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

**MATTHEW-050. THE FAITH WHICH CHRIST PRAISES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8.* *The centurion answered and said: Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. 9. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go! and he goeth; and to another, Come I and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this; and he doeth it."*

*Matthew 8:8-9*

This miracle of the healing of the centurion's servant is the second of the great series which Matthew gives us. It is perhaps not accidental that both the first and the second miracles in his collection point out our Lord's relation to outcasts from Israel. The first of them deals with a leper, the second with the prayer of a heathen. And so they both contribute to the great purpose of Matthew's Gospel, the bringing out of the nature of the kingdom and the glory of the King.

My object now is to deal with the whole of the incident of which I have read the most important part. We have in the story three things: the man and his faith; Christ's eulogium upon the faith, and declaration of its place in His kingdom; and the answer to the faith. Look, then, at these three in succession.

**I. We consider, first, the man and his faith.**

He was a heathen and a Gentile. The Herod, who then ruled over Galilee, had a little army, officered by Romans, of whom probably this centurion was one; the commander, perhaps, of some small garrison of a hundred men, the sixtieth part of a legion, which was stationed in Capernaum. If we look at all the features of his character which come out in the story, we get a very lovable picture of a much more tender heart than might have been supposed to beat under the armour of a mercenary soldier set to overawe a sullen people. He loveth our nation, say the elders of the Jews,--not certainly because of their amiability, but because of the revelation which they possessed. Like a great many others in that strange, restless era when our Lord came, this man seems to have become tired of the hollowness of heathenism, and to have been groping for the light. His military service brought him into contact with Judaism and its monotheism, and his heart sprang to that as the thing he had been seeking. He hath built us a synagogue, thereby expressing his adhesion to, or at least his lofty estimate of, the worship which was there carried on. Just as, if an English officer in India were, in some little village or other, to repair a ruined temple, he would win the hearts of all the people, because they would think he was coming over to Brahminism; so this soldier was felt to be nearer to the Jews than his official position might have suggested.

Then, there was in him a beautiful human kindliness, which neither the rough military life, nor that carelessness about a slave--which is one of the worst fruits of slavery, had been able to sour or destroy. He was tenderly anxious about his servant, who, according to Luke's expression, was dear to him. Then we get as the crown of all the beauty of his character, the lowliness of spirit which the little brief authority in which he was dressed had not puffed up. I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come under my roof. That lowliness is emphasised in Luke's version of the story, which is more detailed and particularly accurate than Matthew's summary account. By it we learn that he did not venture to come himself, but sent His messengers to Jesus. If we take Matthew's version, there is another lovely trait. He does not ask Christ to do anything. He simply spreads the necessity before Him, in the confidence that His pitying love lies so near the surface that it was sure to flow forth, even at that light touch. He will not prescribe, he tells the story, and leaves all to Him. Christ's answer, I will come and heal him, throbs with the consciousness of power, and is gentle with tenderness, quick to interpret unspoken wishes, and not slow to answer, unless it is for the wisher's good to be refused. When He was asked to go, because the asker considered that His presence was necessary for His power to have effect, He refused; when He is not asked to go, He volunteers to do so. He is moved to apparently opposite actions by the same motive, the good of the petitioner, whose weak faith He strengthens by refusal, whose strong faith He confirms by acquiescence. And that is the law of His conduct always, and you and I may trust it absolutely, He may give, or retain ungiven, what we desire; in either case, He will be acting in order that our trust in Him may be deepened.

