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

**MATTHEW-090**. **SWIFT HEALING SERVICE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Peter answered Him and said, Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water."*

*Matthew 14:28*

We owe this account of an episode in the miracle of Christ's walking on the waters to Matthew alone. Singularly enough there is no reference to Peter's venturesomeness and failure in the Gospel which is generally believed to have been written under his special inspection and suggestion. Mark passes by that part of the narrative without a word. That may be because Peter was somewhat ashamed of it, or it may be from a natural disinclination to make himself prominent in the story at all. But, whatever the reason, we may be thankful that in this first Gospel we have the story, for it is not only interesting as illustrating the characteristics of the apostle in a very picturesque fashion, but also as carrying in it very plainly large lessons that are of use for us all.

**I. Note, first, Peter's venturesomeness, half faith, and half presumption.**

There is a singular mixture of good and bad in it. Looked at one way, it seems all right; like a bit of shot silk, in one light it is bright, and in another it is black enough. What was good in it? Well, there was the man's out-and-out confidence in his Master; and there was, further, the unconsidered, instinctive shoot of love in his heart to the mysterious figure standing there upon the water, so that his desire was to be beside Him. It was far more Bid me come to Thee!than Bid me come to Thee on the water. The incident was a kind of rehearsal, with a noticeable difference, and yet with nearly parallel circumstances, of the other incident when, after the Resurrection, he discovered the Lord standing on the shore, and floundered through the water anyhow; whether on it or in it did not matter to him, so long as he could get near his Master. But though the apostle's action was blended with a great deal that was childish and sensuous, and was perhaps quite as much the result of mere temperament as of conscious affection, still there was good in that eager longing to be beside his Lord, which it would be well for us if we in some measure shared, and in that indifference to the perils of the strange path so long as it led to Christ's side, which, if it were ours, would ennoble our lives, and in that perfect confidence that Christ could enable him to tread the unquiet sea, which would make us lords of all storms, if it wrought in us.

What was bad in it? First, the characteristic pushing of himself to the front, and wish to be singled out from his brethren by some special token. Bid me come. Why should he be bidden any more than John, who sits quietly and gazes, or the others, who are tugging at the oars? Then the impetuous rashness and signal over-estimate of his own capacity and courage were bad. Perhaps, too, there was a little dash of a boyish kind of wish to do a strange thing, and now that he sees his Master there, walking on the waters, he thinks he would like to try it too. So the request is a rash, self-confident pushing of himself before his brethren into circumstances of wholly unnecessary peril and trial, of which he had not estimated the severity till he felt the water beginning to yield under his feet and the wind smiting him on the face. So that the incident is a rehearsal and anticipation of the precisely similar thing that he did when, on the morning of Christ's trial, he shouldered himself unnecessarily into the high priest's palace, and got himself close up against the fire there, without a moment's reflection on the possible danger he was running of having his loyalty melted by a fiercer flame, and little dreaming that he was going to fall, and all his courage to ooze out at his finger-ends, before the sharp tongue of a maid-servant. In like manner as he says here, Bid me come to Thee, without the smallest doubt that when he was bade to come he would be able to do it, so he said that night: Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,--and yet he denied Him.

Let us take the warning from this venturesomeness of a generous, impulsive, enthusiastic religious nature, and remember that the most genuine faith and religious emotion need to be sobered and steadied by reflection, and by searching into our own motives, before we venture upon the water, howsoever much we may wish to go there. Make very sure that your zeal for the Lord has an element of sober permanence in it, and that it is the result, not of a mere transitory feeling, but of a steady, settled purpose. And do not push yourself voluntarily into places of peril or of difficulty, where the fighting is hard and the fire heavy, unless you have reasonable grounds for believing that you can stand the strain. Bring quiet, sober reason into the loftiest and loveliest enthusiasm of your faith, and then there will be something in it that will live through storm, and walk the water with unwetted and unsinking foot. An impure alloy of selfish itching for pre-eminence and distinction does not seldom mingle with the fine gold of religious enthusiasm and desire to serve and be near our Lord. Therefore we have to test our motives and seek to refine our purest emotions, and the more scrupulously the purer they seem, lest we be yielding to the impulses of self while we fancy that we are being drawn by the magnetism of Christ.

