouched the question as to the manner of this temptation, which remains equally real, whether we conceive that the tempter appeared in bodily form, and actually carried the body of our Lord from place to place, or whether we suppose that, during it all, Christ sat silent, and apparently alone in the wilderness. We only divert attention from the true importance of the incident by giving prominence to picturesque or questionable externals of it.

**I. The first assault and repulse, in the desert.**

Unlike John the Baptist, whose austere spirit was unfolded in the desert, Jesus grew up among men, passing through and sanctifying childhood and youth, home duties, and innocent pleasures. But ere He enters on His work, the need which every soul appointed to high and hard tasks has felt, namely, the need for seclusion and communion with God in solitude, was felt by Him. As it had been for Moses and Elijah, the wilderness was His school; and as the collective Israel, so the personal Son of God, has to be led into the wilderness, that there God may speak to His heart. So deep and rapt was the communion, that, for forty days, spirit so mastered flesh that the need and desire for food were suspended. But when He touched earth again, the pinch of hunger began. Analogous cases of the power of high emotion to hold physical wants in abeyance are sufficiently familiar to make so extreme an instance explicable.

We have to distinguish in the first temptation between the sphere in which it moves, the act suggested, and the true nature of the act as dragged to light in Christ's answer. The sphere is that of the physical nature. Hunger has nothing to do with right or wrong. It asserts itself independent of all considerations. In itself neutral, it may, like all physical cravings, lead to sin. Most men are most tempted by fleshly desires. Satan had tried the same bait before on the first Adam. It had answered so well then, that he thinks himself wise in bringing it out once more. Adam, in his garden, surrounded by all that sense needed, had yielded, and thereby had turned the garden into desert; Christ, in the desert, pressed by hunger, does not yield, and thereby turns the desert into a garden again. At the beginning of His course He is tempted by the innocent desire to secure physical support; at its close He is tempted by the innocent desire to avoid physical pain. He overcomes both, and by His victories in the wilderness so unlike the garden, and in Gethsemane, another garden, so unlike the first, He brings a statelier Eden back to man.

The act suggested seems not only innocent, but in accordance with His dignity. It was a strange anomaly for the Son of God, on whose head the dove had descended, and in whose ears the voice had sounded, to be at the point of starving. What more unbecoming than that one possessed of His mysterious closeness to God should be suffering from such ignoble necessities? What more foolish than to continue to hunger, when a word could spread a table in the wilderness? John had said that God could make children of Abraham out of these stones. Could He not make bread out of them? The suggestion sounds benevolent, sensible, almost religious. The need is real, the remedy possible and easy; the result desirable as preserving valuable life, and putting an end to an anomaly, and the objections apparently nil. The bait is skilfully wound over the barbed hook.

Christ's answer tears it away, and discloses the sharp points. He will not discuss with Satan whether He is Son of God or no. To the Jews He was wont to answer, I say unto you; to Satan He answers, It is written. He puts honour on the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and sets us an example of how to wield it. The words quoted are found in the account of Israel's miraculous sustenance in the desert by the manna, and are applied by Christ to Himself, not as Son of God, but as simple man. They contain the great truth that God can feed men, in their physical life, by bread or without bread. When He does it by bread or other ordinary means, it is even then not the material substance in itself, but His will operating through it, which feeds. He can abolish all the outward means, and still keep a man alive. There is no reference to the truth which is sometimes forcibly inserted into this saying, that man has a higher than bodily life, and needs more than material bread to feed the hunger of the soul. The whole scope of the words is to state the law of physical nourishment as dependent at last on the divine will, and therefore equally capable of being accomplished with or without bread, by ordinary means or apart from these.

The bearing of the words on Christ's hunger is twofold: First, He will not use His miraculous powers to provide food, for that would be to distrust God, and so to cast off His filial dependence; second, He will not separate Himself from His brethren, and provide for Himself by a way not open to them, for that would really be to reverse the very purpose of His incarnation and to defeat His whole work. He has come to bear all man's burdens, and shall He begin by separating Himself from them? Therefore He answers in words which declare the law for man, and thereby merges all that was distinctive in His position in a loving participation in our lot. If the Captain of our Salvation had begun by refusing to share the privations of the rank and file, and had provided dainties for Himself, what would have become of His making common cause with them? The temptation addressed to Christ's physical nature was, to put it roughly, Look out for yourself. His answer was, As Son of God, I hold by My filial dependence. As man, I share My brethren's lot, and am content to live as they live.

**II. The second assault and repulse, on the temple.**

We need not touch on the questions as to whether our Lord's body was really transported to the temple, and, if so, to what part of it. But we may point out that there is nothing in the narrative to warrant the usual interpretation of this temptation, as being addressed to the desire of recognition, and as equivalent to the suggestion that our Lord should show Himself, by a stupendous miracle before the multitude, as the Messiah. There is nothing about spectators, and no sign that the dread solitude wrapping these two was broken by others. We must seek for the point of the second temptation in another direction.

The very locality chosen for it helps us to the right understanding of it. There were plenty of cliffs in the desert, down which a fall would have been fatal. Why not choose one of them? The temple was God's house, the fitting scene for an attempt to work disaster by the abuse of religious ideas. The former temptation underlies this. That had sought to move Jesus to cast off His filial confidence; this seeks to pervert that confidence, and through it to lead Him to cast off filial obedience. Therefore the Devil quotes Scripture for his purpose. What could be more religious than an act of daring based upon faith, which again was based on a word which proceeded out of the mouth of God? It is not in the suppression of certain words in the quotation that Satan's error lies. The omitted words are not material. What did he hope to accomplish by this suggestion? If Jesus was, in bodily reality, standing on the summit of the temple, the tempter, profoundly disbelieving the promise, may have thought that the leap would end his anxieties by the death of his rival. But, at any rate, he sought to lead His faith into wrong paths, and to incite to what was really sinful self-will under the guise of absolute trust.

