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

**MATTHEW-062**. **THE OBSCURE APOSTLES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"These twelve Jesus sent forth."*

*Matthew 10:5*

And half of these twelve are never heard of as doing any work for Christ. Peter and James and John we know; the other James and Judas have possibly left us short letters; Matthew gives us a Gospel; and of all the rest no trace is left. Some of them are never so much as named again, except in the list at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles; and none of them except the three who seemed to be pillarsappear to have been of much importance in the early diffusion of the Gospel.

There are many instructive and interesting points in reference to the Apostolate. The number of twelve, in obvious allusion to the tribes of Israel, proclaims the eternal certainty of the divine promises to His people, and the dignity of the New Testament Church as their true heir. The ties of relationship which knit so many of the apostles together, the order of the names varying, but within certain limits, in the different catalogues, the uncultivated provincial rudeness of most of them, would all afford material for important reflections. But, perhaps, not the least important fact about the Apostolate is that one to which we have referred, which like the names of countries on the map, escapes notice because it is writso large--namely, the small place which the apostles as a body fill in the subsequent narrative, and the entire oblivion into which so many of them pass from the moment of their appointment.

It is to that fact that we wish to turn attention now. It may suggest some considerations worth pondering, and among other things, may help to show the exaggeration of the functions of the office by the opposite extremes of priests and rationalists. The one school makes it the depository of exclusive supernatural powers; the other regards it as a master-stroke of organisation, to which the early rapid growth of Christianity was largely due. The facts seem to show that it was neither.

**I. The first thought which this peculiar and unexpected silence suggests is of the True Worker in the Church's progress.**

The way in which the New Testament drops these apostles is of a piece with the whole tone of the Bible. Throughout, men are introduced into its narratives and allowed to slip out with well-marked indifference. Nowhere do we get more vivid, penetrating portraiture, but nowhere do we see such carelessness about following the fortunes or completing the biographies even of those who have filled the largest space in its pages.

Recall, for example, the way in which the New Testament deals with the very chiefestapostles, the illustrious triad of Peter, James, and John. The first escapes from prison; we see him hammering at Mary's door in the grey of the morning, and after brief, eager talk with his friends he vanishes to hide in another place, and is no more heard of, except for a moment in the great council, held in Jerusalem, about the admission of Gentiles to the Church. The second of the three is killed off in a parenthesis. The third is only seen twice in the Book of the Acts, as a silent companion of Peter at a miracle and before the Sanhedrim. Remember how Paul is left in his own hired house, within sight of trial and sentence, and neither the original writer of the book nor any later hand thought it worth while to add three lines to tell the world what became of him. A strange way to write history, and a most imperfect narrative, surely! Yes, unless there be some peculiarity in the purpose of the book, which explains this cold-blooded, inartistic, and tantalising habit of letting men leap upon the stage as if they had dropped from the clouds, and vanish from it as abruptly as if they had fallen through a trap-door.

Such a peculiarity there is. One of the three to whom we have referred has explained it in the words with which he closes his gospel, words which might stand for the motto of the whole book, These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Son of God. The true purpose is not to speak of men except in so far as they bore witness to that lightand were illuminated for a moment by contact with Him. From the beginning the true Heroof the Bible is God; its theme is His self-revelation culminating for evermore in the Man Jesus. All other men interest the writers only as they are subsidiary or antagonistic to that revelation. As long as that breath blows through them they are music; else they are but common reeds. Men are nothing except as instruments and organs of God. He is all, and His whole fulness is in Jesus Christ. Christ is the sole worker in the progress of His Church. That is the teaching of all the New Testament. The thought is expressed in the deepest, simplest form in His own unapproachable words, unfathomable as they are in their depth of meaning, and inexhaustible in their power to strengthen and to cheer: I am the vine, ye are the branches, without Me ye can do nothing. It shapes the whole treatment of the history of the so-called Acts of the Apostles, which by its very first sentence proclaims itself to be the Acts of the ascended Jesus, the former treatisebeing declared to have had for its subject all that Jesus began to do and teach while on earth, and this treatise being manifestly the continuance of the same theme, and the record of the heavenly activity of the Lord. So the thought runs through all the book: The help that is done on earth, He does it all Himself.

