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

**MATTHEW-049. THE TOUCH THAT CLEANSES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. When He was come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. 2. And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped Him, saying, Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean. 3. And Jesus put forth His hand, and touched him, saying, I will; he thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. 4. And Jesus saith unto him, See thou tell no man; but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them."*

*Matthew 8:1-4*

THE great collection of Jesus sayings, which we call the Sermon on the Mount, is followed by a similar collection of Jesus doings, which we call miracles. It is significant that Matthew puts the words first and the works second, as if to teach us the relative importance of the two. Some one has said that miracles are the bell rung before the sermon, but Matthew thinks that the sermon comes first. He masses together nine miracles (the raising of Jairus daughter and the healing of the woman with the bloody issue being so closely connected that they may be regarded as one) which are divided into three groups of three each, and are separated by three sections of more general character, like three landings in a broad flight of stairs, or three breaks in a procession (ch. 8:18-22; 9:9-17, 35-38).

The first triplet comprises miracles of bodily healing, and shows Jesus as the great physician, curing leprosy, palsy, and fever, three types of disease which have their analogues in the moral world. The cure of the leper comes first, apparently not from chronological reasons, but because leprosy had been made by the Old Testament legislation the symbol of sin. The story is found in all the Synoptic Gospels, with slight variations, which make more impressive their verbal identity in reporting the leper's appeal and the Lord's answer.

A leper had to keep apart from men and was shunned by them, but this one ventured to mingle with the great multitudes that followed Jesus, till he reached His side. He must have known something of Christ to have approached Him with a flicker of long-absent hope in his heart. No doubt he had heard of some of the earlier miracles; and no doubt the crowd recoiled from him so that he could easily reach Jesus. When he got there he worshipped, or, as Luke puts it, fell on his face, and made his appeal. It would be all the more piteous, because it was spoken in that feeble, hoarse voice characteristic of leprosy, and it was in itself most pathetic. The poor creature has won his way to a surprising confidence, dashed with a yet more surprising diffidence and doubt. He is sure of the power, but not of the willingness, of this wonderful healer. Thou canst, does not make him confident, because it is weakened by If Thou wilt. Faith, desire, humility, and submissiveness are beautifully smelted together in the wistful words, which are all the more prevalent a prayer, because they do not venture to take the form of prayer. To tell Jesus that His will was all that was needed to heal him was, as it were, to throw the responsibility for this continued misery on Him who could so easily deliver, if He only willed to do it. But the hope which gleamed before his poor eyes was only a gleam, obscured by his ignorance of Jesus disposition towards him. The lowly acquiescence, with which he leaves Jesus to decide whether he is to be freed from his horrible, living death, is very beautiful, and speaks of a patient, disciplined spirit, as well as of a profound insight into our Lord's authority. The leper does cling to the hope that Jesus does will to heal him, but he will not rebel if he is left shut up in his prison-house. Surely in such a blending of trust, yearning, and acceptance of that Will, whatever it involved, there was the germ of discipleship. Surely there was, at least, the beginning of a living union with Jesus, which would heal more than the leprosy of the flesh.

Mark gives the precious addition to the narrative, of a glimpse into the heart of Jesus, when he tells us that, moved with compassion, He put forth His hand and touched him. Swift and, we may almost say, instinctive was the outgoing of pity from the heart, which was so pitiful because it was so pure, and laid on itself every man's sorrow because it carried no burden of its own sin or self-regard. That touch had deep meaning, but it was not done for the sake of a meaning. It was the spontaneous expression of love, and revealed the delicate quickness of perception of another's feelings which flows from love only. The leper had almost forgotten what the touch of a hand felt like. He had lived, ever since his disease was manifest, apart from others, had perhaps lost the embraces of wife and children, had walked alone in crowds, and had a heart-chilling circle cleared round him everywhere. But now this Man stretches His hand across the dreary gulf, and lets him feel once more the sweetness of a warm and gentle touch. It was half the cure; it was the complete clearing away of the last film of the cloud of doubt as to the will of Jesus. It answered the if by something that spoke louder than any word. And, though it was not meant for anything but the silent voice of pity and love, we do not rob it of its beautiful spontaneity when we see, in the touch of that pure hand on the rotting feculence of leprosy, a parable of the Incarnation, in which He lays hold on our flesh of sin and is yet without sin--contracts no defilement by contact, but by touching cleanses the foulness on which He lays His white fingers. By that touch He proclaimed Himself the priest, to whom the Law gave the office of laying his hand on the leper.

But the great word accompanying the touch is majestic in its brevity and absolute claim to absolute power. Jesus accepts the leper's lofty conception of His omnipotent will, as He always accepted the highest conceptions that any formed of His person or authority. The sovereign utterance, I will, claims possession of the divine prerogative of affecting dead matter by the mere outgoing of His volition. Not only is it true of Him that He spake and it was done, but He willed and it was done; and these are the hall-marks of divine power. Neither the touch of His hand nor the word of His lips cleansed the leper, but simply the exercise of His will, of which word and touch were but audible and visible tokens for sense to grasp. The form of the poor husky croak for help determined the form of the answer, and the correspondence is marked by all the evangelists as a striking instance of Christ's loving way of echoing our petitions in His replies, and moulding His gifts to match our desires. Thunder in heaven wakes echoes on earth, but more wonderful is it that the thin voice of our supplications, when we scarcely dare to shape them into prayers, should wake a voice from the throne, which, though it is mighty as the voice of many waters and sweet as that of harpers harping with their harps, deigns to echo our poor cries.

The prohibition to speak of the cure till the priests had pronounced it real and complete is more stringent in Mark, who also tells how utterly it was disregarded. Its reason was obviously the wish to comply with the law, and also the wish to get the official seal to the cure. Jesus did desire the miracle to be known, but not till it was authoritatively certified by the priest whose business it was to pronounce a sufferer clean. It was for the leper's advantage, too, that he should have the official certificate, since he would not be restored to society without it. One does not wonder that the prohibition was disregarded in the uncontrollable delight and wonder at such an experience. The leper was eloquent, as we all can be, when our hearts are engaged, and his blessing refused to be hid. Alas, how many of us, who profess to have been cleansed from a worse defilement, find no such impulse to speak welling up in ourselves! Alas, how superfluous is the injunction to hundreds of Christ's disciples: See thou say nothing to any man!