**II. We have here the momentary triumph and swift collapse of an impure faith.**

One can fancy with what hushed expectation the other apostles looked at Peter as he let himself down over the side of the ship, and his feet touched the surges and did not sink. Christ's grave, single-worded answer Comebarely sanctions the apostle's request. It is at most a permission, but scarcely a command, and it is permission to try, in order that Peter may learn his own weakness. He did walk on the water to go to Jesus. What kept him up? Not Christ's hand, nor any power bestowed on the apostle, but simply the exercise of Christ's will. But if he was held up by the operation of that will, why did he begin to sink? The vivid narrative tells us: When he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid. That was why. It had been blowing every bit as hard before he stepped out of the ship. The waves were not running any higher after than when he said, Bid me come to Thee. But he was down amongst them, and that makes a wonderful difference. For a moment he stood, and then the peril into which he had so heedlessly thrust himself began to tell on him. Presumption subsided swiftly into fright, as it usually does, and fear began to fulfil itself, as it usually does. He became afraid, and that made him heavy and he began to sink. Not because the gale was any more violent, not because the uneven pavement was any more yielding, but because he was frightened, and his faith began to falter at the close sight of the danger.

And why did the ebbing away of faith mean the withdrawal of Christ's will to keep him up? Why? Because it could not but be so. There is only one door through which Christ's upholding power gets into a man, and that is the door of the man's trust in the power; and if he shuts the door, the power stops outside. So Peter went down. The text does not tell us how far down he went. Depend upon it, it was further than over the shoes! But he went down because he began to lose his trust that Christ could hold him up; and when he lost his trust, Christ lost His power over him.

All this is a parable, carrying very plain and important lessons. We are upborne by Christ's power, and that power, working on and in our weakness, invests us with prerogatives in some measure like His own. If He can stand quiet on the heaving wave, so can His servant. The works that I do shall ye do also--and the depths of the sea "become" a way for the ransomed to pass over. That power is exercised on condition of our faith. As soon as faith ceases the influx of His grace is stayed. Peter, though probably he was not thinking of this incident, has put the whole philosophy of it into plain words in his own letter, when he says, You who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. He was held up as long as he believed. His belief was a hand, and that which it grasped was what held him up, and that was Christ's will and power. So we shall be held up everywhere, and in any storm, as long as, and no longer than, we set our confidence upon Him.

Our faith is sure to fail when we turn away our eyes from Christ to look at the tempest and the dangers. If we keep our gaze fixed upon Him, the consciousness and the confidence of His all-sustaining power will hold us up. If once we turn aside to look at the waves as they heave, and prick our ears to listen to the wind as it whistles, then we shall begin to doubt whether He is able to keep us up. Looking offfrom all these dangers unto Jesusis needful if we are to run the race set before us.

A man walking along a narrow ledge of some Alpine height has only one chance of safety, and that is, not to look at his feet or at the icy rocks beside him, or at the gulf beneath, into which he will be dashed if he gazes down. He must look up and onwards, and then he will walk along a knife-edge, and he shall not fall. So, Peter, never mind the water, never mind the wind; look at Jesus and you will get to Him dry shod. If you turn away your eyes from Him, and take counsel of the difficulties and trials and antagonisms, down you will be sure to go. They sank to the bottom like a stone, the depths covered them. Christ holds us up. He cannot hold us up unless we trust Him. Faith and fear contend for supremacy in our hearts. If we rightly trust, we shall not be afraid. If we are afraid, terror will slay trust. To look away from Christ, and occupy our thoughts with dangers and obstacles, is sure to lead to the collapse of faith and the strengthening of terror. To look past and above the billows to Him that stands on them is sure to cast out fear and to hearten faith. Peter ignored the danger at the wrong time, before he dropped over the side of the boat, and he was aware of it at the wrong time, while he was actually being held up and delivered from it. Rashness ignores peril in the wrong way, and thereby ensures its falling on the presumptuous head. Faith ignores it in the right way, by letting the eye travel past it, to Christ who shields from it, and thereby faith brings about the security it expects, and annihilates the peril from which it looks away to Jesus.

