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

**MATTHEW-012. THE EARLY WELCOME AND THE FIRST MINISTERS OF THE KING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17. From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. 18. And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. 19. And He saith unto them, Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. 20. And they straightway left their nets, and followed Him. 21. And going on from thence, He saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets: and He called them. 22. And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed Him. 23. And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. 24. And His fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto Him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and He healed them. 25. And there followed Him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judæ¡¬ and from beyond Jordan."*

*Matthew 4:17-25*

In these verses we have a summary of our Lord's early Galilean ministry. The events are so presented and combined as to give an impression as of a triumphal progress of the newly anointed monarch. He sweeps through the northern regions, everywhere exercising the twofold office of teaching and healing, and everywhere followed by eager crowds. This joyous burst of the new power, like some strong fountain leaping into the sunshine, and this rush of popular enthusiasm, are meant to heighten the impression of the subsequent hostility of the people. The King welcomed at first is crucified at last. It was roses, roses, all the way in these early days, but they withered soon. There are three points in these verses: the King acting as His own herald; the King calling His first servants; and the King wielding His power and welcomed by His subjects.

**I. In verse 17 we have a striking picture of the King as His own herald.**

The word rendered preach of course means, literally, to proclaim as a herald does. It is remarkable that this earliest phase of our Lord's teaching is described in the same words as John's preaching. The stern voice was silenced. Instead of the free wilderness, John had now the gloomy walls of Machæµ³ for the bound of his activity. But Jesus takes up his message, though with a difference. The severe imagery of the axe, the fan, the fire, is not repeated, as it would seem. Sterner words than John's could fall hot from the lips into which grace was poured; but the time for these was not yet come. It may seem singular that Christ should have spoken of the kingdom, and been silent concerning the King. But such silence was only of a piece with the reticence which marked His whole teaching, and was a sign of His wise adaptation of His words to the capacity of His hearers, as well as of His lowliness. He veiled His royalty by deigning to be His own herald; by substituting the proclamation of the abstract, the kingdom, for the concrete, the King; by seeming to careless hearers to be but the continuer of the forerunner's message; by the simple, remote region which He chose for His earliest work. The belief that the kingdom was at hand was equally necessary, and repentance equally indispensable as preparation for it, whoever the King might be. The same law of congruity between message and hearers, which He enjoined on His followers, when He bade them be careful where they flung their pearls, and which governed His own fullest final revelations to His truest friends, when He said, I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot carry them now, moulded His first words to the excited but ignorant crowds.

**II. The King's mandate summoning His servants.**

The call of the first four disciples is so told as to make prominent these points: the brotherhood of the two pairs; their occupation at the moment of their call; the brief, authoritative word of Christ; His investiture of them with new functions, which yet in some sense were the prolongation of the old; their unhesitating, instantaneous obedience and willing abandonment of their all. These points all help the impression of regal power, and do something to explain the nature of the kingdom and the heart of the King. Matthew does not seem to have known of the previous intercourse of the four with Jesus, as recorded In John 1. His narrative, taken alone, would lay stress on the strange influence wielded by Jesus over these busy fishermen. But that influence is no less remarkable, and becomes more explicable, on taking John's supplemental account into consideration. It tells us that one brother of each pair--namely Andrew, and probably John--had sought Jesus on the Baptist's testimony, and in that never-to-be-forgotten night had acquired the conviction that He was the King of Israel. It tells us, too, that Andrew first found his own brother, Simon; from which we may infer that the other one of the two next found his brother James, and that each brought his own brother to Jesus. The bond of discipleship was then riveted. But apparently, when Jesus went up to Jerusalem on that first journey recorded only in John's Gospel, the four went back to their fishing, and waited for His further call. It came in the manner which Matthew describes. The background, which John enables us to fill in, shows us that their following was no sudden blind impulse, but the deliberate surrender of men who knew well what they were doing, though they had not fathomed the whole truth as to His kingdom and their place in it. They knew, at any rate, that He was the Messiah and that they were called by a voice, which they ought to obey, to be His soldiers and partisans. They could not but know that the call meant danger, hardship, conflict. They rallied to the call, as soldiers might when the commander honours them by reading out their names, as picked for leaders of the storming-party.

Was this the same incident which St. Luke narrates as following the first miraculous draught of fishes? That is one of the difficulties in harmonising the synoptic narratives which will always divide opinions. On the whole, I incline to think it most natural to answer no. The reasons would take us too far afield. But accepting that view, we may note through how many stages Jesus led this group of His disciples before they were fully recognised as apostles. First there was their attachment to Him as disciples, which in no degree interfered with their trade. Then came this call to more close attendance on Him, which, however, was probably still somewhat intermittent. Then followed the call recorded by Luke, which finally tore them from their homes; and, last of all, their appointment as apostles. At each stage they might have had opportunity to have returned. Their vocation in the kingdom dawns on them slowly. They and we are led on, by little and little and little, to posts and tasks of which we do not dream at the beginning. Duty opens before the docile heart bit by bit. Abram is led to Harran, and only there learns his ultimate destination. Obedience is rewarded by the summons to more complete surrender, which is also fuller possession of Him for whom the surrender is made.