So let us think of Him and of His relation to us as well as to that early Church. His continuous energy is pouring down on us if we will accept it. In us, for us, by us He works. My Father worketh hitherto, said He when here, and I work; and now, exalted on high, He has passed into that divine repose, which is at the same time the most energetic divine activity. He is all in all to His people. He is all their strength, wisdom, and righteousness. They are but the clouds irradiated by the sun and bathed in its brightness; He is the light which flames in their grey mist and turns it to a glory. They are but the belts and cranks and wheels; He is the power. They are but the channel, muddy and dry; He is the flashing life that fills it and makes it a joy. They are the body; He is the soul dwelling in every part to save it from corruption and give movement and warmth.

Thou art the organ, whose full breath is thunder;

I am the keys, beneath thy fingers pressed.

If this be true, how it should deliver us from all overestimate of men, to which our human affections and our feeble faith tempt us so sorely! There is One man, and One man only, whose biography is a Gospel, who owes nothing to circumstances, and who originates the power which He wields; One who is a new beginning, and has changed the whole current of human history, One to whom we are right to bring offerings of the gold, and incense, and myrrh of our hearts, and wills, and minds, which it is blasphemy and degradation to lay at the feet of any others. We may utterly love, trust, and obey Jesus Christ. We dare not do so to any other. The inscription written over the whole book, that it may be transcribed on our whole nature, is, No man any more save Jesus only.

If this thought be true, what confidence it ought to give us as we think of the tasks and fortunes of the Church! If we think only of the difficulties and of the enormous work before us, so disproportioned to our weak powers, we shall be disposed to agree with our enemies, who talk as if Christianity was on the point of perishing, as they have been doing ever since it began. But the outlook is wonderfully different when we take Christ into the account. We are very apt to leave Him out of the reckoning. But one man with Christ to back him is always in the majority. He flings his sword clashing into one scale, and it weighs down all that is in the other. The walls are very lofty and strong, and the besiegers few and weak, badly armed, and quite unfit for the assault; but if we lift our eyes high enough, we, too, shall see a man with a drawn sword over against us, and our hearts may leap up in assured confidence of victory as we recognise in Him the Captain of the Lord's Host, who has already overcome, and will make us valiant in fight and more than conquerors.

When conscious of our own weakness, and tempted to think of our task as heavy, or when complacent in our own power, and tempted to regard our task as easy, let us think of His ever-present work in and for His people, till it braces us for all duty, and rebukes our easy-going idleness. Surely from that thought of the active, ascended Christ may come to many of His slothful followers the pleading question, as from His own lips, Dost thou not care that thou hast left me to serve alone?Surely to us all it should bring inspiration and strength, courage and confidence, deliverance from man, and elevation above the reverence of blind impersonal forces. Surely we may all lay to heart the grand lesson that union with Him is our only strength, and oblivion of ourselves our highest wisdom. Surely he has best learned his true place and the worth of Jesus Christ, who abides with unmoved humility at His feet, and, like the lonely, lowly forerunner, puts away all temptations to self-assertion while joyfully accepting it as the law of his life to

Fade in the light of the planet he loves,

To fade in his light and to die.

Blessed is he who is glad to say, He must increase, I must decrease!

**II. This same silence of Scripture as to so many of the apostles may be taken as suggesting what the real work of these delegated workers was.**

It certainly seems very strange that, if they were the possessors of such extraordinary powers as the theory of Apostolic Succession implies, we should hear so little of these in the narratives. The silence of Scripture about them goes a long way to discredit such ideas, while it is entirely accordant with a more modest view of the apostolic office.

What was an apostle's function during the life of Christ? One of the evangelists divides it into three portions: to be with Jesus; to preach the kingdom; to cast out devils and to heal. There is nothing in these offices peculiar to them. The seventy had miraculous powers too, and some at least were our Lord's companions and preachers of His kingdom who were simple disciples. What was an apostle's function after the resurrection? Peter's words, on proposing the election of a new apostle, lay down the duty as simply to bear witnessof that resurrection. They were not supernatural channels of mysterious grace, not lords over God's heritage, not even leaders of the Church, but bearers of a testimony to the great historical fact, on the acceptance of which all belief in an historical Christ depended then and depends now. Each of the greater of the apostles is penetrated with the same thought. Paul disclaims anything beside in his Not I, but the grace of God in me. Peter thrusts the question at the staring crowd, Why look ye on us as though by our power or holiness we had made this man to walk?John, in his calm way, tells his children at Ephesus, Ye need not that any man teach you.

