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

**MATTHEW-075**. **AN ATTEMPT TO ACCOUNT FOR JESUS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This man doth not cast out demons, but by Beelzebub, the prince of the demons."*

*Matthew 12:24*

Mark's Gospel tells us that this astonishing explanation of Christ and His work was due to the ingenious malice of an ecclesiastical deputation, sent down from Jerusalem to prevent the simple folk in Galilee from being led away by this new Teacher. They must have been very hard put to it to explain undeniable but unwelcome facts, when they hazarded such a preposterous theory.

Formal religionists never know what to make of a man who is in manifest touch with the unseen. These scribes, like Christ's other critics, judged themselves in judging Him, and bore witness to the very truths that they were eager to deny. For this ridiculous explanation admits the miraculous, recognises the impossibility of accounting for Christ on any naturalistic hypothesis, and by its very outrageous absurdity indicates that the only reasonable explanation of the facts is the admission of His divine message and authority. So we may learn, even from such words as these, how the glory of Jesus Christ shines, though distorted and blurred, through the fogs of prejudice and malice.

**I. Note, then, first, the unwelcome and undeniable facts that insist upon explanation.**

I have said that these hostile critics attest the reality of the miracles. I know that it is not fashionable at present to attach much weight to the fact that none of all the enemies that saw them ever had a doubt about the reality of Christ's miracles. I know quite well that in an age that believed in the possibility of the supernatural, as this age does not, credence would be more easy, and that such testimony is less valuable than if it had come from a jury of scientific twentieth century sceptics. But I know, on the other hand, that for long generations the expectation of the miraculous had died out before Christ came; that His predecessor, John the Baptist, made no such claims; and that, at first, at all events, there was no expectation of Jesus working miracles, to lead to any initial ease of acceptance of His claims. And I know that there were never sharper and more hostile eyes brought to bear upon any man and his work than the eyes of these ecclesiastical triers. It would have been so easy and so triumphant a way of ending the whole business if they could have shown, what they were anxious to be able to show, that the miracle was a trick. And so I venture to think that not without some weight is the attestation from the camp of the enemy, This man casteth out demons.

But you have to remember that amongst the facts to be explained is not only this one of Christ's works having passed muster with His enemies, but the other of His own reiterated and solemn claim to have the power of working what we call miracles. Now, I wish to dwell on that for one moment, because it is fashionable to put one's thumb upon it nowadays. It is not unusual to eliminate from the Gospel narrative all that side of it, and then to run over in eulogiums about the rest. But what we have to deal with is this fact, that the Man whom the world admits to be the consummate flower of humanity, meek, sane, humble, who has given all generations lessons in self-abnegation and devotion, claimed to be able to raise the dead, to cast out demons, and to do many wonderful works. And though we should be misrepresenting the facts if we said that He did what His followers have too often been inclined to do, i.e. rested the stress of evidence upon that side of His work, yet it is an equal exaggeration in the other direction to do, as so many are inclined to do to-day, i.e. disparage the miraculous evidence as no evidence at all. Go and tell John the things that ye see and hear,--that is His own answer to the question, Art Thou He that should come?And though I rejoice to believe that there are far loftier and more blessed answers to it than these outward signs and tokens, they are signs and tokens; and they are part of the whole facts that have to be accounted for.

I would venture to widen the reference of my text for a moment, and include not only the actual miracles of our Lord's earthly life, but all the beneficent, hallowing, elevating, ennobling, refining results which have followed upon the proclamation of His truth in the world ever since. I believe, as I think Scripture teaches me to believe, that in the world today Christ is working; and that it is a mistake to talk about the results of Christianity, meaning thereby some abstract system divorced from Him. It is the working of Jesus Christ in the world that has brought nobler manners, purer laws; that has given a new impulse and elevation to art and literature; that has lifted the whole tone of society; that has suppressed ancient evils; that has barred the doors of old temples of devildom, of lust, and cruelty, and vice; and that is still working in the world for the elevation and the deifying of humanity. And I claim the whole difference between B.C. and A.D.--the whole difference between Christendom and Heathendom--as being the measure of the continuous power with which Jesus Christ has grappled with and throttled the snakes that have fastened on men. That continuous operation of His in delivering from the powers of evil has, indeed, not yielded such results as might have been expected. But just as on earth He was hindered in the exercise of His supernatural power by men's unbelief, so that He could do no mighty works, save that He laid His hands on a few sick folkhere and there, and healed them, so He has been thwarted by His Church, and hindered in the world, from manifesting the fulness of His power. But yet, sorrowfully admitting that, and taking as deserved the scoffs of the men that say, Your Christianity does not seem to do so very much after all, I still venture to allege that its record is unique; and that these are facts which wise men ought to take into account, and have some fairly plausible way of explaining.

