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

**MATTHEW-104**. **THE SERVANT LORD AND HIS SERVANTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister."*

*Matthew 20:28*

It seems at first sight strangely unsympathetic and irrelevant that the ambitious request of James and John and their foolish mother, that they should sit at Christ's right hand and His left in His kingdom, should have been occasioned by, and have followed immediately upon, our Lord's solemn and pathetic announcement of His sufferings. But the connection is not difficult to trace. The disciples believed that, in some inexplicable way, the sufferings which our Lord was shadowing forth were to be the immediate precursors of His assuming His regal dignity. And so they took time by the forelock, as they thought, and made haste to ensure their places in the kingdom, which they believed was now ready to burst upon them. Other occasions in the Gospels in which we find similar quarrelling among the disciples as to pre-eminence are similarly associated with references made by our Lord to His approaching crucifixion. On a former occasion He cured these misplaced ambitions by setting a child in the midst of them. On this He cures them by a still more pathetic and wonderful example, His own; and He says, I, in My lowliness and service, am to be your Pattern. In Me see the basis of all true greatness, and the right use of all influence and authority. The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.

**I. So, then, let us look first at the perfect life of service of the Servant-Lord.**

Now, in order to appreciate the significance of that life of service, we must take into account the introductory words, The Son of Man came. They declare His pre-existence, His voluntary entrance into the conditions of humanity, and His denuding Himself of the glory which He had with the Father before the world was. We shall never understand the Servant-Christ until we understand that He is the Eternal Son of the Father. His service began long before any of His acts of sympathetic and self-forgetting lowliness rendered help to the miserable here upon earth. His service began when He laid aside, not the garments of earth, but the vesture of the heavens, and girded Himself, not with the cincture woven in man's looms, but with the flesh of our humanity, and being found in fashion as a man, bowed Himself to enter into the conditions of earth. This was the first, the chiefest of all His acts of service, and the sanctity and awfulness of it run through the list of all His deeds and make them unspeakably great. It was much that His hands should heal, that His lips should comfort, that His heart should bleed with sympathy for sorrow. But, oh! it was more that He had hands to touch, lips to speak to human hearts, and the heart of a man and a brother to feel with as well as for us. The Son of Man came--there is the transcendent example of the true use of greatness; there is the conspicuous instance of the true basis of authority and rule. For it was because He was found in fashion as a Manthat He has won a name that is above every name, and that there have accrued to Him the many crownswhich He wears at the Father's side.

But then, passing beyond this, we may dwell, though all imperfectly, upon the features, familiar as they are, of that wonderful life of self-oblivious and self-sacrificing ministration to others. Think of the purity of the source from all which these wonders and blessednesses of service for man flowed. The life of Jesus Christ is self-forgetting love made visible. Scientists tell us that, by the arrangement of particles of sand upon plates of glass, there can be made, as it were, perceptible to the eye, the sweetness of musical sounds; and each note when struck will fling the particles into varying forms of beauty. The life of Jesus Christ presents in shapes of loveliness and symmetry the else invisible music of a divine love. He lets us see the rhythm of the Father's heart. The source from which His ministrations have flowed is the pure source of a perfect love. Ancient legends consolidated the sunbeams into the bright figure of the far-darting god of light. And so the sunbeams of the divine love have, as it were, drawn themselves together and shaped themselves into the human form of the Son of Man who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.

No taint of bye-ends was in that service; no sidelong glances at possible advantages of influence or reputation or the like, which so often deform men's philanthropies and services to one another. No more than the sunbeam shines for the sake of collateral issues which may benefit itself, did Jesus Christ seek His own advantage in ministering to men. There was no speck of black in that lustrous white robe, but all was perfectly unselfish love. Like the clear sea, weedless and stainless, that laves the marble steps of the palaces of Venice, the deep ocean of Christ's service to man was pure to the depths throughout.

That perfect ministry of the Servant-Lord was rendered with strange spontaneity and cheerfulness. One of the evangelists says, in a very striking and beautiful phrase, that He healed them that had need of healing, as if the presence of the necessity evoked the supply, by the instinctive action of a perfect love. There was never in Him one trace of reluctance to have leisure broken in upon, repose disturbed, or even communion with God abbreviated. All men could come always; they never came inopportunely. We often cheerfully take up a burden of service, but find it very hard to continue bearing it. But He was willing to come down from the mountain of Transfiguration because there was a demoniac boy in the plain; and therefore He put aside the temptation--Let us build here three tabernacles. He was willing to abandon His desert seclusion because the multitude sought Him. Interrupted in His communion with the Father by His disciples, He had no impatient word to say, but Let us go into other cities also, for therefore am I sent. When He stepped from the fishing-boat on the other side of the lake to which He had fled for a moment of repose, He was glad when He saw the multitude who had pertinaciously outrun Him, and were waiting for Him on the beach. On His Cross He had leisure to turn from His own physical sufferings and the weight of a world's sin, which lay upon Him, to look at that penitent by His side, and He ended His life in the ministry of mercy to a brigand. And thus cheerfully, and always without a thought of self, He came to minister.

Think, too, of the sweep of His ministrations. They took in all men; they were equally open to enemies and to friends, to mockers and to sympathisers. Think of the variety of the gifts which He brought in His ministry--caring for body and for soul; alleviating sorrow, binding up wounds, purifying hearts; dealing with sin, the fountain, and with miseries, its waters, with equal helpfulness and equal love.

