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

**MATTHEW-056. THE PEACE BRINGER IN THE SPIRITUAL WORLD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"28.* *And when He was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way. 29. And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with Thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art Thou come hither to torment us before the time? 30. And there was a good way off from them an herd of many swine feeding. 31. So the devils besought Him, saying, If Thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine. 32. And He said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters. 33. And they that kept them fled, and went their ways into the city, and told every thing, and what was befallen to the possessed of the devils. 34. And, behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus: and when they saw Him, they besought Him that He would depart out of their coasts.."*

*Matthew 8:28-34*

Matthew keeps to chronological order in the first and second miracles of the second triplet, but probably His reason for bringing them together was rather similarity in their contents than proximity in their time. For one cannot but feel that the stilling of the storm, which manifested Jesus as the Peace-bringer in the realm of the Natural, is fitly followed by the casting out of demons, which showed Him as the Lord of still wider and darker realms, and the Peace-bringer to spirits tortured and torn by a mysterious tyranny. His meek power sways all creatures; His word runneth very swiftly. Winds and seas and demons hearken and obey. Cheap ridicule has been plentifully flung at this miracle, and some defenders of the Gospels have tried to explain it away, and have almost apologised for it, but, while it raises difficult problems in its details, the total effect of it is to present a sublime conception of Jesus and of His absolute, universal authority. The conception is heightened in sublimity when the two adjacent miracles are contemplated in connection.

There is singular variation in the readings of the name of the scene of the miracle in the three evangelists. According to the reading of the Authorised Version, Matthew locates it in the country of the Gergesenes; Mark and Luke, in the country of the Gadarenes; whereas the Revised Version, following the general consensus of textual critics, reads Gadarenes in Matthew and Gerasenes in Mark and Luke. Now, Gadara is over six miles from the lake, and the deep gorge of a river lies between, so that it is out of the question as the scene of the miracle. But the only Gerasa known, till lately, is even more impossible, for it is far to the east of the lake. But some years since, Thomson found ruins bearing the name of Khersa or Gersa, at the only portion of that coast on which the steep hills come down to the shore (Smith, Historical Geography of the Holy Land, p. 459). This is probably the site of the miracle, and may have been included in the territory dependent on Gadara, and so have been rightly described as in the country of the Gadarenes.

Matthew again abbreviates, omitting many of the most striking and solemn features of the narrative as given by the other two evangelists, and he also diverges from them in mentioning two demoniacs instead of one. That is not contradiction, for if there were two, there was one, but it is divergence, due to more accurate information. Whether they were meant so or no, the abbreviations have the striking result that Jesus speaks but one word, the permissive Go, and that thus His simple presence is the potent spell before which the demons cower and flee. They know Him as the Son of God; a name which, on their lips, must be taken in its full significance. If demoniacal possession is a fact, there is no difficulty in accounting for the name here given to Jesus, nor for the sudden change from the fierce purpose of barring an intruder's path to abject submission. If it is not a fact, to make a plausible explanation of either circumstance will be a task needing many contortions, as is seen by the attempts to achieve it. For example, we are told that the demoniacs were afraid of Jesus, because He was not afraid of them, and they knew Him, because men with shattered reason also felt the spell, while the wise and the strong-minded often used their intellect, under the force of passion or prejudice, to resist the force of truth. Possibly the last clause goes as far to explain some critics non-recognition of demoniacal possession as the first does to explain the demoniacs recognition of Jesus!

To the demonic nature Christ's coming brought torture, as the sunbeam, which gives life to many, also gives death to ugly creatures that crawl and swarm in the dark. Turn up a stone, and the creeping things hurry out of the penetrating glare so unwelcome. What maketh heaven, that maketh hell, and the same presence is life or death, joy or agony. The dear perception of divine purity and the shuddering recoil of impotent hatred from it are surely of the very essence of the demonic nature, and every man, who looks into the depths of his own spirit, knows that the possibilities of such a state are in him.

