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

**MATTHEW-077**. **A GREATER THAN JONAS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"A greater than Jonas is here."*

*Matthew 12:41*

There never was any man in his right mind, still more of influence on his fellows, who made such claims as to himself in such unmistakable language as Jesus Christ does. To say such things of oneself as come from His lips is a sign of a weak, foolish nature. It is fatal to all influence, to all beauty of character. It is not only that He claims official attributes as a fanatical or dishonest pretender to inspiration may do. He does that, but He does more--He declares Himself possessed of virtues which, if a man said he had them, it would be the best proof that he did not possess them and did not know himself. I am the way and the truth and the life. I am the light of the world--a greater than the temple, a greater than Jonah, a greater than Solomon, and then withal I am meek and lowly of heart. And the world believes Him, and says, Yes! it is true.

These three comparisons of Jesus with Temple, Jonas, and Solomon, carry great claims and great lessons. By the first Jesus asserts that He is in reality all that the Temple was in shadowy symbol, and sets Himself above ritual, sacrifices, and priests. By the second he asserts His superiority not only to one prophet but to them all. By the third He asserts His superiority to Solomon, whom the Jews reverenced as the bright, consummate flower of kinghood.

Now we may take this comparison as giving us positive thoughts about our Lord. The points of comparison may be taken to be three, with Jonah as one of an order, with Jonah in his personal character as a servant of God, with Jonah as a prophet charged with a special work.

**I. The prophets and the Son.**

The whole prophetic order may fairly be taken as included here. And over against all these august and venerable names, the teachers of wisdom, the speakers of the oracles of God, this Nazarene peasant stands there before Pharisees and Scribes, and asserts His superiority. It is either the most insane arrogance of self-assertion, or it is a sober truth. If it be true that self-consciousness is ever the disease of the soul, and that the religious teacher who begins to think of himself is lost, how marvellous is this assertion!

Compare it with Paul's, Unto me who am less than the least of all saints--I am not a whit behind the chief of the Apostles--though I be nothing--Not I, but Christ in me. And yet this is meekness, for it is infinite condescension in Him to compare Himself with any son of man.

**(a)** The contrast is suggested between the prophets and the theme of the prophets.

The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. Though undoubtedly the prophet order had other work than prediction to do, yet the soul of their whole work was the announcement of the Messiah.

In testimony whereof, Elijah, who was traditionally the chief of the prophets, stood beside Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, and passed away as lost in His light.

**(b)** The contrast is suggested between the recipients of the word of God and the Word of God.

The relation of the prophets to their message is contrasted with His who was the Truth, who not merely received, but was, the Word of God.

There is nothing in Christ's teaching to show that He was conscious of standing in a human relation to the truths which He spoke. His own personality is ever present in His teaching instead of being suppressed--as in all the prophets. His own personality is His teaching, for His revelation is by being as much as by saying. Similarly, His miracles are done by His own power.

**(c)** The contrast is suggested between the partial teacher of God's Name and the complete revealer of it.

The foundation was laid by the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone (Hebrews 1:1).

**II. The disobedient prophet and the perfect Son.**

Jonah stands as the great example of human weakness in the chosen instruments of God's hand.

Take the story--his shrinking from the message given him. We know not why; but perhaps from faint-hearted fear, or from a sense of his unworthiness and unfitness for the task. His own words about God as long-suffering seem to suggest another reason, that he feared to go with a message of judgment which seemed to him so unlikely to be executed by the long-suffering God. If so, then what made him recreant was not so much fear from personal motives as intellectual perplexity and imperfect comprehension of the ways of God. Then we hear of his pitiable flight with its absurdity and its wickedness. Then comes the prayer which shows him to have been right and true at bottom, and teaches us that what makes a good man is not the absence of faults, but the presence of love and longing after God. Then we see the boldness of his mission. Then follows the reaction from that lofty height, the petulance or whatever else it was with which he sees the city spared. Even the mildest interpretation cannot acquit him of much disregard for the poor souls whom he had brought to repentance, and of dreadful carelessness for the life and happiness of his fellows.

Now Jonah's behaviour is but a specimen of the vacillations, the alternations of feeling which beset every man; the loftiest, the truest, the best. Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, John the Baptist, Peter, Luther, Cranmer. And it is full of instruction for us.

Then we turn to the contrast in Christ's perfect obedience and faithfulness in His prophetic office. In Him is no trace of shrinking even when the grimness of the Cross weighed most on His heart. No confusion of mind as to the Father's will, or as to the union in Him of perfect righteousness and infinite mercy, ever darkened His clear utterances or cast a shadow over his own soul. He was never weakened by the collapse that follows on great effort or strong emotion. He never failed in his mission through lack of pity.

But there is no need to draw out the comparison. We look on all God's instruments, and see them all full of faults and flaws. Here is one stainless name, one life in which is no blot, one heart in which are no envy, no failings--one obedience which never varied. He says of Himself, I do always those things which please Him, and we, thinking of all the noblest examples of virtue that the world has ever seen, and seeing in them all some speck, turn to this whole and perfect chrysolite and say, Yes! a greater than they!

**III. The bearer of a transitory message of repentance to one Gentile people, and the bearer of an eternal message of grace and love to the whole earth.**

* Jonah is remarkable as having had the sphere of his activity wholly outside Israel.
* The nature of his message; a preaching of punishment; a call to repentance.
* The sphere of it--one Gentile city. The effect of it--transitory. We know what Nineveh became.

Jesus is greater than Jonah or any prophet in this respect, that His message is to the world, and in this, that what He preaches and brings far transcends even the loftiest and most spiritual words of any of them.

His voice is sweetest, tenderest, clearest and fullest of all that have ever sounded in men's ears. And just because it is so, the hearing of it brings the most solemn responsibility that was ever laid on men, and to us still more gravely and truly may it be said than to those who heard Jesus speak on earth, The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation and condemn it.