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

**MATTHEW-059**. **THE CALL OF MATTHEW by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"9. And as Jesus passed forth from thence, He saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and He saith unto him, Follow Me. And he arose, and followed Him. 10. And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. 11. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto His disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? 12. But when Jesus heard that, He said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. 13. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. 14. Then came to Him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but Thy disciples fast not? 15. And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast. 16. No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. 17. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved."*

*Matthew 9:9-17*

All three evangelists connect the call of Matthew immediately with the cure of the paralytic, and follow it with an account of Christ's answers to sundry cavils from Pharisees and John's disciples. No doubt, the spectacle of this new Teacher taking a publican into His circle of disciples, and, not content with such an outrage on all proper patriotic feeling, following it up with scandalous companionship with the sort of people that a publican could get to accept his hospitality, sharpened hatred and made suspicion prick its ears. Mark and Luke call the publican Levi, he calls himself Matthew, the former being probably his name before his discipleship, the latter, that by which he was known thereafter. Possibly Jesus gave it him, as in the cases of Simon, and perhaps Bartholomew. But, however acquired, it superseded the old one, as the fact that it appears in the lists of the apostles in both the other evangelists and in Acts, shows. Its use here may be a trace of a touching desire to make sure that readers, who only knew him as Matthew, should understand who this publican was. It is like the little likenesses of themselves, in some corner of a background, that early painters used to slip into a picture of Madonna and angels. There was no vanity in the wish, for he says nothing about his sacrifices, leaving it to Luke to tell that he left all, but he does crave that his brethren, who read, should know that it was he whom Jesus honoured by His call.

The condensed narrative emphasises three things, (i) his occupation with his ordinary business when that wonderful summons thrilled his soul; (ii) the curt authoritative command, and (iii) the swift obedience. As to the first, Capernaum was on a great trade route, and the custom-house officers there would have their hands full. This one was busy at his work, hateful and shameful as it was in Jewish eyes, and into that sordid atmosphere, like a flash of light into a mephitic cavern full of unclean creatures, came the transcendent mercy of Jesussummons. There is no region of life so foul, so mean, so despicable in men's eyes, but that the quickening Voice will enter there. We do not need to be in temples or about sacred tasks in order to hear it. It summons us in, and sometimes from, our daily work. Well for those who know whose Voice it is, and do not mistake it for some Eli's!

No doubt this was not the first of Matthew's knowledge of Jesus. Living in Capernaum, he would have had many opportunities of hearing Him or of Him, and his heart and conscience may have been stirred. As he sat in his tolbooth, feeling contempt and hatred poured on him, he, no doubt, had had longings to get nearer to the One whose voice was gentle, and His looks, love. So the call would come to him as the fulfilment of a dim hope, and it would be a joyful surprise to know that Jesus wished to have him for a disciple as much as he wished to have Jesus for a Teacher. The ring of fire and hate within which he had been imprisoned was broken, and there was One who cared to have him, and who would not shrink from his touch. In the light of that assurance, the call became, not a summons to give anything up, but an invitation to receive a better possession than all with which he was called to part. And if we saw things as they are, would it not always be so to us? Follow Medoes mean, Forsake earth and self, but it means still more: Take what is more than all. It parts from these because it unites to Jesus. Therefore it means gain, not deprivation. And it condenses all rules for life into one, for to follow Him is the sum of all duty, and yields the perfect pattern of conduct and character, while it is also the secret of all blessedness, and the talisman that assures a man of continual progress. They who follow are near, and will reach, Him. Of course, if His servants follow Him, it stands to reason that one day, where I am there shall also My servants be. So in that command lie a sufficient guide for earth, and a sure guarantee for heaven.

And he arose and followed Him. That is the only thing that we are told of Matthew. We hear no more of him, except that he made a feast in his house on the occasion. No doubt he did his work as an apostle, but oblivion has swallowed up all that. A happy fate to be known to all the world for all time, only by this one thing, that he unconditionally, immediately and joyfully obeyed Christ's call! He might have said: How can I leave my work? I must make up my accounts, hand over my papers, do a hundred things in order to wind up matters, and I must postpone following till then. But he sprang up at once. He would have abundant opportunities to settle all details afterwards, but if he let this opportunity of taking his place as a disciple pass, he might never have another. There are some things that are best done gradually and slowly, but obedience to Christ's call is not one of them. Prompt obedience is the only safety. The psalmist knew the danger of delay when he said: I made haste and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments.