**III. We have here the cry of desperate faith and its immediate answer.**

The very thing which had broken Peter's faith mended it again. Fear sunk him by making him falter in his confidence; and, as he was sinking, the very desperation of his terror drove him back to his faith, and he criedwith a shrill, loud voice, heard above the roar of the boisterous wind, Lord, save me. So difficulties and dangers, when they begin to tell upon us, often send us back to the trust which the anticipation of them had broken; and out of the very extremity of fear we sometimes can draw its own antidote. Just as with flint and steel you may strike a spark, so danger, striking against our heart, brings out the flash that kindles the tinder.

This brief cry for help singularly blends faith and fear. There is faith in it, else Peter would not have appealed to Christ to save him. There is mortal terror in it, else he would not have felt that he needed to cry. But faith is uppermost now, and the very terror feeds it. So, by swift transition, our fears may pass into their own opposite and become courageous trust. Just as in a coal fire the thick black smoke sometimes gets alight and passes into ruddy flame, so our fears may catch fire and flash up as confidence and prayer.

Note the merciful swiftness of Christ's answer. Immediately He caught him, because another moment would have been too late. There will be time to teach him the lessons of his presumption, but when the water is all but up to the lips that shrieked for help, there is but one thing to do. He must be saved first and talked to afterwards. Our cries for deliverance in temporal matters are not always answered so quickly, for it is often better for us to be left to struggle with the waves and winds. But our appeals for Christ's helping hand in soul-peril are always answered without delay. No appreciable time is consumed in the passage of the telegram or in flashing back the answer. The apostle was not caught by Christ's hand before he knew his danger, for it was good for him that he should go down some way, but he was caught as soon as he called on the Master, and before he had come to any harm. The trial lasted long enough to wash the stiffening of self-confidence out of him, and then it had done its work--and Christ's strong hand held him up.

The manner of the answer is noteworthy. It is determined by, and adapted to, his weak faith. He could not be upheld now as he had been a moment ago, before his fear had weighted him, by the exercise of Christ's will only. Then Christ could hold him up without touching him, but now the palpable grasp of the hand was needed to assure the tremulous, doubting heart. So we, too, sometimes need and get material and outward signs which make it easier to feel the reality of sustaining grace. But whether we do or no, Christ's swift help always takes the form best suited to our faith, and He has regard to the capacity of our clasping hands in the measure and manner of His gifts.

The time and tone of Christ's gentle remonstrance are remarkable. Deliverance comes first, and rebuke afterwards. Having first shown him, by the fact of safety, that his doubts were irrational, Christ then, and not till then, puts His gentle question. Perhaps there was a smile on His face, as surely there was love in His voice, that softened the rebuke and went to Peter's heart.

What does Christ rebuke him for? Getting out of the boat? No. He does not blame him for venturing too much, but for trusting too little. He does not blame him for attempting something beyond his strength, but for not holding fast the beginning of his confidence firm unto the end. And so the lesson for us is, that we cannot expect too much if we expect it perseveringly. We cannot set our conceptions of Christ's possible help to us too high if only we keep at the height to which we once have set them, and are assured that He will hold us up when we are down amongst the weltering waves, as we fancied ourselves to be when we were sitting in the boat wishing to be with Him. That is the question that He will meet us with when we get up on the shore yonder; and we shall not have any more to say for ourselves, in vindication of our tremulous trust, than Peter, silenced for once, had to say on this occasion.

It will be good for us all if, like this apostle, our trials consolidate our characters, and out of the shifting, fluctuating, impetuous nature that was blown about like sand by every gust of emotion there be made, by the pressure of responsibility and trial, and experience of our own unreliableness, the Rockof a stable character, steadfast and unmovable, with calm resolution and fixed faith, on which the Great Architect can build some portion of His great temple.