And think of how that ministering was always ministration by the LORD. For there is nothing to me more remarkable in the Gospel narrative than the way in which, side by side, there lie in Christ's life the two elements, so difficult to harmonise in fact, and so impossible to have been harmonised in a legend, the consciousness of authority and the humility of a servant. The paradox with which John introduces his sweet pathetic story of our Lord's washing the disciplesfeet is true of, and is illustrated by, every instance of more than ordinary lowliness and self-oblivion which the Gospel contains. Jesus, knowing that He had come from God, and went to God, and that the Father had given all things into His hand--did what? Laid aside His garments and took a towel and girded Himself. The two things ever go together. And thus, in His lowliest abasement, as in a star entangled in a cloud, there shine out, all the more broad and conspicuous for the environment which wraps them, the beams of His uncreated lustre.

That ministration was a service that never shrank from stern rebuke. His service was no mere soft and pliant, sympathetic helpfulness, but it could smite and stab, and be severe, and knit its brow, and speak stern words, as all true service must. For it is not service but cruelty to sympathise with the sinner, and say nothing in condemnation of his sin. And yet no sternness is blessed which is not plainly prompted by desire to help.

Now, I know far better than you do how wretchedly inadequate all these poor words of mine have been to the great theme that I have been trying to speak of, but they may at least--like a little water poured into a pump--have set your minds working upon the theme, and, I hope, to better purpose. The Son of Man came ... to minister.

**II. Now, secondly, note the service that should be modelled on His.**

Oh! brethren, if we, however imperfectly, have taken into mind and heart that picture of Him who was and is amongst us as One that serveth, how sharp a test, and how stringent, and, as it seems to us sometimes, impossible, a commandment are involved in the even asof my text. When we think of our grudging services; when we think of how much more apt we are to insist upon what men owe to us than of what we owe to them; how ready we are to demand, how slow we are to give; how we flame up in what we think is warranted indignation if we do not get the observance, or the sympathy, or the attention that we require, and yet how little we give of these, we may well say, Thou hast set a pattern that can only drive us to despair. If we would read our Gospels more than we do with the feeling, as we trace that Master through each of His phases of sympathy and self-oblivion and self-sacrifice and service, that is what I should be, what a different book the New Testament would be to us, and what different people you and I would be!

There is no ground on which we can rest greatness or superiority in Christ's kingdom except this ground of service. And there is no use that we can make either of money or of talents, of acquirements or opportunities, except the use of helping our fellows with them, which will stand the test of this model and example. It is more blessed to give than to receive. The servant who serves for love is highest in the hierarchy of Heaven. God, who is supreme, has stooped lower than any that are beneath Him, and His true rule follows, not because He is infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, or any of those other pompous Latin words which describe what men call His attributes, but because He loves best, and does most for the most. And that is what you and I ought to be. We may well take the lesson to ourselves. I have no space, and, I hope, no need to enlarge upon it; but be sure of this, that if we are ever to be near the right and the left of the Master in His kingdom, there is one way, and only one way, to come thither, and that is to make self abdicate its authority as the centre of our lives, and to enthrone there Christ, and for His sake all our brethren. Be ambitious to be first, but remember, Noblesse oblige. He that is first must become last. He that is Servant of all is Master of all. That is the only mastery that is worth anything, the devotion of hearts that circle round the source from which they draw light and warmth. What is it that makes a mother the queen of her children? Simply that all her life she has been their servant, and never thought about herself, but always about them.

Now much might be said as to the application of these threadbare principles in the Church and in society, but I do not enlarge on that; only let me say in a word--that here is the one law on which pre-eminence in the Church is to be allocated.

What becomes of sacerdotal hierarchies, what becomes of the lords over God's heritage, if the one ground of pre-eminence is service? I know, of course, that there may be different forms embodying one principle, but it seems to me that that form of Church polity is nearest the mind of Christ in which the only dignity is dignity of service, and the only use of place is the privilege of stooping and helping.

This fruitful principle will one day shape civil as well as ecclesiastical societies. For the present, our Lord draws a contrast between the worldly and the Christian notions of rank and dignity. It shall not be so among you, says He. And the nobler conception of eminence and service set forth in His disciples, if they are true to their Lord and their duty, will leaven, and we may hope finally transform society, sweeping away all vulgar notions of greatness as depending on birth, or wealth, or ruder forms of powers, and marshalling men according to Christ's order of precedence, in which helpfulness is pre-eminence and service is supremacy, while conversely pre-eminence is used to help and superiority stoops to serve.

One remark will close my sermon. You have to take the last words of this verse if you are ever going to put in practice its first words. Even as the Son of Man came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister,--if Jesus Christ had stopped there He would only have been one more of the long roll of ineffectual preachers and prophets who show men the better way, and leave them struggling in the mire. But He did not stop there: Even as the Son of Man came ... to give His life a ransom for many.

Ah! the Cross, with its burden of the sacrifice for the world's sin, is the only power which will supply us with a sufficient motive for the loftiness of Christlike service. I know that there is plenty of entirely irreligious and Christless beneficence in the world. And God forbid that I should say a word to seem to depreciate that. But sure I am that for the noblest, purest, most widely diffused and blessedly operative kinds of service of man, there is no motive and spring anywhere except He loved me, and gave Himself for me. And, bought by that service and that blood, it will be possible, and it is obligatory upon all of us, to do unto others, as He Himself said, as I have done to you. The servant is not greater than his Lord.