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

**MATTHEW-069**. **JOHN'S DOUBTS OF JESUS, AND JESUS' PRAISE OF JOHN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"2.* *Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, 3. And said unto Him, Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another? 4. Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: 5. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me. 7. And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? 8. But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings houses. 9. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. 10. For this is he, of whom it is written. Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee. 11. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. 13. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John--And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come. 16. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."*

*Matthew 11:2-15*

This text falls into two parts: the first, from verses 2-6 inclusive, giving us the faltering faith of the great witness, and Christ's gentle treatment of the waverer; the second, from verse 7 to the end, giving the witness of Christ to John, exuberant in recognition, notwithstanding his momentary hesitation.

**I.** We do not believe that this message of John's was sent for the sake of strengthening his disciples faith in Jesus as Messiah, nor that it was merely meant as a hint to Jesus to declare Himself. The question is John's. The answer is sent to him: it is he who is to ponder the things which the messengers saw, and to answer his own question thereby. The note which the evangelist prefixes to his account gives the key to the incident. John was in prison, in that gloomy fortress of Machaerus which Herod had rebuilt at once for a sinful pleasure-houseand for an impregnable refuge, among the savage cliffs of Moab. The halls of luxurious vice and the walls of defence are gone; but the dungeons are there still, with the holes in the masonry into which the bars were fixed to which the prisoners--John, perhaps, one of them--were chained. No wonder that in the foul atmosphere of a dark dungeon the spirit which had been so undaunted in the free air of the desert began to flag; nor that even he who had seen the fluttering dove descend on Christ's head, and had pointed to Him as the Lamb of God, felt that all his mind was clouded with a doubt. It would have been wiser if commentators, instead of trying to save John's credit at the cost of straining the narrative, had recognised the psychological truth of the plain story of his wavering conviction and had learned its lessons of self-distrust. There is only one Man with whom it was always high-water; all others have ebbs and flows in their religious life, and variations in their grasp of truth.

The narrative further gives the motive for John's embassy, in the report which had reached him of the works of Christ. We need only recall John's earlier testimony to understand how these works would not seem to him to fill up the role which he had anticipated for Messiah. Where is the axe that was to be laid at the root of the trees, or the fan that was to winnow out the chaff? Where is the fiery spirit which he had foretold? This gentle Healer is not the theocratic judge of his warning prophecies. He is tending and nurturing, rather than felling, the barren trees. A nimbus of merciful deeds, not of flashing wrath to come, surrounds His head. So John began to wonder if, after all, he had been premature in his recognition. Perhaps this Jesus was but a precursor, as he himself was, of the Messiah. Evidently he continues firm in the conviction of Christ's being sent from God, and is ready to accept His answer as conclusive; but, as evidently, he is puzzled by the contrariety between Jesusdeeds and his own expectations. He asks, Art Thou He that cometh--a well-known name for Messiah--or are we to expect another?where it should be noted that the word for anothermeans not merely a second, but a different kind of, person, who should present the aspects of the Messiah as revealed in prophecy, and as embodied in John's own preaching, which Jesus had left unfulfilled.

We may well take to heart the lesson of the fluctuations possible to the firmest faith, and pray to be enabled to hold fast that we have. We may learn, too, the danger to right conceptions of Christ, of separating the two elements of mercy and judgment in His character and work. John was right in believing that the Christ must come to judge. A Christ without the fan in His hand is a maimed Christ. John was wrong in stumbling at the gentleness, just as many to-day, who go to the opposite extreme, are wrong in stumbling at the judicial side of His work. Both halves are needed to make the full-orbed character. We have not to look for a differentChrist, but we have to look for Him, coming the second time, the same Jesus, but now with His axe in His pierced hands, to hew down trees which He has patiently tended. Let John's profound sense of the need for a judicial aspect in the Christ who is to meet the prophecies written in men's hearts, as well as in Scripture, teach us how one-sided and superficial are representations of His work which suppress or slur over His future coming to judgment.

