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

**MATTHEW-096**. **THE COIN IN THE FISH'S MOUTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"25.* *And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest them, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers? 26. Peter saith unto Him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free."*

*Matthew 17:25-26*

All our Lord's miracles are signsas well as wonders. They have a meaning. They not only authenticate His teaching, but they are themselves no inconsiderable portion of the teaching. They are not only the great bell before His sermon, but they are also a portion of the sermon.

That doctrinal or dogmatic purpose characterises all the miracles in varying degrees. It is the only purpose of the one before us. This singular miracle of finding the coin in the fish's mouth and giving it for the tribute-money is unlike our Lord's other works in several particulars. It is the only miracle--with the exception of the cursing of the barren fig-tree, and the episode of the unclean spirits entering into the swine--in which there is no message of love or blessing for man's sorrow and pain. It is the only miracle in which our Lord uses His power for His own service or help, and it is like the whole brood of legendary miracles, and unlike all the rest of Christ's in that, at first sight, it seems done for a very trivial end--the providing of some three shillings of our money.

Now, if we put all these things together, the absence of any alleviation of man's sorrow, the presence of a personal end, and the apparent triviality of the result secured, I think we shall see that the only explanation of the miracle is given by regarding it as being what I may call a teaching one, full of instruction with regard to our Lord's character, person, and work. It is a parable as well as a miracle, and it is in that aspect that I wish to look at it now, and try to bring out its lessons.

**I. We have here, first, the freedom of the Son.**

The whole point of the story depends upon the fact that this tribute-money was not a civil, but an ecclesiastical impost. It had originally been levied in the Wilderness, at the time of the numbering of the people, and was enjoined to be repeated at each census, when every male Israelite was to pay half a shekel for a ransom for his soul, an acknowledgment that his life was forfeited by sin. In later years it came to be levied as an annual payment for the support of the temple and its ceremonial. It was never compulsory, there was no power to exact it. The question of the collectors, Doth not your Master pay tribute?does not sound like the imperative demand which a publicanwould have made for payment of an impost due to the Roman Government. It was an optional church-rate, and the very fact that it was so, would make Jews who were, or wished to be considered, patriotic or religious, the more punctilious in paying it.

The question put to Peter possibly implies a doubt whether this Rabbi, who held lax views on so many points of Pharisaical righteousness, would be likely to recognise the obligation of the tax. Peter's quick answer seems to be prompted by zeal for his Master's honour, on which the question appears to him to cast a slur. It was perhaps too quick, but the apostle has been too much blamed for his answer, which was in fact correct, and for which our Lord does not blame him. When he comes to Christ to tell what has happened, before he can speak, Christ puts to him this little parable which I have taken as part of my text: How thinkest thou? Do kings of this world take custom?--meaning thereby not imports or exports, but taxes of all kinds of things,--or tribute,--meaning thereby taxes on persons--from their own children, or from subjects who are not their children?The answer, of course, is, From the latter. So the answer comes, Then are the children free.

Christ then here claims in some sense, Sonship to Him to whom the tribute is paid, that is, to God, and therefore freedom from the obligation to pay the tribute. But notice, for this is an important point in the explanation of the words, that the plural in our Lord's words, Then are the children free, is not intended to include Peter and the others in the same category as Himself. The only question in hand is as to His obligation to pay a certain tax; and to include any one else would have been irrelevant, as well as erroneous. The plural belongs to the illustration, not to its application, and corresponds with the plural in the question, Of whom do the kings of the earth take custom?The kings of the earth are contrasted with the one King of the heavens, the supreme and sole Sovereign; and the children of the kings of the earth are contrasted with the only begotten Son of the only King of kings and Lord of lords.

So that here there is no mixing up of Himself with others, or of others with Himself, but the claiming of an unique position, singular and sole, belonging to Him only, in which He stands as the Son of the mighty Monarch to whom the tribute is paid. He claims to have the divine nature, the divine prerogatives, to bear a specific relationship to God Himself, and to be, as other words in Scripture put it, the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His person.

If there is anything certain about Jesus Christ's teaching, this is certain about it, that He proclaimed Himself to be the Son of God, in such a sense as no man shared with Him, and in such a sense as vindicated the attitude which He took up, the demands which He made, and the gifts which He offered to men.

What a deduction must be made from the wisdom of His teaching, and from the meekness of His Spirit, if that claim was an illusion! What shall we say of the sanity of a man who poses himself before the whole race, claiming to be the Son of God, and whose continual teaching to them therefore is, not, Believe in goodness; Believe in virtue; Believe in truth; Believe in My word; but Believe in Me? Was there ever anywhere else a religious teacher, all of whose words were gracious and wise and sweet, but who--

Make the important stumble,

Of saying that he, the sage and humble,

Was likewise--one with the Creator?

But now what is the freedom based on sonship which our Lord here claims?

I have said that this tax was levied with a double meaning; first, it was an atonement or ransom for the soul; second, it was devoted to the temple and its worship. And now, mark, that in both these aspects our Lord alleges His true sonship as the reason why He is exempt from it.