That brings us to the remarkable and unique conception of our Lord's manner of working and power to which this centurion gives utterance. I also (for the true text of Matthew has that also, as the Revised Version shows), I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me, and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; to another, Come, and he cometh; to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it. Speak thou with a word only and my servant shall be healed. A centurion was likely to understand the power of a word of command. His whole training had taught him the omnipotence of the uttered will of the authoritative general, and although he was but an officer over a poor sixtieth part of a legion, yet in some limited measure the same power lay in him, and his word could secure unhesitating submission. One good thing about the devilish trade of war is that it teaches the might of authority and the virtue of absolute obedience. And even his profession, with all its roughness and wickedness, had taught the centurion this precious lesson, a jewel that he had found in a dunghill, the lesson that, given the authoritative lip, a word is omnipotent. The commander speaks and the legion goes, though it be to dash itself to death.

So he turns to Christ. Does he mean to parallel or to contrast his subordination and Christ's position? The also, which, as I remarked, the Revised Version has rightly replaced in the text here, is in favour of the former supposition, that he means to parallel Christ's position with his own. And it is much more natural to suppose that a heathen man, with little knowledge of Christ and of the depths of the divine revelation in the past, should have attained to the conception of Jesus as possessing a real but subordinate and derived authority, than to suppose that he had grasped, at that early stage, the truth which Christ's nearest friends took long years to understand, and which some of them do not understand yet, viz. that Christ possessed as His own the power which He wielded.

But if we take this point of view, and consider that the centurion's conception falls beneath the lofty Christian ideal of Christ's power in the universe, as it is set forth to us in the New Testament, even then His words set forth a truth. For if we believe on the one hand in the divinity of our Lord and Saviour, we also believe that the Son is subject to the Father and listen to His own words when He says, All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. So that whatever difference there may be between His relation to the power which He wields and that of a prophet or miracle-worker, who derives his power from Him, this is true, that Christ's power, too, is a power given to Him. But the other side is one that I desire to emphasise in a few words, viz. that the centurion's conception falls short of the truth, inasmuch as, if we believe in Christ's witness to Himself, we must believe that the power which acted through His word, dwelt in Him, in an altogether different relation to His person from that in which an analogous power may have dwelt in any other man. He spake and it was done, He commanded and it stood fast. Diseases fled at His word. By the breath of His mouth He slew these enemies of men. He rebuked the storm, and the howling of the wind and the dashing of the waves were less loud than His calm voice. He flung a word into the depths of the grave, strangely speaking to, and yet more strangely heard by, the dull cold ear of death, and Lazarus, dazzled, stumbles out into the light. Who is this, that commandeth the waves, and the seas, and the sicknesses, and they obey Him? My brother, I pray that you and I, in these days of hesitation, when many a truth is clouded by doubt, may be able to answer with the full assent and consent of understanding and heart, this is God manifest in the flesh.

And remember that this prerogative of dealing with physical nature, by the bare forth-putting of His word, is not only a doctrine of Christianity, but that more and more physical investigation is coming to the unifying of all forces in one, and to the resolving of that one into the force of a will, and that all that will, as the Christian scheme teaches us, is lodged in Jesus Christ. His lip speaks, and it is power. He moves in nature, in providence, in history, in grace, because in Him abides now in the form of a man, that same everlasting Word which was with the Father, and by whom all things were made. The centurion bows before the Commander, and the Christ says, as Captain of the Lord's host am I now come. Such, then, is the faith of this soldier taught him by the Legion.

**II. Now a word next as to our Lord's eulogium on his faith.**

Jesus Christ accepts and endorses the centurion's estimate of Him, as He always accepts the highest place offered Him. No one ever proffered to Jesus Christ honours that He put by. No one ever brought to Him a trust which He said was either excessive or misdirected. Speak the word and my servant shall be healed, said the centurion. Contrast Christ's acceptance of this confidence in his power with Elijah's Am I a God, to kill and to make alive, that they send this man to me to recover him of his leprosy? Or contrast it with Peter's Why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk? Christ takes as His due all the honour, love, and trust, which any man can give Him--either an exorbitant appetite for adulation, or the manifestation of conscious divinity.