Our Lord discriminated between healing the sick and casting out demons. He distinguished between forms of disease due to possession and the same diseases when dissociated from it, as, for example, cases of dumbness. His whole attitude, both in His actual dealing with the possessed and in His referring to the subject, gave His complete adhesion to the reality of the awful thing. It is vain to say that He humoured the delusions of insanity in order to cure them. That theory does not adequately explain any of the facts and does not touch some of them. It is perilous to try to weaken the force of the narrative by saying that the evangelists were under the influence of popular notions (which are quietly assumed to have been wrong), and hence that their prepossessions coloured their representations. If the mirror was so distorted, what reliance can be placed on any part of its reflection of Jesus? There can be no doubt that the Gospel narrative asserts and assumes the reality of demoniacal possession, and if the representation that Jesus also assumed it is due to the evangelists, what trust can be reposed in authorities which misrepresent Him in such a matter? On the other hand, if they do not misrepresent Him, and He blundered, confounding mere insanity with possession by a demon, what reliance can be reposed in Him as our Teacher of the Unseen World? The issues involved are very grave and far-reaching, and raillery or sarcasm is out of place.

But the question is pertinent: By what right do we allege that demoniacal possession is an exploded figment and an impossibility? Do we know ourselves or our fellows so thoroughly as to be warranted in denying that deep down in the mysterious subliminal consciousness there is a gate through which spiritual beings may come into contact with human personalities? He would be bold, to the verge of presumption or somewhat further, who should take up such a position. And have we any better right to assume that we know so much of the universe as to be sure that there are no evil spirits there, who can come into contact with human spirits and wield an alien tyranny over them? The Christian attitude is not that of such far-reaching denial which outruns our knowledge, but that of calm belief that Jesus is the head of all principality and power, and that to Him all are subject. It is taken for granted that the supposed possession is insanity. But may it not rather be that to-day some of the supposed insanity is possession? Be that as it may--and perhaps those who have the widest experience of lunatics would be the least ready to dismiss the possibility,--Jesus recognised the reality that there were souls oppressed by a real personality, which had settled itself in the house of life, and none of us has wide and deep enough knowledge to contradict Him. Might it not be better to accept His witness in this, as in other matters beyond our ken, as true, and to ponder it?

The demons petition, according to the Received Text, takes the form, Suffer us to go, while the reading adopted by most modern editors is Send us. The former reading seems to be taken from Luke (viii. 32), while Mark has Send (not the same word as now read in Matthew). But Mark goes on to say, not that Jesus sent them, but that He suffered them or gave them leave (the same word as in Matthew, according to the Received Text). Thus, Jesus part in the transaction is simply permissive, and the one word which He speaks is authoritative indeed in its curtness, and means simply away, or begone. It casts them out but does not send them in. He did not send them into the herd, but out of the men, and did not prevent their entrance into the swine. It should further be noted that nothing in the narrative suggests that the destruction of the herd was designed even by the demons, much less by Jesus. The maddened brutes rushed straight before them, not knowing why or where; the steep slope was in front, and the sea was at its foot, and their terrified, short gallop ended there. The last thing the demons would have done would have been to banish themselves, as the death of the swine did banish them, from their new shelter. There is no need, then, to invent justifications for Christ's destroying the herd, for He did not destroy it. No doubt, keeping swine was a breach of Jewish law; no doubt the two demoniacs and the bystanders would be more convinced of the reality of the exorcism by the fate of the swine, but these apologies are needless.

The narrative suggests some affinity between the demoniac and the animal nature, and though it is easy to ridicule, it is impossible to disprove, the suggestion. We know too little about either to do that, and what we cannot disprove it is somewhat venturesome hardily to deny. There are depths in the one nature, which we cannot fathom though its possessors are close to us; the other is removed from our investigation altogether. Where we are so utterly ignorant we had better neither affirm nor deny. But we may take a homiletical use out of that apparent affinity, and recognise that a spirit in rebellion against God necessarily gravitates downwards, and becomes more or less bestialised.

No wonder that the swineherds fled, but, surely, it is a wonder that eagerness to be rid of Jesus was the sole result of the miracle. Perhaps the reason was the loss of the swine, which would bulk largest in their keepers excited story; perhaps the reason was a fear that He would find out and rebuke other instances of breach of strict Jewish propriety, perhaps it was simply the shrinking from any close contact with the heavenly, or apparently supernatural, which is so instinctive in us, and witnesses to a dormant consciousness of discord with Heaven. Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, is the cry of the roused conscience. And, alas! it has power to send away Him whom we need, and who comes to us, just because we are sinful, and just that He may deliver us from our sin.