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

**MATTHEW-071**. **SODOM, CAPERNAUM, MANCHESTER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then began He to upbraid the cities wherein most of His mighty works were done, because they repented not."*

*Matthew 11:20*

These words, and the woes which they introduce, are found in another connection in Luke's Gospel. He attaches them to his report of the mission of the seventy disciples. Matthew here introduces them in an order which seems not to depend upon time, but upon identity of subject. It is his method in his Gospel to group together similar events, as we have it exemplified, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, and in the long procession of miracles which immediately follows it, as well as in other parts of the Gospel. In this chapter it is not difficult to discover the common idea which binds its parts into a whole. We have a number of instances strung together, illustrating the different effects of Christ's appearance and work on different classes of persons. There pass before us, John the Baptist with his doubts, the excitable multitude ready to take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm, the critics who cavilled with impartial inconsistency alike at John's asceticism and at Christ's freedom. Then follow the woes pronounced by Him upon the indifference of those who knew Him best, and these are succeeded by His rejoicing in spirit over the babes who accepted Him; and the whole is crowned by great words of invitation which extend equally over those and over all other varieties of disposition, and, since all labour and are heavy laden, summon all, be they what they may, to come and find rest in Him. Obviously, then, the order in this chapter is not that of time, but that of subject.

Notice that of all these different classes and types of character that pass in review before us, the one that is singled out for the solemn denunciation of heavy judgment is that of the people who stood in a blaze of light, and simply paid no attention to it. These are the worst sort. I wonder how many of them are in my audience now?

Let me try, then, to bring before you the thoughts naturally suggested by these introductory words, and the solemn, sorrowful forebodings of retribution which follow them. I ask you to look at three things,--the blaze of light; the neglect of the light; the rebuke for the neglected light. Jesus began to upbraid the cities wherein most of His mighty works were done.

**I. First, then, consider the blaze of light.**

According to the words of my text, the larger number of the miracles of our Lord were wrought in these three places. Cities, our Bible calls them; two of them were little fishing villages, the third a somewhat considerable town. Where are these miracles recorded? Not in our gospels. As for Chorazin, we never hear its name except in this verse, and in the parallel in Luke's Gospel; and all that He did there is swallowed up in oblivion. As for Bethsaida, there are a couple of miracles, probably, recorded as having been wrought there, though there is some obscurity in reference to the locality of at least one of them. As for Capernaum, there are several miracles recorded as having been performed in that place, and several others referred to as having been done there. But there is nothing in the four gospels that would suggest the statement of the text.

Now the inference (which has nothing to do with my present subject, but which I just note in passing) is,--how extremely fragmentary and incomplete these four gospels avowedly are! They harvest for us a few ears plucked in the great waving cornfield,--and all the others withered and died where they grew. The light falls upon one or two groups in the crowd of miserables whom He helped, the rest lie in dim shadow. You have to think of dozens, I suppose I should not be exaggerating if I were to say hundreds, of miracles unrecorded but known, lying behind the specimens that we have in the gospels. Many other things truly did Jesus, which are not written in this book.

Our Lord takes these two little fishing villages, and He parallels and contrasts them with the two great maritime cities of Tyre and Sidon, and says that these insignificant places have far more light than those had. Then He isolates Capernaum, a place of more importance, and His own usual settled residence; and, in like manner, He contrasts it with the long-buried Sodom, and proclaims the superiority of the illumination which fell on the more modern three. Why were they so superior? Because they had Moses? because they had the prophets, the law, the temple, the priesthood? By no means. Because they had Him. So He sets Himself forth as being the highest and clearest of all the revelations that God has made to the world, and asserts that in Him, in His character, in His deeds, men ought to find motives that should bow them in penitence before God; motives sweeter, tenderer, stronger than any that the world knows besides. There is no such light of the knowledge of the glory of God anywhere else as there is in the face of Jesus Christ. And oh! brother; no thoughts of the nobleness of rectitude, and the imperfection of one's own life, no thoughts of a divine justice and a divine punishment, will bow a man in penitence like having once caught a glimpse of the perfect sweetness and perfect beauty of the perfect Humanity that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

