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

**MATTHEW-093**. **CHRIST FORESEEING THE CROSS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto His disciples, how that He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day."*

*Matthew 16:21*

The timereferred to in the text was probably a little more than six months before the Crucifixion, when Jesus was just on the point of finally leaving Galilee, and travelling towards Jerusalem. It was an epoch in His ministry. The hostility of the priestly party in the capital had become more pronounced, and simultaneously the fickle enthusiasm of the Galilean crowds, which had been cooled by His discouragement, had died down into apathy. He and His followers are about to leave familiar scenes and faces, and to plunge into perilous and intrude paths. He is resolved that, if they will come after Him, as He bids them in a subsequent verse, it shall be with their eyes open, and as knowing that to come after Him now means to cut themselves loose from old moorings, and to put out into the storm. They shall be abundantly certified that their journeying to Jerusalem is not a triumphal procession to a crown, but a march to a cross.

So, this new epoch in His life is attended with a new development of His teaching. My text sums up the result of many interviews in which, by slow degrees, He sought to put the disciples in possession of this unwelcome truth. It was prepared for, by the previous conversation in which His question elicited from Peter, as the mouthpiece of the apostles, the great confession of His Messiahship and Divinity. Settled in their belief of these truths, however imperfect their intellectual grasp of them, they might perhaps be able to receive the mournful mystery of His passion.

**I. We have here set forth in the first place our Lord's anticipation of the Cross.**

Mark the tone of the language, the minuteness of the detail, the absolute certainty of the prevision. That is not the language of a man who simply is calculating that the course which he is pursuing is likely to end in his martyrdom; but the thing lies there before Him, a definite, fixed certainty; every detail known, the scene, the instruments, the non-participation of these in the final act of His death, His resurrection, and its date,--all manifested and mapped out in His sight, and all absolutely certain.

Now this was by no means the first time that the certainty of the Cross was plain to Christ. It was not even the first time that it had been announced in His teaching. Veiled hints; allusions, brief but pregnant, had been scattered through His earlier ministry--such, for instance, as the enigmatical word at its very beginning, Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up; or as the profound word to the rabbi that sought Him by night, As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up; or as the passing hint, dropped to the people, in symbolical language, about the sign of the prophet Jonas; or as the grief foreshadowed dimly to the apostles, of the withdrawal of the Bridegroom, and their fasting in those days. These hints, and no doubt others unrecorded, had cropped to the surface before; and what we have to do with here, is neither the dawning of an expectation in Christ, nor the first utterance of the certainty of the Cross, but simply the beginning of a continuous and unenigmatical teaching of it, as an element in His instructions to His disciples.

So then, we have to recognise the fact that our Lord's prevision of the end--shone, I was going to say, perhaps it might be truer to say, darkened,--all the path along which He had to travel.

I think that people dogmatise a great deal too glibly as to what they know very little about, the interaction of the divine and the human elements in Christ, and on the one side are far too certain in their affirmation that His humanity possessed in some reflected fashion the divine gift of omniscience; and on the other hand, that His manhood, passing through the process of human development, and increasing in wisdom, was necessarily in its earlier stages void of the consciousness of His Messianic mission. I dare not affirm either yesor noabout that matter; but this I am sure of, that if ever there was a time in the development of the Manhood of Jesus Christ when He began to know Himself as the Messias, at that same time He began to be certain of the Cross. For His Messianic work required the Cross, and the divine thing that was in Him was born into the world for a double purpose, to minister and to die.

So, dear friends, putting aside mere metaphysics, which are superficial after all, we have to recognise this as the fact, that all through His career there arose before our Lord the certainty of that death, and that it did not assume to Him the aspect which such a prospect might have assumed to others as a possible result of a mission that failed, but it assumed to Him the aspect of the certain result of a work that was accomplished. He began His career with no illusions, such as other teachers, reformers, philanthropists, men that have moved society, have always begun with. Moses might suppose his brethren would have understood how that God by His hand would deliver them, but Christ had no such illusion. He knew from the beginning that He came to be rejected and to die. And so He trod life's common way, with that grim certainty rising ever before Him. I suppose that He did not, as you and I do, forget the death that awaits us, and find the non-remembrance of it the condition of much of our energy, but that it was perpetually in His sight.