And He marvelled. Twice we read in Scripture that Christ wondered--once at this heathen's faith, so strongly grown, with so few advantages of culture; once at Jewish unbelief, so feeble and fruitless, after so much expenditure of patience and care. But passing from that, notice how much lies in these sad and yet astonished words of His: Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. Then, He came seeking faith from this people whom God had cared for during centuries. The one fruit that He desired was trust in Him. That is what He is seeking for in us--not lives of profession, not orthodoxy of conception, not even fruits in work, but before all this, and productive of all that is good in any of them, He desires to find in our hearts the child's trust that casts itself wholly on His Omnipotent word, and is sure of an answer. This man's faith was great, great in the rapidity of its growth, great in the difficulties which it had overcome, great in the clearness of its conception, great in the firmness of its affiance, great in the humility with which it was accompanied. Such a faith He seeks as the thirsty traveller seeks grapes in the wilderness, and when He finds it growing in our hearts, then He is satisfied and glad.

Still further, there is brought out the dignity of faith as being not only the great desire of Christ's heart for each of us, but also as being the one means of admission into the kingdom. I say unto you, many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, in the Kingdom of Heaven; but the children of the Kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness. Strange that Matthew's, the Jewish gospel, should record that saying. Strange that Luke's, the universal human gospel, should omit it. But it was relevant to Matthew's great purpose to make very plain this truth--which the nation were forgetting, and which was gall and wormwood to them,--that hereditary descent and outward privileges had no power to open the door of Christ's Kingdom to any man, and that the one thing which had, was the one thing which the centurion possessed and the Jews did not, a simple trust in that divine Lord.

My brethren, there are many of us who attach precisely the same value as these Jews did, in slightly different forms, to external connection with religion and religious institutions. What blunts the sharpest words that come from pulpits, and prevents them from getting to hearts and consciences, is just that pestilent old Jewish error, that because men have always had a kind of outward hold on the Kingdom, therefore they do not need the teaching that the publicans and the harlots want.

My dear friend, nothing binds a man to Christ but trust. Nothing opens the doors of His Kingdom, either here on earth or yonder, but reliance upon Him. And although you were steeped to the eye-brows in religious privileges, and high in place in His church, it would avail nothing. The Kingdom of Christ is a Kingdom into which faith, and faith only, admits a man. Therefore from the furthest corners of the world Christ's sad prescience saw the Gentiles flocking, and the Jews who trusted in externals, cast out.

I need not dwell on the two halves of the picture here, the radiant glow of the one, the tragic darkness of the other. The feast expresses abundance, joy, rest, companionship. They shall come says Christ; then He is there, and sitting at the head of the table; and the Master's welcome makes the feast. On the other hand, that which is without the banqueting hall is dark. That darkness is but the making visible of the nature of the men. Hell comes out of a man before it surrounds him. They were sometime darkness, and now they are in the darkness. I say no more about that, I dare not; but I pray you to remember that the lips which said this spake that He did know; and to take heed lest, speculating and arguing, and sometimes quarrelling, about the nature and the duration of future retribution, we should lose our sense of the awfulness and certainty of the fact.

**III. So one word lastly as to the answer that faith brings.**

Go thy way; as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. He heals at a distance, and shapes His gift by the man's desire. The form of the vase that is dipped into the sea settles the quantity and the shape of the water that is taken out. There is a wide truth in that, on which I do not now enlarge. The measure of my faith is the measure of my possession of Christ. He puts the key of the treasure-house into our hands and says, Go in, and take as much as you like; and some of us come out with a halfpenny as all that we care to bring away. You are starving, some of you, whilst you are sitting in a granary bursting with plenty. Suppose a proclamation were made, There will be given away gold to anybody that likes to come. Let them bring a purse, and it will be filled. How large a purse do you think you would like to take? A sack, I should think. Christ says that to you; and you bring a tiny thing like what they keep sovereigns in, that will scarcely hold a farthing, with such a narrow throat is it provided, and so small its interior accommodation. Ye have not because ye ask not. Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it.