The word of a king is with power. Christ's call is authoritative in its brevity. All duty lies in Come ye after Me. He does not need to use arguments. From the very first this meek and lowly man assumes a tone which on other lips we call arrogant. His style is royal. His mouth is autocratic. He knows that He has the right to command. And, strangely enough, the world admits the right, and finds nothing unworthy of His meekness--a meekness of which He was fully conscious, which is another paradox--in this unconditional claim of absolute submission to his curt orders. What is the explanation of this tone of authority? How comes it that the kingdom which is liberty is, from its very foundation, an absolute despotism? That same peremptory summons reaches beyond these four fishermen to us all. They were the first to hear it, and continued to hold pre-eminence among the disciples, for they make up the first group of the three quaternions into which the list of the apostles is always divided. But the very same voice speaks to us, and we are as truly summoned by the King to be His servants and soldiers as were they.

Their prompt self-surrendering response is the witness of the power over their hearts which Jesus had won. The one pair of brothers left their nets floating in the water; the other left their father with the mesh and the twine in his old hands. It was not much wealth to leave. But he surrenders much who surrenders all, however little that all may be; and he surrenders nothing who keeps back anything. One sweet portion of their earthly happiness He left them to enjoy, heightened by discipleship, for each had his brother by his side, and natural affection was ennobled by common faith and service. If Zebedee was left, John still had James. True, Herod's sword cut their union asunder, and James died first, and John last, of the twelve; but years of happy brotherhood were to come before then. So both the surrender which outwardly gives up possessions or friends, and that which keeps them, sanctified by being held and used as for and from Him, were exemplified in the swift obedience of these four to the call of the King.

I will make you fishers of men. That shows a kindly wish to make as little as may be of the change of occupation. Their old craft is to be theirs still, only in nobler form. The patience, the brave facing of the storm and the night, the observance of the indications which taught where to cast, the perseverance which toiled all night though not a fin glistened in the net, would all find place in their new career. Nor are these words less royal than was the call. They contain profound hints as to the nature of the kingdom which could scarcely be apprehended at first. But this at least would be clear, that Jesus summoned them to service, to gather in men out of the dreary waves of worldly care and toil into a kingdom of stable rest, and that by summoning them to service He endowed them with power. So He does still. All whom He summons to follow Him are meant by Him to be fishers of men. It was not as apostles, but as simple disciples, that these four received this charge and ability. The same command and fitness are given to all Christians. Following Christ, surrender, the obligation of effort to win others, capacity to do so, belong to all the subjects of Christ's kingdom.

**III. The triumphal progress of the King.**

Our evangelist evidently masses together without regard to chronological order the broad features of the early Galilean ministry. He paints it as a time of joyful activity, of universal recognition, of swift and far-spreading fame. We do not exaggerate the impression of victorious publicity which they give, when we call these closing verses the record of the King's triumphal progress through His dominions. Observe the reiterated use of all,--all Galilee, all manner of sickness and all manner of disease, all Syria, all that were sick. Matthew labours to convey the feeling of universal stir and wide-reaching, full-throated welcome. Observe, too, that the activity of Christ is confined to Galilee, but the fame of Him crosses the border into heathendom. The King stays on His own territory, but He conquers beyond the frontier. Syria and the mostly heathen Decapolis, and Peræ¡ (beyond Jordan), are moved. The odour of the ointment not only fills the house, but enriches the scentless outside air. The prophecy contained in the coming of the Magi is beginning to be fulfilled. From its first preaching, the kingdom is diffusive. Note, too, the contrast between John's ministry and Christ's, in that the former stayed in one spot, and the crowds had to go out to him, while the very genius of Christ's mission expressed itself in that this shepherd king sought the sad and sick, and went about in all Galilee. Observe, too, that He teaches and preaches the good news of the kingdom, before He heals. John's proclamation of the kingdom had been so charged with threatenings and mingled with fire that it could scarcely be called a gospel; but here that joyous word, used for the first time, is in place. As the tidings came from Christ's lips, they were good tidings, and to proclaim them was His first task. The miracles of healing came second. They were not the bell before the sermon, but the benediction after it. They flowed from Christ in rich abundance. The eager receptiveness of the people, ignorant as it was, was greater then than ever afterwards. Therefore the flow of miraculous power was more unimpeded. But it may be questioned whether we generally have an adequate notion of the immense number of Christ's miracles. Those recorded are but a small proportion of those done. There were more grapes in the vineyards of Eshcol than the messengers brought in evidence to the camp. Our Lord's miracles are told by units; they seem to have been wrought by scores. These early ones were not only attestations of His claim to be the King, but illustrations of the nature of His kingdom He had conquered and bound the strong man, and now He was spoiling his house. They were parables of His higher work on men's souls, which He comes to cleanse from the oppression of demons, from the foamings of epilepsy, from impotence as to doing right. They were tokens of the inexhaustible fountain of power, and of the swift and equally inexhaustible treasures of sympathy, which dwelt in Him. They were His first trophies in His holy war, His first gifts to His subjects.

Thus compassed with enthusiasm, and shedding on the wearied new hopes, and on the sick unwonted health, and stirring in sluggish souls some aspirations that greatened and inspired, the King appeared. But no illusions deceived His calm prescience. From the beginning He knew the path which stretched before Him; and while the transient loyalty of the ignorant shouted hosannas around His steps, He saw the cross at the end, and the sight did not make Him falter.