Such an idea of the apostolic office is far more reasonable and accordant with Scripture than a figment about unexampled powers and authority in the Church. It accounts for the qualifications as stated in the same address of Peter's, which merely secure the validity of their testimony. The one thing that must be found in an apostle was that he should have been in familiar intercourse with Christ during his earthly life, both before and after His resurrection, in order that he might be able to say, I knew Him well; I know that He died; I know that He rose again; I saw Him go up to heaven. For such a work there was no need for men of commanding power. Plain, simple, honest men who had the requisite eye-witness were sufficient. The guidance and the missionary work of the Church need not necessarily be in their hands, and, in fact, does not seem to have been. In harmony with this view of the office and its requisites, we find that Paul rests the validity of his apostolate on the fact that He was seen of me also, and regards that vision as his true appointment which left him not one whit behind the very chiefest apostles. Miraculous gifts indeed they had, and miraculous gifts they imparted; but in both instances others shared these powers with them. It was no apostle who laid his hands on the blinded Saul in that house in Damascus and said, Receive the Holy Ghost. An apostle stood by passive and wondering when the Holy Ghost fell on Cornelius and his comrades. In reality apostolic succession is absurd, because there is nothing to succeed to, except what cannot be transmitted, personal knowledge of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To establish that fact as indubitable history is to lay the foundation of the Christian Church, and the eleven plain men, who did that, need no superstitious mist around them to magnify their greatness.

In so far as any succession to them or any devolution of their office is possible, all Christian men inherit it, for to bear witness of the living power of the risen Lord is still the office and honour of every believing soul. It is still true that the sharpest weapon which any man can wield for Christ is the simple adducing of his own personal experience. That which we have seen and handled we declareis still the best form into which our preaching can be cast. And such a voice every man and woman who has found the sweetness and the power of Christ filling their own souls, is bound--rather let us say, is privileged--to lift up. This honour have all the saints. Christ is the true worker, and all our work is but to proclaim Him, and what He has done and is doing for ourselves and for all men.

**III. We may gather, too, the lesson of how often faithful work is unrecorded and forgotten.**

No doubt those apostles who have no place in the history toiled honestly and did their Lord's commands, and oblivion has swallowed it all. Bartholomew and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus, and the rest of them, have no place in the record, and their obscure work is faded, faithful and good as certainly it was.

So it will be sooner or later with us all. For most of us, our service has to be unnoticed and unknown, and the memory of our poor work will live perhaps for a year or two in the hearts of some few who loved us, but will fade wholly when they follow us into the silent land. Well, be it so; we shall sleep none the less sweetly, though none be talking about us over our heads. The world has a short memory, and, as the years go on, the list that it has to remember grows so crowded that it is harder and harder to find room to write a new name on it, or to read the old. The letters on the tombstones are soon erased by the feet that tramp across the churchyard. All that matters very little. The notoriety of our work is of no consequence. The earnestness and accuracy with which we strike our blow is all-important; but it matters nothing how far it echoes. It is not the heaven of heavens to be talked about, nor does a man's life consist in the abundance of newspaper or other paragraphs about him. The love of fameis, no doubt, sometimes found in mindsotherwise noble, but in itself is very much the reverse of noble. We shall do our work best, and be saved from much festering anxiety which corrupts our purest service and fevers our serenest thoughts, if we once fairly make up our minds to working unnoticed and unknown, and determine that, whether our post be a conspicuous or an obscure one, we shall fill it to the utmost of our power--careless of praise or censure, because our judgment is with our God; careless whether we are unknown or well known, because we are known altogether to Him.