Matthew does not tell us that he made the feast, but Luke does. It was the natural expression of his thankfulness and joy for the new bond. His knowledge was small, but his love was great. How could he honour Jesus enough? But he was a pariah in Capernaum, and the only guests he could assemble were, like himself, outcasts from respectable society. In popular estimation all publicans were regarded without any more ado as sinners, but probably that designation is here applied to disreputable folks of various kinds and degrees of shadiness, who gravitated to Matthew and his class, because, like him, they were repulsed by every one else. Even outcasts hunger for society, and manage to get a community of their own, in which they find some glow of comradeship, and some defence from hatred and contempt. Even lepers herd together and have their own rules of intercourse.

But what a scandal in the eyes not only of Pharisees, but of all the proper people in Capernaum, Jesusgoing to such a gathering of disreputables would be, we may estimate if we remember that they did not know His reason, but thought that He went because He liked the atmosphere and the company. Like draws to likewas the conclusion suggested, in the absence of His own explanation. The Pharisee conceived that his duty in regard to publicans and sinners was to keep as far from them as he could, and his strait-laced self-righteousness had never dreamed of going to them with an open heart, and trying to win them to a better life. Many so-called followers of Jesus still take that attitude. They gather up their skirts round them daintily, and never think that it would be liker their Lord to sweep away the mud than to pick their steps through it, caring mainly to keep their own shoes clean.

The feast was probably spread in some courtyard or open space, to which, as is the Eastern custom, uninvited spectators could have access. It is quite in accordance with the usage of the times and land that the Pharisees should have been onlookers, and should have been able to talk to the disciples. No doubt their colloquy became animated, and perhaps loud, so that it could easily attract Christ's attention. He answered for Himself, and the tone of His reply is friendly and explanatory, as if He recognised that the questioners genuinely wished to know whyHe was sitting in such company.

It discloses His motive, and thereby sweeps away all insinuations that He consorted with sinners because their company was congenial. It was precisely for the opposite reason, because He was so unlike them. He came among these sinners as a physician; and who wonders at his being beside the sick? He does not spend his days by their bedsides because he likes the atmosphere, but because it is his business to make them well. Now, in that comparison, Jesus pronounces no opinion on the correctness of the Phariseesestimate of themselves as righteous, or of publicans as sinners, but simply takes them on their own ground. But He does make a great claim for Himself, and speaks out of His consciousness of power to heal men's worst disease, sin. It is a tremendous assertion to make of oneself, and its greatness is enhanced by the quiet way in which it is stated as a thought familiar to Himself. What right had He to pose as the physician for humanity, and how can such a claim be reconciled with His being meek and lowly in heart? If He Himself was one of the sick and needed healing, how can He be the healer of the rest? If being a sinful man, as we all are, He made such a claim, what becomes of the reverence which is paid to Him as a great religious Teacher, and where has His 'sweet reasonablenessvanished?

Jesus passes from explanation of His personal relation to the publicans to adduce the broad principle which should shape the Phariseesrelation to them, as it had shaped His. Hosea had said long ago that God delighted more in mercythan in sacrifice. Kindly helpfulness to men is better worship than exact performance of any ritual. Sacrifice propitiates God, but mercy imitates Him, and imitation is the perfection of divine service. Jesus here speaks as all the prophets had spoken, and smites with a deadly stroke the mechanical formalism which in every age stiffens religion into ceremonies and neglects love towards God, expressed in mercy to men. He lays bare the secret of His own life, and He thereby lays on His followers the obligation of making it the moving impulse of theirs.

The great general truth is followed, as it has been preceded, by a plain statement of Jesusown conception of His mission in the world. I came, says He, hinting at the fact that He was before He was born, and that His Incarnation was His voluntary act. True, He was sent, and we speak of His mission, but also He came, and we speak of His advent. To repentanceis omitted by the best editors as being brought over from Luke, where it is genuine. But it is a correct gloss on the simple word call, though repentanceis but a small part of that to which He summons. He calls us to repent; He calls us to Himself; He calls us to self-surrender; He calls us to Eternal Life; He calls us to a better feast than Matthew had spread. But we must recognise that we are sinners, or we shall never realise that His invitation is for us, nor ever feel that we need a physician, and have in Him, and in Him alone, the Physician whom we need.

The Pharisees objected to Jesusfeasting, and could scarcely in the same breath find fault with Him for not fasting, but they put forward some of John's disciples to bring that fresh objection. Common hatred is a strong cement, and often holds opposites together for a while. It was bad for John's followers that they should be willing to say, We and the Pharisees. They had travelled far from the days when their master had called the same class a generation of vipers! Their keen desire to uphold the honour of their teacher, whose light they saw paling before the younger Jesus, made them hostile to Him, and, as is usually the case, the followers were more partisan than the leader. Religious antagonism sometimes stoops to very strange alliances. The two questions brought together in this context are noticeably alike, and noticeably different. Both ask for the reason of conduct which they do not go the length of impugning. They seem to be desirous of enlightenment, they are really eager to condemn. Both avoid seeming to call in question the acts of the persons addressed, for the Pharisees interrogate the disciples as to the reason for Jesusconduct, while John's disciples ask from Jesus the reason of His disciplesconduct. In both, mock respectfulness covers lively hatred.