Our Lord does not answer Yesor No. To do so might have stilled, but would not have removed, John's misconception. A more thorough cure is needed. So Christ attacks it in its roots by referring him back for answer to the very deeds which had excited his doubt. In doing so, He points to, or indeed, we may say, quotes, two prophetic passages (Isa. 35:5, 6; 61:1) which give the prophetic notesof Messiah. It is as if He had said, Have you forgotten that the very prophets whose words have fed your hopes, and now seem to minister to your doubts, have said this and this about the Messiah?Further, there is deep wisdom in sending John back again to think over the very deeds at which he was stumbling. It is not Christ's work which is wanting in conformity to the divine idea; it is John's conceptions of that idea that need enlarging. What he wants is not so much to be told that Jesus is the Christ, as to grow up to a truer, because more comprehensive, notion of what the Christ is to be. A wide principle is taught us here. The very points in Christ's work which may occasion difficulty, will, when we stand at the right point of view, become evidences of His claims. What were stumbling-blocks become stepping-stones. Arguments against become proofs of, the truth when we look at them with clearer eyes, and from the proper angle. Further, we are taught here, that what Christ does is the best answer to the question as to who He is. Still He is doing these works among us. Darkened eyes are flooded with light by His touch, and see a new world, because they gaze with faith on Him. Lame limbs are endowed with strength, and can run in the way of His commandments, and walk with unfainting perseverance the thorniest paths of duty and self-sacrifice. Lepers are cleansed from the rotting leprosy of sin, and their flesh comes again, as the flesh of a little child. Deaf ears hear the voice of the Son of God, and the dead who hear live. Good news is preached to all the poor in spirit, and whosoever knows himself to be in need of all things may claim all things as his own in Christ. He who through the ages has been working such works, and works them still, needs not to speak anythingto confirm His claims, neither is there salvation in any other. We look for no second Christ; but we look for that same Jesus to come the second time to be the Judge of the world of which He is the Saviour.

The benediction on him who finds none occasion of stumbling in Christ, is at once a beatitude and a warning. It rebukes in the gentlest fashion John's temper, which found difficulty in even the perfect personality of Jesus, and made that which should have been the sure foundationof his spirit a stone of stumbling. Our Lord's consciousness of absolute perfection of moral character, and of absolute perfectness in His office and work, is distinct in the words. He knows that there is none occasion of stumbling in Him, and that whoever finds any, brings it or makes it. He knows and warns us that all blessedness lies for us in recognising Him for what He is--God's sure foundation of our hopes, our peace, our thoughts, our lives. He knows that all woe and loss are involved in stumbling on this stone, against which whosoever falls is broken, and by which, when it begins to move, and falls on a man, he is ground to powder, like the dust of the threshing-floor. What tremendous arrogance of assertion! Who is he who can venture on such words without blasphemy against God, and universal ridicule from men?

**II.** The witness of Christ to John. Praise from Jesus is praise indeed; and it is poured out here with no stinted hand on the languishing prisoner whose doubts had just been brought to Him. Such an eulogium at such a time is a wonderful instance of loving forbearance with a true-hearted follower's weakness, and of a desire which, in a man, we should call magnanimous, to shield John's character from depreciation on account of his message. The world praises a man to his face, and speaks of his faults behind his back. Christ does the opposite. Not till the messengers were departing does He begin to speak concerning John. He lays bare the secret of the Baptist's power, and allocates his place as greatest in one epoch and as less than the least in another, with an authority more than human, and on principles which set Himself high above all comparison with men, whether the greatest or the least. The King places His subjects, and Himself sits enthroned above them all.

First, Christ praises John's great personal character in the dramatic and vivid questions which begin this section. He recalls the scenes of popular enthusiasm when all Israel streamed out to the desert preacher. A small man could not have made such an upheaval. What drew the crowds? Just what will draw them; the qualities without which, either possessed in reality or in popular estimation, no man can be a power religiously. The first essential is heroic firmness. It was not reeds swaying in the wind by Jordan's banks, nor a poor feeble man like these, that the people flocked to listen to. His emblem was not the reed, but an iron pillar. His whole career had been marked by decisiveness, constancy, courage. Nothing can be done worth doing in the world without a wholesome obstinacy and imperturbability, which keep a man true to his convictions and his task, whatever winds blow in his teeth. The multitudes will not flock to listen to a teacher who does not speak with the accent of conviction, nor will truths feebly grasped touch the lips with fire. The first requisite for a religious teacher is that he shall be sure of his message and of himself. Athanasius has to stand against the worldbefore the world accepts his teaching. Though there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the house-tops, go I will, said Luther. That is the temper for God's instruments.

The next requisite, which John also had, is manifest indifference to material ease. Silken courtiers do not haunt the desert. Kingshouses, and not either the wilderness or kingsdungeons, are the sunny spots where they spread their plumage. If the gaunt ascetic, with his girdle of camel's hair and his coarse fare, had been a self-indulgent sybarite, his voice would never have shaken a nation. The least breath of suspicion that a preacher is such a man ends his power, and ought to end it; for self-indulgence and the love of fleshly comforts eat the heart out of goodness, and make the eyes too heavy to see visions. John was the same man then as they had known him to be; therefore it was no impatience of the hardships of his prison that had inspired his doubts.