Now I do not think that we sufficiently dwell upon that fact as an element in the human experience of our Lord. What beauty it gives to His gentleness, to the leisureliness of heart with which He was ready to make everybody's sorrow His own, and to lay a healing and a loving finger upon every wound! With this certainty before Him, there was yet no strain manifest upon His spirit, no self-absorption, no shutting Himself out from other people's burdens because He had so heavy ones of His own to carry; but He was ready for every joy, ready for all sympathy, ready for every help; and if we cannot say that, in cheerful godliness, as I think we may, at least we can say that with solemn joy and untroubled readiness, He journeyed towards that Cross. This Isaac was under no illusions as to who the Lamb for the offering was, but knowing it, He patiently carried the wood and climbed the hill, ready for the Father's will.

**II. That brings me to notice the second point here, our Lord's recognition of the necessity of His suffering.**

Mark that He does not say that He shall suffer. Certainty is not all that He proclaims here, however absolute that certainty might be, but it is He must. He is speaking not only of the historical fact, but of the need, deep in the nature of things, for His sufferings that were to follow.

And though these were wrought out by His own willing submission on the one hand, and by the unfettered play of the evil passions of the worst of men on the other, yet over all that apparent chaos of unbridled devildom there ruled the unalterable purpose of God; and the mustwas wrought out through the passions of evil-doers and the voluntary submission of the innocent sufferer; thus setting before us, in the central fact of the history of humanity, viz. the Cross and passion of Jesus Christ, the eminent example of that great mystery how the absolute freedom of the human will, and the responsibility of the guilt of human wrong-doers, are congruous with the fixed purpose of an all-determining and all-ruling Providence.

But that is apart from my purpose. Mark then, that our Lord's recognition of this necessity for His suffering is, on the first and plainest aspect of it, His recognition that His suffering was necessary on the ground of filial obedience. All through His life we hear that mustechoing, and His whole spirit bowed to it. As He says Himself, The Son can do nothing of Himself. As was said for Him of old: Lo, I come. In the volume of the book it is written of Me, I delight to do Thy will, and Thy law is within My heart. So the Father's will is the Son's law; and the Father's Thou shaltis answered by the Son's I must.

But yet that necessity grounded on filial obedience was no mere external necessity determined solely by the divine will. God so willed it, because it must be so; that it must be so was not because God so willed it. That is to say, the work to which Christ had set His hand was a work that demanded the Cross, nor could it be accomplished without it. For it was the work of redeeming the world, and required more than a beautiful life, more than a divine gentleness of heart, more than the homely and yet deep wisdom of His teachings, it required the sacrifice that He offered on the Cross.

So, dear friends, Christ's mustis but this: My work is not accomplished except I die. And remember that the connection between our Lord's work and our Lord's death is not that which subsists between the works and the deaths of great teachers, or heroic martyrs, or philanthropists and benefactors, who will gladly pay the price of life in order to carry out their loving or their wise designs. It is no mere appendage to His work, nor the price that He paid for having done it, but it is His very work in its vital centre.

I pray you to consider if there is any theory of the meaning and power of the death of Jesus Christ which adequately explains this must, except the one that He died a sacrifice for the sins of the world. On any other hypothesis, as it seems to me, of what His death meant, it is surplusage, over and above His work: not adding much, either to His teaching or to the beauty of His example, and having no absolute stringent necessity impressed upon it. There is one doctrine--that when He died He bare the sins of the whole world--which makes His death a necessity; and I ask you, Is there any other doctrine which does? Take care of a Christianity which would not be much impoverished if the Cross were struck out of it altogether.

There is a deeper question, on which, as I believe, it does not become us to enter, and that is, What is the necessity for the necessity? Why must it be that He, who is the Redeemer of the world, must needs be the Sacrifice for the world? We do not know enough about the depths of the divine nature and the divine government to speak very wisely or reverently upon that subject, and I, for one, abjure the attempt, which seems to me to be presumptuous--the attempt to explain why there was needed a sacrifice for sin in order to the forgiveness of sin. If I knew all about God, I could tell you; and nobody, that does not, can. But we can see, as far as concerns us, that, as the history of all religions tells us, for the forgiveness and acceptance of sinful men a pure sacrifice is needed; and that for teaching us the love of God, the hideousness and wages of sin, for our emancipation from evil, for the quieting of our consciences, for a foothold for faith, for an adequate motive of self-surrender and obedience, his sacrificial death is needful. The life and death of Jesus Christ, regarded as God's sacrifice for the world's sin, does all this. The life and death of Jesus Christ, regarded in any other aspect, does not do this. Historically speaking, mutilated forms of Christianity, which have not known what to do with the Cross of Christ, have lost their constraining, purifying, and aggressive power. For us sinful men, if we are to be delivered from evil and become sons of God, He must suffer many things, and be killed, and rise again the third day.