**II. Secondly, note the preposterous explanation.**

This man doth not cast out demons, but by Beelzebub, the prince of the demons. That is the last resort of prejudice so deep that it will father an absurdity rather than yield to evidence. And Christ has no difficulty in putting it aside, as you may remember, by a piece of common sense: If Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself, and his kingdom cannot stand. There is an old play which has for its title, The Devil as an Ass. He is not such an ass as that, to build up with one hand and cast down with the other. As the proverb has it, Hawks do not pick out hawkseyes. But this plainly hopeless attempt to account for Christ and His work may be turned into a witness for both, and yield not unimportant lessons.

This explanation witnesses to the insufficiency of all explanations which omit the supernatural. These men felt that they had to do with a Man who was in touch with a whole world of unseen powers; and that they had here to deal with something to which ordinary measuring lines were palpably inapplicable. And so they fell back upon by Beelzebub; and they thereby admitted that humanity without something more at the back of it never made such a man as that. And I beg you to lay that to heart. It is very easy to solve an insoluble problem if you begin by taking all the insoluble elements out of it. And that is how a great deal of modern thinking does with Christianity. Knock out all the miracles; pooh-pooh all Christ's claims; say nothing about Incarnation; declare Resurrection to be entirely unhistorical, and you will not have much difficulty in accounting for the rest; and it will not be worth the accounting for. But here is the thing to be dealt with, that whole life, the Christ of the Gospels. And I venture to say that any explanation professing to account for Him which leaves out His coming from an unseen world, and His possession of powers above this world of sense and nature, is ludicrously inadequate. Suppose you had a chain which for thousands of years had been winding on to a drum, and link after link had been rough iron, and all at once there comes one of pure gold, would it be reasonable to say that it had been dug from the same mine, and forged in the same fires, as its black and ponderous companions? Generation after generation has passed across the earth, each begetting sons after its own likeness; and lo! in the midst of them starts up one sinless Man. Is it reasonable to say that He is the product of the same causes which have produced all the millions, and never another like Him? Surely to account for Jesus without the supernatural is hopeless.

Further, this explanation may be taken as an instance showing the inadequacy of all theories and explanations of Christ and Christianity from an unbelieving point of view. It was the first attempt of unbelievers to explain where Christ's power came from. Like all first attempts, it was crude, and it has been amended and refined since. Earlier generations did not hesitate to call the Apostles liars, and Christ's contemporaries did not hesitate to call Him this deceiver. We have got beyond that; but we still are met by explanations of the power of the Gospel and of Christ, its subject and Author, which trace these to ignoble elements, and do not shrink from asserting that a blunder or a hallucination lies at the foundation.

Now, I am not going to enter upon these matters at any length, but I would just recall to you our Lord's broad, simple principle: A corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit, neither doth a good tree bring forth evil fruit. And I would apply that all round. Christian teachers have often made great mistakes, as it seems to me, by tracing the prevalence of the power of some heathen religions to their vices and lies. No system has ever had great moral power in this world but by reason of its excellences and truths. Mohammedanism, for instance, swept away, and rightly, a mere formal superstition which called itself Christianity, because it grasped the one truth: There is no God but God; and it had faith of a sort. Monasticism held the field in Europe, with all its faults, for centuries, because it enshrined the great Christian truth of self-sacrifice and absolute obedience. And you may take it as a fixed rule, that howsoever some mixture of falsehood doth ever please, as Bacon says, in his cynical way, the reason for the power of any great movement has been the truth that was in it and not the lie; and the reason why great men have exercised influence has been their greatness and their goodness, and not their smallnesses and their vices.

