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

**MATTHEW-105**. **WHAT THE HISTORIC CHRIST TAUGHT ABOUT HIS DEATH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Son of Man came... to give His life a ransom for many."*

*Matthew 20:28*

We hear a great deal at present about going back to the Christ of the Gospels. In so far as that phrase and the movement of thought which it describes are a protest against the substitution of doctrines for the Person whom the doctrines represent, I, for one, rejoice in it. But I believe that the antithesis suggested by the phrase, and by some of its advocates avowed, between the Christ of the Gospels and the Christ of the Epistles, is false. The Christ of the Gospels is the Christ of the Epistles, as I humbly venture to believe. And I cannot but see that there is a possibility of a movement which, carried out legitimately, should command the fullest sympathy of every Christian heart, degenerating into the rejection of all the supernatural elements in the nature and work of our Lord, and leaving us with a meagre human Christ, shrunken and impotent. The Christ of the Gospels, by all means; but let it be the whole Christ of all the Gospels, the Christ over whose cradle angels sang, by whose empty grave angels watched, whose ascending form angels beheld and proclaimed that He should come again to be our Judge. Go back to that Christ, and all will be well.

Now it seems to me that one direction in which there is a possibility of such movement as I have referred to being one-sided and harmful is in reference to the conception which we form of the death of Jesus Christ. And therefore I ask you to listen for a few moments to me at this time whilst I try to bring out what is plain in the words before us; and is, as I humbly believe, interwoven in the whole texture of all the Gospels--viz., the conception which Jesus Christ Himself formed of the meaning of His death.

**I. The first thing that I notice is that the Christ of the Gospels thought and taught that His death was to be His own act.**

I do not think that it is an undue or pedantic pressing of the significance of the words before us, if I ask you to notice two of the significant expressions in this text. The Son of Man came, and came to give His life. The one word refers to the act of entrance into, the other to the act of departure from, this earthly life. They correspond in so far as that both bring into prominence Christ's own consent, volition, and action in the very two things about which men are least consulted, their being born and their dying.

The Son of Man came. Now if that expression occurred but once it might be minimised as being only a synonym for birth, having no special force. But if you will notice that it is our Lord's habitual word about Himself, only varied occasionally by another one equally significant when he says that He was sent; and if you will further notice that all through the Gospels He never but once speaks of Himself as being born, I think you will admit that I am not making too much of a word when I say that when Christ, out of the depths of His consciousness, said the Son of Man came, He was teaching us that He lived before He was born, and that behind the natural fact of birth there lay the supernatural fact of His choosing to be incarnated for man's redemption. The one instance in which He does speak of Himself as being bornis most instructive in this connection. For it was before the Roman governor; and He accompanied the clause in which He said, To this end was I born--which was adapted to Pilate's level of intelligence--with another one which seemed to be inserted to satisfy His own sense of fitness, rather than for any light that it would give to its first hearer, And for this cause came I into the world. The two things were not synonymous; but before the birth there was the coming, and Jesus was born because the Eternal Word willed to come. So says the Christ of the Gospels; and the Christ of the Epistles is represented as taking upon Him the form of a servant, and being found in fashion as a man. Do you accept that as true of the historic Christ?

With precise correspondence, if we turn to the other end of His life, we find the equally significant expression in my text which asserts for it, too, that the other necessity to which men necessarily and without their own volition bow was to Christ a matter of choice. The Son of Man came to give. No man taketh it from Me, as He said on another occasion. I lay it down of Myself. The Good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep. My flesh ... I give for the world's life. Now, brethren, we are not to regard these words as mere vague expressions for a willing surrender to the necessity of death, but as expressing what I believe is taught us all through Scripture, and is fundamental to any real grasp of the real Christ, that He died because He chose, and chose because He loved. What meant that loud voicewith which He said It is finished, but that there was no physical exhaustion, such as was usually the immediate occasion of death by crucifixion? What meant that surprising rapidity with which the last moment came in His case, to the astonishment of the stolid bystanders? They meant the same thing as I believe that the Evangelists meant when they, with one consent, employed expressions to describe Christ's death, which may indeed be only euphemisms, but are apparently declarations of its voluntary character. He gave up the ghost. He yielded His Spirit. He breathed forth His life, and so He died.

As one of the old fathers said, Who is this that thus falls asleep when He wills? To die is weakness, but thus to die is power. The weakness of God is stronger than man. The desperate king of Israel bade his slave kill him, and when the menial shrunk from such sacrilege he fell upon his own sword. Christ bade His servant Death, Do this, and he did it; and dying, our Lord and Master declared Himself the Lord and Master of Death. This is a part of the history of the historic Christ. Do you believe it?

**II. Then, secondly, the Christ of the Gospels thought and taught that His death was one chief aim of His coming.**

I have omitted words from my text which intervene between its first and its last ones; not because I regard them as unimportant, but because they would lead us into too wide a field to cover in one sermon. But I would pray you to observe how the re-insertion of them throws immense light upon the significance of the words which I have chosen. The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister. That covers the whole ground of His gracious and gentle dealings here on earth, His tenderness, self-abnegation, sympathy, healing, and helpfulness. Then, side by side with that, and as the crowning manifestation of His work of service, without which His life--gracious, radiant, sweet as it is--would still want something of its power, He sets His death.