Our Lord's first answer is as profound as it is beautiful, and veils, while it reveals, a lofty claim for Himself and a solemn foresight of His death, and lays down a great and fruitful principle as to the relations between spiritual moods and outward acts of religion. His speaking of Himself as the Bridegroomwould recall to some of His questioners, and that with a touch of shame, John's nobly humble acceptance of the subordinate place of the bridegroom's friend and elevation of Jesus to that of the bridegroom. But it was not merely a rebuking quotation from John's witness, but the expression of His own unclouded and continual consciousness of what He was to humanity, and of what humanity could find in Him, as well as a sovereign appropriating to Himself of many prophetic strains. What depth of love, what mysterious blending of spirit, what adoring, lowly obedience, what perfection of protecting care, what rapture of possession, what rest of heart in trust, what dower of riches are dimly shadowed in that wonderful emblem, will never be known till the hour of the marriage-supper of the Lamb, when His bride hath made herself ready. But across the light there flits a shadow. It is but for a moment, and it meant little to the hearers, but it meant much to Him. For He could not look forward to winning His bride without seeing the grim Cross, and even athwart the brightness of the days of companionship with His humble friends, came the darkness on His soul, though not on theirs, of the violent end when He shall be taken from them. The hint fell apparently on deaf ears, but it witnesses to the continual presence in the mind of Jesus of His sufferings and death. The certainty that He must die was not forced on Him by the failure of His efforts as His career unfolded itself. It was no disappointment of bright earlier hopes, as is the case with many a disillusionised reformer, who thought at the outset that he had only to speak and all men would listen. It was the clearly discerned goal from the first. The Son of Man came ... to give His life a ransom.

But our Lord here lays down a broad principle, which, if applied as it was meant to be, would lift a heavy burden of outward observance off the Christian consciousness. Fast when you are sad; feast when you are glad. Let the disposition, the mood, the moment's circumstance, mould your action. There is no virtue or sanctity in observances which do not correspond to the inner self. What a charter of liberty is proclaimed in these quiet words! What mountains of ceremonial unreality, oppressive to the spirit, are cast into the sea by them! How different Christendom would have been and would be to-day, if Christians had learned the lesson of these words!

The two condensed parables or extended metaphors, which follow the vindication of the disciples, carry the matter further, and lay down a principle which is intended to cover not only the question in hand, their non-observance of Jewish regulations as to fasting, but the whole subject of the relations of the new word, which Jesus felt that He brought, to the old system. The same consciousness of His unique mission which prompted His use of the term bridegroom, shines through the two metaphors of the new cloth and the new wine. He knows that He is about to bring a new garb to men, and to give them new wine to drink, and He knows that what He brings is no mere patch on a worn-out system, but a new fermenting force, which demands fresh vehicles and modes of expression. The two metaphors take up different aspects of one thought. To try to mend an old coat with a bit of unshrunk cloth would only make a worse dissolution of continuity, for as soon as a shower fell on it the patch would shrink, and, in shrinking, pull the thin pieces of the old garment adjoining it to itself. Judaism was already rentand worn too thin to be capable of repair. The only thing to be done was as a vestureto fold it upand shape a new garment out of new cloth. What was true as to the supremely new thing which He brought into the world remains true, in less eminent degree, of the less acute differences between the Old and the New, within Christianity itself. There do come times when its externals become antiquated, worn thin and torn, and when patching is useless. Christian men, like others, constitutionally incline to conservatism or to progress, and the one temperament needs to be warned against obstinately preserving old clothes, and the other against eagerly insisting that they are past mending.

But a patch and a worn garment do not wholly describe the relations of the old and the new. Freshly made wine, still fermenting, and old, stiff wine-skins which have lost their elasticity suggest further thoughts. Now we have to do with containing vessel versus contents, with a fermenting force versus stiffened forms. To put that into these will destroy both. For example, if the struggle of the Judaisers in the early Church had succeeded, and Christianity had become a Jewish sect, it would have dwindled to nothing, as the Jewish-minded Christians did. The wine must have bottles. Every great spiritual renovating force must embody itself in institutions. Spiritual emotions must express themselves in acts of worship, spiritual convictions must speak in a creed. But the containing vessel must be congruous with, and still more, it must be created by, the contained force, as there are creatures who frame their shells to fit the convolutions of their bodies, and build them up from their own substance. Forms are good, as long as they can stretch if need be; when they are too stiff to expand, they restrict rather than contain the wine, and if short-sighted obstinacy insists on keeping it in them, there will be a great spill and loss of much that is precious.