But now, mark;--as Capernaum is to Sodom, so is Manchester to Capernaum! I wonder if Jesus Christ were to come amongst us now, whether He would not repeat in spirit the same lesson that is in my text, and bid us contrast our greater illumination with the morning twilight that dawned upon these men, and yet was light enough to bring condemnation? Think,--these people of whom our Lord is speaking here, and setting them high above Tyre and Sidon and Sodom, knew nothing about His cross, death, resurrection, ascension. They knew Him only as a dubious Name, as a possible Divine Messenger and a Miracle-worker; but all the sweetest and the deepest thoughts about Him lay unrevealed. Whilst they stood but in the morning twilight, you and I stand in the noonday blaze. They might be pardoned for doubting whether the light that shone from Him was sunshine or candle, but men of this twentieth century, who have the whole story of Christ, which is the gospel for the world, wrought out through all the tragedy and pathos of His death, and triumph and power of His resurrection, and who have, besides, the history of the world and of the Church for nineteen centuries, are more unpardonable unless they listen to Him with penitence and faith, than were any of His contemporaries.

My brother, we stand in the very focus and fountain, as it were, of the heavenly radiance. A whole Christ, a crucified Christ, a risen Christ, an ascended Christ, a Christ who is the Lord of the Spirit, a Christ who through the centuries is saving and blessing men, a Christ who can point to nineteen hundred years and say, That is My work, in so far as it is good and noble,--this Christ shines with a clearer evidence than the Miracle-worker of Capernaum and Bethsaida. And to you the word comes, If the mighty works which have been done in thee, had been done in Bethsaida and Chorazin, they would have remained until this day.

There are many of you here saturated with the knowledge of the gospel, who from childhood have heard it and heard it and heard it. You have lived in the light all your days. Alas! If the light that isround thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

**II. That brings me in the next place to notice the negligent indifference to the Light in all its blaze.**

The men of these three little fishing towns were not sinners above all the Galileans of their day. Their crime was that they did nothing. No persecution is recorded as having been raised against Him by them; there were no angry antagonisms, no scornful words, no violent opposition. They simply stolidly stood like some black rock in the sunshine, and let the sunshine pour down upon them, and remained grim and black as ever. That was all.

That is to say, the thing that brings down the severest rebuke is not the angry antagonism of the men who are contending in half-darkness, with a misunderstood and therefore disliked Christ, but the sleek, passive apathy that is never touched deeper than its ears by the message of God's word. It is not a difficult thing to incur this condemnation. You have simply to do what some of you are doing, and have been doing all your lives, as to Christianity, and that is--nothing! You have simply to acquiesce politely and respectfully, as many of you do, and say you are Christians; and there an end. You have simply to take my words (as I fear so many of those that listen to them do) as matters of course, the proper things to be said on a Sunday, and for me to say, which may be very true in some vague, general way, but which have no felt application to you. That is all you have to do. It is quite enough. Negative vices will ruin a man, in mind, body, and estate; and the negative sin of simple indifference avails to put a barrier between you and Jesus Christ, through which none of His blessing can filter. If a sailor does not lash himself to something fixed, the next sea that comes across the deck will do the rest. If a sick man does not take the medicine, by doing nothing he has committed suicide. And simple passivity, that is to say (to translate it out of Latin into good, honest English), doing nothing, is all that is needed in order to part you from Christ and Christ from you. He upbraided the cities because they repented not.

One can fancy some well-to-do and thoroughly respectable and clean-living native of Capernaum saying, What! those foul beasts in Sodom better off than I? Impossible!Well, Jesus Christ says so upon very intelligible grounds. The measure of light is the measure of responsibility. That is one ground. And the not preferring Him is the preferring of self and the world, and that is the sin of sins. He will convince the world of sin because they believe not on Me.

Now, one more point, viz. this gelatinous kind of indifference, as of a disposition not stiff enough to take any impression, is found most deeply seated, and hopeless, amongst--shall I venture?--amongst people like you, who have been listening, listening, listening, until your systems have become so habituated to this Christian preaching that it does not produce the least effect. It all runs off you like rain off waterproof. You have waterproofed your consciences and your spiritual susceptibilities by long habit of listening and doing nothing.

And some of you have come to this point, that you positively rather like the titillation and excitement, slight though it may be, which is produced by coming in contact now and then with a good, wholesome, rousing Christian appeal. Not that you ever intend to do anything, but it is pleasant to see a man in earnest, and preaching as if he believed what he was saying. And so perhaps some of you are feeling here to-night.