Our Lord next speaks of John's great office. He was a prophet. The dim recognition that God spoke in His fiery words had drawn the crowds, weary of teachers in whose endless jangle and jargon of casuistry was no inspiration. The voice of a man who gets his message at first-hand from God has a ring in it which even dull ears detect as something genuine. Alas for the bewildering babble of echoes and the paucity of voices to-day!

So far Jesus had been appealing to His hearersknowledge; He now goes on to add higher truth concerning John. He declares that he is more than a prophet, because he is His messenger before His face; that is, immediately preceding Himself. We cannot stay to comment on the remarkable variation between the original form of the quotation from Malachi and Christ's version of it, which, in its substitution of theefor me, bears so forcibly on the divinity of Christ; but we may mark the principle on which John's superiority to the whole prophetic order is based. It is that nearness to Jesus makes greatness. The closer the relation to Him, the higher the honour. In that long procession the King comes last; and of them that go before, crying, Hosanna to Him that cometh, the order of precedence is that the first are last, and that the highest is he who walks in front of the Sovereign.

Next, we have the limitations of the forerunner and his relative inferiority to the least in the kingdom of heaven. Another standard of greatness is here from that of the world, which smiles at the contrast between the uncultured preacher of repentance and the mighty thinkers, poets, legislators, kingdom-makers, whom it enrols among the great. In Christ's eyes greatness is nearness to Him, and understanding of Him and His work. Neither natural faculty nor worth is in question, but simply relation to the Kingdom and the King. He who had only to preach of Him who should come after him, and had but a partial apprehension of Christ and His work, stood on a lower level than the least who has to look to a Christ who has come, and has opened the gates of the kingdom to the humblest believer. The truths which were hid from ages, and were but visible as in morning twilight to John, are sunlit to us. The scholars in our Sunday-schools know familiarly more than prophets and kings ever knew. We hold the grey barbarian lower than the Christian child; and not merely he, but the wisest of the prophets, and the forerunner himself. The history of the world is parted into two by the coming of Jesus Christ, as every dictionary of dates tells, and the least of the greater is greater than the greatest of the less. What a place, then, does Christ claim! Our relation to Him determines greatness. To recognise Him is to be in the Kingdom of Heaven. Union to Him brings us to fulfil the ideal of human nature; and this is life, to know and trust Him, the King.

Our Lord adds a brief characterisation of the effect of John's ministry. It was of mingled good and evil, and there is a tone of sadness perceptible in the ambiguous words. John had aroused great popular excitement, and had stirred multitudes to seek to enter the Kingdom. So far was good. But had all the crowds understood what sort of kingdom it was? Had they not too often dragged down the lofty conception to their own vulgar level, and, with their dream of an outward sovereignty, thought to gain it for their own by violence instead of meekness, by arms and worldly force rather than by submission? The earnestness was good, but Christ's sad insight saw how much strange fire had mingled in the blaze, as if some earth-born smoky flame should seek to blend with the pure sunlight. Such seems the most natural interpretation of the words, but they are ambiguous, and may possibly mean by the violentthose who had been roused to genuine earnestness by the clarion voice which rang in the ears of that slumbering generation.

Then follows the explanation of this new interest in the kingdom. All the prophets and the law prophesied until John. The whole period till his coming was one of preparation, and it all converged on the epoch of the forerunner. The eagerness to flock into the Kingdom which characterised his time would have been impossible in the earlier days. He closes that order of things, standing, as it were, on the isthmus between prophecy and fulfilment, belonging properly to neither, but having affinities with both, and being the transition from the one to the other. Then our Lord closes His words concerning John with the distinct statement, which He expects His hearers to have difficulty in receiving, probably from the contradiction to it which John's present condition seemed to give, that in him was fulfilled Malachi's prophecy of the sending of Elijah the prophet before ... day of the Lord. The fiery Tishbite, gaunt and grim, ascetic and solitary, who bearded Ahab, and flamed across a corrupt age with a stern message of repentance or destruction, was repeated in the lonely ascetic who had his Ahab in Herod, and his Jezebel in Herodias, and like his prototype, knew no fear, but flashed out the lightnings of his words on every sin. The two men were brothers, and their voices answer each other across the centuries. Christ crowns His witness to John while thus quoting the last swansong of ancient prophecy, and thereby at once sets John on a pinnacle of greatness, and advances a claim concerning Himself all the more weighty, because He leaves it to be inferred. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear--this eulogium on the forerunner needs to be reflected on ere all its bearings are seen. If John was Elias, the day of the Lord was at hand, and the Sun of Righteousnesswas already above the horizon. Jesuswitness concerning John ends in witness concerning Himself.