**III. Now note further, how we have here also our Lord's willing acceptance of the necessity.**

It is one thing to recognise, and another thing to accept, a needs-be. This mustwas no unwelcome obligation laid upon Him against His will, but one to which His whole nature responded and which He accepted. No doubt there was in Him the innocent instinctive physical shrinking from death. No doubt the Cross, in so far, was pain and suffering. No doubt we are to trace the reality of a temptation in Peter's rash words which follow, as indicated to us by the severity and almost vehemence of the action with which Christ puts it away. No doubt there is a profound meaning in that answer of His, Thou art a stumbling-block to Me. The Rockis turned into a stone of stumbling, and Peter's suggestion appeals to something in Him which responded to it.

That shrinking might be a shrinking of nature, but it was not a recoil of will. The ship may toss in dreadful billows, but the needle points to the pole. The train may rock upon the line, but it never leaves the rails. Christ felt that the Cross was an evil, but that feeling never made Him falter in His determination to bear it. His willing acceptance of the necessity was owing to His full resolve to save the world. He must die because He would redeem, and He would redeem because He could not but love. He saved others, and therefore Himself He cannot save. So the mustwas not an iron chain that fastened Him to His Cross. Like some of the heroic martyrs of old, who refused to be bound to the funeral pile, He stood there chained to it by nothing but His own will and loving purpose to save the world.

And, brethren, in that loving purpose, each of us may be sure that we had an individual and a personal share. Whatever the interaction between the divinity and the humanity, this at all events is certain, that every soul of man has his distinct and definite place in Christ's knowledge and in Christ's love. Each of us all may be sure that one strand of the cords of love which fastened Him to the Cross was His love for me; and each of us may say--He must die, because He loved me, and gave Himself for me.

**IV. Lastly, notice here our Lord's teaching the necessity of His death.**

This announcement was preceded, as I remarked, by that conversation which led to the crystallising of the half-formed convictions of the apostles in a definite creed, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. But that was not all that they needed to know and believe and trust to. That was the first volume of their lesson-book. The second volume was this, that Christ must suffer. And so let us learn the central place which the Cross holds in Christ's teaching. They tell us that the doctrine of Christ as the Sacrifice for the world is not in the Gospels. Where are the eyes that read the Gospels and do not see it? The theory of it is not there; the announcements of it are. And in this latest section of our Lord's ministry, they are fuller and more frequent than in the earlier, for the plain reason which is implied by the preparation through which He passed these disciples, ere He ventured to communicate the mournful and the bewildering fact. There must be, first, the grasp of His Messiahship, and some recognition that He is the Son of God, ere it is possible to go on to speak of the Cross, the full message concerning which could not be spoken until after the Resurrection and the Ascension.

But note, you do not understand Christ's Cross unless you bring to it the faith in Christ's Messiahship and the belief in some measure that He is the Son of God. Neither the pathos nor the power of His death is intelligible if it be simply like other deaths--the dying of a man who is born subject to the law of mortality, and who yields to it by natural process. Unless you and I take upon our lips, though with far deeper meaning, the words with which the heathen centurion gazed upon the dying Christ, and say, Truly this was the Son of God!His Cross is common and trivial and insignificant; but if we can thus speak, then it stands before us as the crown of all God's manifestations in the world, the wisdom of God and the power of God.

And then note, still further, how, without the Cross, these other truths are not the whole gospel. There were disciples then, as there have been disciples since, and as there are to-day, who were willing to accept, Thou art the Christ; and willing in some sense to say Thou art the Son of God, but stumbled when He said, The Son of Man must suffer. Brethren, I venture to urge that the gospel of the Incarnation, precious as it is, is not the whole gospel, and that the full-orbed truth about Jesus Christ is that He is the Christ, and that He died for our sins, and rose again to live for ever, our Priest and King.

We need a whole Christ. For our soul's salvation, for the quieting of our consciences, the forgiveness of our sins, for new life, for peace, purity, obedience, love, joy, hope, our faith must grasp Christ, and Him crucified. A half Christ is no Christ, and unless we have as sinful men laid hold of the one Sacrifice for sins for ever, which He offered, we do not understand even the preciousness of the half Christ whom we perceive, nor know the full beauty of His example, the depth of His teaching, nor the tenderness of His heart.

I beseech you, ask yourselves, What Christ can do for me the things which I need to have done, except the Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us?