Our Lord's answer, again drawn from Deuteronomy, strips off the disguise from the action which seemed so trustful. He changes the plural verb of the original passage into the singular, thus at once taking as His own personal obligation the general command, and pointing a sharp arrow at His foe, who was now knowingly or unknowingly so flagrantly breaking that law. If God had bidden Jesus cast Himself down, to do it would have been right. As He had not, to do it was not faith, but self-will. To cast Himself into dangers needlessly, and then to trust God (whom He had not consulted about going into them) to get Him out, was to tempt God. True faith is ever accompanied with true docility. He had come to do His Father's will. A divine must ruled His life. Was He to begin His career by throwing off His allegiance on pretext of trust? If the Captain of our Salvation commences the campaign by rebellion, how can He lead the rank and file to that surrender of their own wills which is victory?

The lessons for us from the second temptation are weighty. Faith may be perverted. It may even lead to abandoning filial submission. God's promised protection is available, not in paths of our own choosing, but only where He has sent us. If we take the leap without His command, we shall fall mangled on the very temple pavement. It is when we are in the way which He has prescribed that the angels of God whom He has promised meet us. How many scandals in the falls of good men would have been avoided, and how many mad enterprises would have been unattempted, and how much more clearly would the relations of filial faith and filial obedience have been understood, if the teaching of this second temptation had been laid to heart!

**III. The final assault and repulse, on the mountain.**

Again the scene changes, because the stress of the temptation is different. The exceeding high mountain is not to be looked for in our atlases. The manner in which all the glories of the world's kingdoms were flashed in one dazzling panorama, like an instantaneous photograph, before Christ's eyes, is beyond our knowledge. We note that Satan has no more to say about the Son of God. He has been foiled in both his assaults on Christ in that character. If He stood firm in filial trust and in filial submission, there was no more to be done. So the tempter tries new weapons, and seeks to pervert the desire for that dominion over the world which was to be a consequence of the sonship. He has not been able to touch Him as Son; can he not spoil Him as King? They are rivals: can they not strike up a treaty? Jesus thinks that He is going to reign as God's viceroy; can He not be induced, as a much quicker way of getting to His end, to become Satan's? Such a scheme sounds very stupid; but Satan is very stupid, for all his wisdom, and the hopeless folly of his proposal is typical of the absurdities which lie in all sins. There is an old play, the title of which would be coarse if it were not so true, The Devil is an Ass.

His boast, like all his wiles, is a little truth and a great lie. It is true that his servants do often manage to climb into thrones and other high places. It is true that beggars and worse than beggars on horseback, and princes and better than princes walking, is often the rule. It is true that the crowned saints of the world might be counted on the fingers. But, for all that, the Father of lies was like himself in this promise. He did not say that, if he gives a kingdom to one of his servants, he takes it from another. He did not say that his gifts are shams, and fade away when the daylight comes. He did not say that he and his are, after all, tools in God's hands.

What was it that he thought he was appealing to in Christ? Ambition? He knew that Jesus was destined to be King of the earth, and he blunders to the conclusion that His reign is to be such as he could help Him to. How impossible it is for Satan to penetrate the depths of that loving heart! How mole-blind evil is to the radiant light of goodness! How hate fails when it tries to fathom love! If all that Satan meant by the glory of the world had been Christ's, He would have been no nearer His heart's desire.

The temptation was not only to fling away the ideal of His kingdom, but to reverse the means for its establishment. Neither temptation could originate within Christ's heart, but both beset Him all His life. The cravings of His followers, the expectations of His race, the certainty of an enthusiastic response if He would put Himself at their head, and the equal certainty of death if He would not, were always urging Him to the very same thing.

There is nothing weaker, says an old school-man, than the Devil stripped naked. The mask is thrown off at last, and swift and smiting comes the gesture and the word of abhorrence, Get thee hence, Satan,--now revealed in thy true colours. Jesus still couches His refusal in Scripture words, as if sheltering Himself behind their broad shield. It is safest to meet temptation, not by our own reasonings and thoughts, but by the words which cannot lie. As He had held unmoved, by His filial trust and His filial submission, now He clings to the foundation principle of all religion,--the exclusive worship and service of God. His kingdom is to be a kingdom of priests; therefore to begin it by such an act would be suicide. It is to be the victorious antagonist of Satan's kingdom, because it is to lead all men to worship God alone; therefore enmity, not alliance, is to be between these two. Christ's last words are not only His final refusal of all the baits, but the ringing proclamation of war to the death, and that a war which will end in victory. The enemy's quiver is empty. He feels that he has met more than his match, so he skulks from the field, beaten for the first time by having encountered a heart which all his fiery darts failed to inflame, and dimly foreseeing yet more utter defeat.

The last temptation teaches us both the nature of Christ's kingdom and the means of its establishment. It is a rule over men's hearts and wills, swaying them to goodness and the exclusive worship and service of God. That being so, the way to found it follows of course. It can only be set up by suffering, utter self-sacrifice, gentleness, and goodness. Christ is King of all because He is servant of all. His cross is His throne. His realm is of hearts softened, cleansed, made gladly obedient, and growingly like Himself. For such a king, weapons of force are impossible, and for His subjects the same law holds. They have often tried to fight for Christ with the Devil's weapons, to make compliance with him for ends which they thought good, to keep terms with evil, or to adopt worldly policy, craft, or force. They have never succeeded, and, thank God! they never will.

That duel was fought for us. There we all conquered, if we will hold fast by Him who conquered then, and thereby taught our hands to war and our fingers to fight. The strong man is bound. The spoiling of his house follows of course, and is but a question of time.