That is to say, first, Jesus Christ claims to have no need of a ransom for His soul. Never one word dropped from His lips which indicated the smallest consciousness of flaw or failure, of defect or imperfection, still less of actual transgression. He takes His position outside the circle of sinful men which includes all others. It is a strange characteristic in a religious teacher, very unlike the usual tone of devout men. And stranger still is the fact that the absence of this consciousness of evil has never been felt to be itself evil and a blot. Think of a David's agony of penitence. Think of a Paul's, Of whom I am chief!Think of the long wail of an Augustine's confessions. Think of the stormy self-accusations of a Luther; and then think that He who inspired them all, never, by word or deed, betrayed the slightest consciousness that in Himself there was the smallest deflection from the perfect line of right, the least speck or stain on the perfect gold of His purity. And remember, too, that when He challenges the world with, Which of you convinceth Me of sin?with the exception of half a dozen men, of whom we can scarcely say whether their want of spiritual insight or their arrogance of self-importance is the most flagrant, who, in the course of nineteen centuries, have ventured to fling their little handfuls of mud at Him, the whole world has answered, Thou art fairer than the children of men; grace is poured into Thy lips.

The Son needs no ransom for His soul, which, being translated, is but this: the purity and the innocence of Jesus Christ, which is a manifest fact in His biography, is only explicable when we believe that we have before us the Incarnate God, and therefore the Perfect Man. And the Son needs no temple for His worship. His whole life, as human, was a life of communion and prayer with His Father in heaven. And just because He dwelt inGod's bosom all the year, for Him ritual and temple were nought. Sense-bound men needed them; He needed them not. In this place, said He, is one greater than the temple. He was all which the temple symbolised. Was it the dwelling-place of God, the place of sacrifice, the meeting-place of man with God, the place of divine manifestation? The temple of His bodywas in deepest reality all these. In it dwelt the whole fulness of the Godhead. It was at once sacrifice and place of sacrifice, even as He is the true everlasting Priest. In Him men see God, and meet with God. He is greater than the temple because He is the true temple, and He is the true temple because He is the Son. And because He is the Son, therefore He is free from all dependence upon, and connection with, the outward worship of ceremony and sacrifice and priest and ritual.

Now, dear brethren, let me pause for one moment to press upon you and upon myself this question: Do I welcome that Christ with the full conviction that He is the Son of God? It seems to me that, in this generation, the question of questions, as far as religion is concerned, is the old one which Christ asked of His disciples by the fountains and woods of Caesarea Philippi: Whom say ye that I, the Son of Man, am?Can you lift up your face to meet His clear and all-searching eye, and say: Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God? If you can, you are on the way to understanding Him and His work; if you cannot, His life and work are all wrapped in darkness for you, His death robbed of its truest power, and your life deprived of its surest anchor.

**II. Now, there is a second lesson that I would gather from this miracle--the voluntary submission of the Son to the bonds from which He is free.**

He bids His disciple pay the tribute for Him, for a specific reason: Lest we should offend them. That, of course, is simply a piece of practical wisdom, to prevent any narrow or purblind souls from stumbling at His teaching, by reason of His neglect of this trivial matter. The question of how far religious teachers or any others are at liberty, when they are not actuated by personal motives, to render compliance with ceremonies which are of no value to them, is a wide one, which I have no need to dwell upon here. But, turning from that specific aspect of the incident, I think we may look upon it as being an illustration, in regard to a very small matter, of what is really the essence of our Lord's relation to the whole world and ourselves--His voluntary taking upon Himself of bonds from which He is free.

Is it not a symbol of the very heart of the meaning of His Incarnation? For as much as the children are partakers of flesh and blood He also Himself likewise takes part of the same. He is found in fashion as a man. He chooses to enter within the limits and the obligations of humanity. Round the radiant glories of the divinity, He gathers the folds of the veil of human flesh. He immerses the pillar of fire in a cloud of smoke. He comes amongst us, taking on His own wrists the fetters that bind us, suffering Himself to be cribbed, cabined, and confinedwithin the narrow limits of our manhood, in order that by His voluntary acceptance of it we may be redeemed from our corruption.

Is it not a parable of His life and lowly obedience? He proclaimed the same principle as the guide for all His conduct, when, sinless, He presented Himself to John for the baptism of repentance, and overcame the baptiser's scruples with the words, Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. He comes under the law. Bound to no such service, He binds Himself to all human duties that He may hallow the bonds which He has worn, may set us the pattern of perfect obedience, and may know a servant's heart.

The Prince is free, but King's Son though He be, He goes among His Father's poor subjects, lives their squalid lives, makes experience of their poverty, and hardens His hands by labouring like them. Sympathy He learned in huts where poor men lie.