I apply that all round, and I ask you to apply it to Christianity; and in the light of such plain principles to answer the question: Where did this Man, so fair, so radiant, so human and yet so superhuman, so universal and yet so individual--where did He come from? and where did the Gospel, which flows from Him, and which has done such things in the world as it has done--where did it come from? Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?If it is true that Jesus Christ is either mistakenly represented in the Gospels, or that He made enthusiastic claims which cannot be verified; and if it is true that the faith in a Resurrection on which Christianity is suspended, and which has produced such fruits as we know have been produced, is a delusion; then all I can say is that the noblest lives that ever were lived in the world have found their impulse in a falsehood or a dream; and that the richest clusters that ever have yielded wine for the cup have grown upon a thorn. If like produces like, you cannot account for Christ and Christianity by anything short of the belief in His Divine mission. Serpentseggs do not hatch out into doves. This Man, when He claimed to be God's Son and the world's Saviour, was no brain-sick enthusiast; and the results show that the Gospel which His followers proclaim rests upon no lie.

Again, this explanation is an instance of the credulity of unbelief. Think of the mental condition which could swallow such an explanation of such a Worker and such work. It is more difficult to believe the explanation than the alternative which it is framed to escape. So it is always. The difficulties of faith are small by comparison with those of unbelief, gnats beside camels, and that that is so is plain from the short duration of each unbelieving explanation of Jesus. One can remember in the compass of one's own life more than one assailant taking the field with much trumpeting and flag-waving, whose attack failed and is forgotten. The child's story tells of a giant who determined to slay his enemy, and belaboured an empty bed with his club all night, and found his foe untouched and fresh in the morning. The Gospel is here; what has become of its assailants? They are gone, and the limbo into which the scribestheory has passed will receive all the others. So we may be quite patient, and sure that the sieve of time, which is slowly and constantly working, will riddle out all the rubbish, and cast it on the dunghill where so many exploded theories rot forgotten.

**III. And now, one word about the last point; and that is--the true explanation.**

Now, at this stage of my sermon, I must not be tempted to say a word about the light which our Lord throws, in these declarations in the context, into that dim unseen world. His words seem to me to be too solemn and didactic to be taken as accommodations to popular prejudice, and a great deal too grave to be taken as mere metaphor. And I, for my part, am not so sure that, apart from Him, I know all things in heaven and earth, as to venture to put aside these solemn words of His--which lift a corner of the veil which hides the unseen--and to dismiss them as unworthy of notice. Is it not a strange thing that a world which is so ready to believe in spiritual communications when they are vouched for by a newspaper editor, is so unwilling to believe them when they are in the Bible? And is it not a strange thing that scientists, who are always taunting Christians with the importance they attach to man in the plan of the universe, and ask if all these starry orbs were built for him, should be so incredulous of teachings which fill the waste places with loftier beings? But that is by the way.

What does Christ say in the context? He tells the secret of His power. I, by the Spirit of God, cast out demons. And then He goes on to speak about a conflict that He wages with a strong man; and about His binding the strong man, and spoiling his house. All which, being turned into modern language, is just this, that the Lord, by His incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and government at the right hand of God, has broken the powers of evil in their central hold. He has crushed the serpent's head; and though He may still, as Milton puts it, swinge the scaly horror of his folded tail, it is but the flurries of the dying brute. The conquering heel is firm on his head. So, brethren, evil is conquered, and Christ is the Conqueror; and by His work in life and death He has delivered them that were held captive of the devil. And you and I may, if we will, pass into the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.

That is the only explanation of Him--in His person, in His character, in His work, and in the effects of that work in the world--that covers all the facts, and will hold water. All others fail, and they mostly fail by boldly eliminating the very facts that need to be accounted for. Let us rather look to Him, thankful that our Brother has conquered; and let us put our trust in that Saviour. For, if His explanation is true, then a very solemn personal consideration arises for each of us, If I, by the Spirit of God, cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God is come unto you, it stands beside us; it calls for our obedience. Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone, can cast the evils out of our natures. It is the Incarnate Christ, the Divine Christ, the crucified Christ, the ascended Christ, the indwelling Christ, who will so fill our hearts that there shall be no aching voids there to invite the return of the expelled tyrants. If any other reformation pass upon us than the thorough one of receiving Him by faith into our hearts, then, though they may be swept and garnished, they will be empty; and the demons will come back. With Jesus inside--they will be outside.