Ah! my dear friends, it is possible for a man to live by the side of Niagara until he cannot hear the cataract; and it is an awful thing for men and women to live under the sound of Christian teaching until it produces no more effect upon their wills and natures than the ringing of the church bells, to which they pay no attention.

You do not know the despair that comes over us preachers time after time, as we look down upon the faces of our congregations, and feel, What shall I do to put a sharp enough point upon this truth to get it into the heart of some man that has been sitting there as long as I have been standing here, and is never a bit the better for it?Our most earnest preaching is like putting a red-hot iron into a pond: the cold water puts it out and closes above it, and there is no more heard nor seen of it. Our old Puritan forefathers used to talk about gospel-hardened hearers. I believe that there are people listening to me now who have become so inured to Christian preaching that, like artillery horses, they will not move a muscle or quiver if a whole battery of cannon is fired off under their noses. God knows I despair sometimes, many a time, when I think of the hundreds of people to whom I speak, year after year, and how there seems next to nothing in the world to come of it all.

**III. Now lastly, notice here the rebuke of this negligence of the light.**

He began to upbraid the cities. But oh! we shall misunderstand Him and His purpose if we think that that upbraiding was anything but the sorrowful expression of His own loving heart, which warned of what was coming in order that He might never need to send it. Woe unto you; woe unto you, and His own lips quivered and His own heart felt the woe, as He laid bare the sin and foreannounced the retribution.

I do not feel that I dare dwell upon, or that it beseems me to say much about, this solemn thought. Only, dear friends, I do desire, if I could, to wake some of you to look realities for once in the face, and to be sure of this, that retribution is proportioned to light, and that the sin of sins is the rejection of Jesus Christ. Beneath the broad folds of that more tolerablethere lie infinite degrees of retribution. The same deed done by a group of men may be indefinitely varied in its culpability, according to the motives and the clearness of knowledge which accompany or prompt the doing of it. And so, just because the life beyond is the accurate outcome and issue of the whole character and conduct, estimated according to motive and knowledge, therefore there must be differences infinitely wide between the fate of the servant that knew his Lord's will, and the servant that knew not.

Where do you think we gospel-drenched English men and women will stand in that allocation of culpability? I do not presume to say more, but I beseech you,--let no present controversies about the duration and the possible termination of retribution in another state, or the possible prolongation of a probation into another state, blind you to the fact that however these questions be settled, this is a truth, independent of them, but being forgotten amidst the dust of controversy, that the next life is a life of retribution, and that there you and I will give account of our deeds, and chiefly of our attitude to Jesus.

And now let me say, in one word,--hoisting the danger-signal is the work of kindness, and Jesus Christ was never more loving than when from His lips there came these words, heavy with His own sorrow, and stern with the prophecy of retribution. I know that Christian teachers have often spoken of the solemn things beyond, in tones much to be deplored, and which weaken the force of their message. But surely, surely, if we believe in a judgment to come, and if we believe that some of those that listen to us are in peril of it, surely, surely, the plainest duty is that with tears in our voice and pleading tenderness in our tone, seeing the sword coming, we should give warning, and beseech men to flee for refuge to the hope of the Gospel. The solemn words that we have been looking at now, lead up to, and are intended to make more impressive and gracious, the invitation with which this chapter ends: Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Dear friends, we stand in the blaze of the light. Our familiarity with Jesus Christ may be our ruin. We are tempted to pay no heed to His words because we know them so well. Neglect of Christ on your part will bring deeper woes on your head than the people of Capernaum pulled down upon theirs. The brighter the sunshine, the louder the thunder and the fiercer the lightning; the longer the summer day, the longer the winter night; the closer the comet comes to the sun, the further away it plunges, at the other extremity of its orbit, into space and darkness. So I beseech you, listen as if you had never heard it before, and listen as if your lives depended upon it (as indeed they do) to that merciful invitation, Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and then you will get rest for your souls here, and at that day when Sodom and Capernaum and Manchester--they and we--shall stand before His throne, you may lift up your eyes, and be glad to see who it is that sits on the tribunal, and that you learned to know and love the face of your Saviour, before you saw Him enthroned as your Judge.