The magnitude of our work in men's eyes is as little important as the noise of it. Christ gave all the apostles their tasks--to some of them to found the Gentile churches, to some of them to leave to all generations precious teaching, to some of them none of these things. What then? Were the Peters and the Johns more highly favoured than the others? Was their work greater in His sight? Not so. To Him all service done from the same motive is the same, and His measure of excellence is the quantity of love and spiritual force in our deeds, not the width of the area over which they spread. An estuary that goes wandering over miles of shallows may have less water in it, and may creep more languidly, than the torrent that thunders through some narrow gorge. The deeds that stand highest on the records in heaven are not those which we vulgarly call great. Many a cup of cold water onlywill be found to have been rated higher there than jewelled golden chalices brimming with rare wines. God's treasures, where He keeps His children's gifts, will be like many a mother's secret store of relics of her children, full of things of no value, what the world calls trash, but precious in His eyes for the love's sake that was in them.

All service which is done from the same motive and with the same spirit is of the same worth in His eyes. It does not matter whether you have the gospel in a penny Testament printed on thin paper with black ink and done up in cloth, or in an illuminated missal glowing in gold and colour, painted with loving care on fair parchment, and bound in jewelled ivory. And so it matters little about the material or the scale on which we express our devotion and our aspirations; all depends on what we copy, not on the size of the canvas on which, or on the material in which, we copy it. Small service is true service while it lasts, and the unnoticed insignificant servants may do work every whit as good and noble as the most widely known, to whom have been intrusted by Christ tasks that mould the ages.

**IV. Finally, we may add that forgotten work is remembered, and unrecorded names are recorded above.**

The names of these almost anonymous apostles have no place in the records of the advancement of the Church or of the development of Christian doctrine. They drop out of the narrative after the list in the first chapter of the Acts. But we do hear of them once more. In that last vision of the great city which the seer beheld descending from God, we read that in its foundations were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. All were graven there--the inconspicuous names carved on no record of earth, as well as the familiar ones cut deep in the rock to be seen of all men for ever. At the least that grand image may tell us that when the perfect state of the Church is realised, the work which these men did when their testimony laid its foundation, will be for ever associated with their names. Unrecorded on earth, they are written in heaven.

The forgotten work and its workers are remembered by Christ. His faithful heart and all-seeing eye keep them ever in view. The world, and the Church whom these humble men helped, may forget, yet He will not forget. From whatever muster-roll of benefactors and helpers their names may be absent, they will be in His list. The Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Philippians, has a saying in which his delicate courtesy is beautifully conspicuous, where he half apologises for not sending his greetings to others my fellow-workersby name, and reminds them that, however their names may be unwritten in his letter, they have been inscribed by a mightier hand on a better page, and are in the Lamb's book of life. It matters very little from what record ours may be absent so long as they are found there. Let us rejoice that, though we may live obscure and die forgotten, we may have our names written on the breastplate of our High Priest as He stands in the Holy Place, the breastplate which lies close to His heart of love, and is girded to His arm of power.

The forgotten and unrecorded work lives, too, in the great whole. The fruit of our labour may perhaps not be separable from that of others, any more than the sowers can go into the reaped harvest-field and identify the gathered ears which have sprung from the seed that they sowed, but it is there all the same; and whosoever may be unable to pick out each man's share in the blessed total outcome, the Lord of the harvest knows, and His accurate proportionment of individual reward to individual service will not mar the companionship in the general gladness, when he that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together.

The forgotten work will live, too, in blessed results to the doers. Whatever of recognition and honour we may miss here, we cannot be robbed of the blessing to ourselves, in the perpetual influence on our own character, of every piece of faithful even if imperfect service. Habits are formed, emotions deepened, principles confirmed, capacities enlarged by every deed done for Christ, and these make an over-measure of reward here, and in their perfect form hereafter are heaven. Nothing done for Him is ever wasted. Thou shalt find it after many days. We are all writing our liveshistories here, as if with one of these manifold writers--a black blank page beneath the flimsy sheet on which we write, but presently the black page will be taken away, and the writing will stand out plain on the page behind that we did not see. Life is the filmy, unsubstantial page on which our pen rests; the black page is death; and the page beneath is that indelible transcript of our earthly actions, which we shall find waiting for us to read, with shame and confusion of face, or with humble joy, in another world.

Then let us do our work for Christ, not much careful whether it be greater or smaller, obscure or conspicuous; assured that whoever forgets us and it, He will remember, and however our names may be unrecorded on earth, they will be written in heaven, and confessed by Him before His Father and the holy angels.