Is it not the rehearsal in parable of His death? He was free from the bonds of mortality, and He took upon Him our human flesh. He was free from the necessity of death, even after He had taken our flesh upon Him. But, being free from the necessity, He submitted to the actuality, and laid down His life of Himself, because of His loving will, to save and help each of us. Oh, dear friends! we never can understand the meaning and the beauty, either of the life or of the death of our Master, unless we look at each from this point of view, that it is His willing acceptance of the bonds that bind us. His own loving will brought Him here; His own loving will kept Him here; His own loving will impelled Him along the path of life, though at every step of it He trod as with naked feet upon burning iron; His own loving Will brought Him to the Cross; His own loving will, and not the Roman soldiersnails, fastened Him to it. Let us look, then, to Him with thankfulness, and recognise in that death His thorough identification with all the bonds and miseries of our condition. He took part of the same that through death He might deliver them that by fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

**III. Then there is another lesson which I think we may fairly gather from this miracle, viz. that we have here the supernatural glory which ever accompanies the humiliation of the Son.**

The miracle, at first sight, appears to be for a very trivial end. Men have made merry with it by reason of that very triviality. But the miracle is vindicated, peculiar as it is, by a deep divine congruity and decorum. He will submit, Son though He be, to this complete identification of Himself with us. But He will so submit as, even in submitting, to assert His divine dignity. As has been well said, In the midst of the act of submission majesty flashes forth. A multiform miracle--containing many miracles in one--a miracle of omniscience, and a miracle of influence over the lower creatures is wrought. The first fish that rises carries in its mouth the exact sum needed.

Here, therefore, we have another illustration of that remarkable blending of humiliation and glory, which is a characteristic of our Lord's life. These two strands are always twined together, like a twisted line of gold and black. At each moment of special abasement there is some special coruscation of the brightness of His glory. Whensoever He stoops there is something accompanying the stooping, to tell how great and how merciful He is who bows. Out of the deepest darkness there flashes some light. So at His cradle, which seems to be the identifying of Him with humanity in its most helpless and lowest condition, there shall be angels, and the stars in their courses shall bow and move to guide wise men from afar with offerings to His feet. And at His Cross, where He sounds the very bass string and touches the lowest point of humiliation and defeat, a clearer vision sees in that humiliation the highest glory.

And thus, here, He will not only identify Himself with sinful men who need a ransom, and with sense-bound men who need a sacrifice and a temple, but He will so identify Himself with them as that He shall send His power into the recesses of the lake, where His knowledge sees, as clearly as our eyes see the men that stand beside us, and obedient to an unconscious impulse from Him, the dumb creature that had swallowed, as it sunk, the shining stater that had dropped out of the girdle of some fisherman, shall rise first to the hook; in token that not only in His Father's house does He rule as a Son over His own house, but that He doeth as He hath pleased, in all deep places, and that in Him the ancient hope is fulfilled of a Son of Man who hath dominion over the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the sea. The miracle was for a trivial end in appearance, but it was a demonstration, though to one man only at first, yet through him to all the world, that this Christ, in His lowliness, is the Everlasting Son of the Father.

**IV. And so, lastly, we have here also the lesson of the sufficiency for us all of what He provides.**

That take, and give unto them for Me and for thee. He does not say For us. He and Peter do not stand on the game level. He has chosen to submit Himself to the obligations, Peter was necessarily under them. That which is found by miracle in the fish's mouth is precisely the amount required for both the one and the other. It is rendered, as the original has it, Instead of thee and Me, putting emphasis upon the characteristic of the tribute as being ransom, or payment, for a man's soul.

And so, although this thought is not part of the original purpose of the miracle, and, therefore, is different from those which I have already been dwelling on, which are part of that purpose, I think we may fairly see here this great truth,--that that which Christ brings to us by supernatural act, far greater than the miracle here, is enough for all the claims and obligations that God, or man, or law, or conscience have upon any of us. His perfect obedience and stainless life discharged for Himself all the obligations to law and righteousness under which He came as a Man; His perfect life and His mighty death are for us the full discharge of all that can be brought against us.

There are many and solemn claims and claimants upon each of us. Law and duty, that awful oughtwhich should rule our lives and which we have broken thousands of times, come to each of us in many an hour of clear vision, and take us by the throat, and say, Pay us what thou owest!And there is a Judgment Day before all of us; which is no mere bugbear to frighten children, but will be a fact of experience in our case. Friend! how are you going to meet your obligations? You owe God all your love, all your heart, will, strength, service. What an awful score of unpaid debts, with accumulated interest, there stands against each of our names! Think of some bankrupt sitting in his counting-house with a balance-sheet before him that shows his hopeless insolvency. He sits and broods, and broods, and does not know what in the world he is going to do. The door opens--a messenger enters and gives him an envelope. He tears it open, and there flutters out a cheque that more than pays it all. The illustration is a very low one; it does not cover the whole ground of Christ's work for you. It puts a possibly commercial aspect into it, which we have to take care of lest it become the exclusive one; but it is true for all that. You are the bankrupt. What have you to pay? Oh, behold that precious treasure of gold tried in the fire, which is Christ's righteousness and Christ's death; and by faith in Him, that take and giveand all the debt will be discharged, and you will be set free and made a son by that Son who has taken upon Himself all our bonds, and so has broken them; who has taken upon Himself all our debts, and so has cancelled them every one.