Surely that is an altogether unexampled phenomenon; altogether a unique and unparalleled thing, that a man should regard that which for all workers, thinkers, speakers, poets, philanthropists, is the sad term of their activity, as being a part of His work; and not only a part, but so conspicuous a part that it was a purpose which He had in view from the very beginning, and before the beginning, of His earthly life. So Calvary was to Jesus Christ no interruption, tragic and premature, of His life's activities. His death was no mere alternative set before Him, which He chose rather than be unfaithful or dumb. He did not die because He was hounded by hostile priests, but He came on purpose that He might so end His career.

I need not remind you of, and space would not permit me to dwell upon, other instances in the Gospels in which our Lord speaks the same language. At the very beginning of His public ministry He told the inquiring rabbi, who came to Him with the notion that He would be somewhat flattered by His recognition by one of the authoritative and wise pundits of the nation, that the Son of Man must be lifted up. The necessity was before Him, but it was no unwelcome necessity, for it sprung from His own love. It was the very aim of His coming, to live a Servant and to die a Ransom.

Dear brethren, let me press upon you this plain truth, that no conception of Christ's death which looks upon it merely as the close, by pathetic sufferings, of a life to the activities of which it adds nothing but pathos, approaches the signification of it which inheres in the thought that this was the aim and purpose with which Jesus Christ was incarnate, that He should live indeed the pure and sweet life which He lived, but equally that He should die the painful and bitter death which He died. He was not merely a martyr, though the first of them, but something far more, as we shall see presently. If to you the death of Jesus Christ is the same in kind, however superior in degree, as those of patriots and reformers and witnesses for the truth and martyrs for righteousness, then I humbly venture to represent that, instead of going back to, you have gone away from, the Christ of the Gospels, who said, The Son of Man came ... to give His life; and that such a Christ is not a historic but an imaginary one.

**III. So, thirdly, notice that the Christ of the Gospels thought and taught that His death was a ransom.**

A ransom is a price paid in exchange for captives that they may be liberated; or for culprits that they may be set free. And that was Christ's thought of what He had to die for. There lay the must.

I do not dwell upon the conception of our condition involved in that word. We are all bound and held by the chain of our sins. We all stand guilty before God, and, as I believe, there is a necessity in that loving divine nature whereby it is impossible that without a ransom there can be, in the interests of mankind and in the interests of righteousness, forgiveness of sins. I do not mean that in the words before us there is a developed theory of atonement, but I do mean that no man, dealing with them fairly, can strike out of them the notion of vicarious suffering in exchange for, or instead of, the many. This is no occasion for theological discussion, nor am I careful now to set forth a fully developed doctrine; but I am declaring, as God helps me, what is to me, and I pray may be to you, the central thought about that Cross of Calvary, that on it there is made the sacrifice for the world's sins.

And, dear brethren, I beseech you to consider, how can we save the character of Jesus Christ, accepting these Gospels, which on the hypothesis about which I am now speaking are valid sources of knowledge, without recognising that He deliberately led His disciples to believe that He died for--that is, instead of--them that put their trust in Him? For remember that not only such words as these of my text are to be taken into account. Remember that it was the Christ of the Gospels who established that last rite of the Lord's Supper, in which the broken bread, and the separation between the bread and the wine, both indicated a violent death, and who said about both the one and the other of the double symbols, For you. I do not understand how any body of professing believers, rejecting Christ's death as the sacrifice for sin, can find a place in their beliefs or in their practice for that institution of the Lord's Supper, or can rightly interpret the sacred words then spoken. This is why the Cross was Christ's aim. This is why He said, with His dying breath, It is finished. This truth is the explanation of His words, The Good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep.

And this truth of a ransom-price lies at the basis of all vigorous Christianity. A Christianity without a dying Christ is a dying Christianity. And history shows us that the expansiveness and elevating power of the Gospel depend on the prominence given to the sacrifice on the Cross. An old fable says that the only thing that melts adamant is the blood of a lamb. The Gospel reveals the precious blood of Jesus Christ, His death for us as a ransom, as the one power which subdues hostility and binds hearts to Him. The Christ of the Gospels is the Christ who taught that He died for us.

**IV. Lastly, the Christ of the Gospels thought and taught that His death had world-wide power.**

He says here, A ransom for many. Now that word is not used in this instance in contradistinction to all, nor in contradistinction to few. It is distinctly employed as emphasising the contrast between the single death and the wide extent of its benefits; and in terms which, rigidly taken, simply express indefiniteness, it expresses universality. That that is so seems to me to be plain enough, if we notice other places of Scripture to which, at this stage of my sermon, I can but allude. For instance, in Romans v. the two expressions, the manyand the all, alternate in reference to the extent of the power of Christ's sacrifice for men. And the Apostle in another place, where probably there may be an allusion to the words of the text, so varies them as that he declares that Jesus Christ in His death was the ransom instead of all. But I do not need to dwell upon these. Manyis a vague word, and in it we see dim crowds stretching away beyond our vision, for whom that death was to be the means of salvation. I take it that the words of our text have an allusion to those in the great prophecy in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, in which we read, By His knowledge shall My righteous Servant(mark the allusion in our text, Who came to minister) justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.

So, brethren, I believe that I am not guilty of unduly widening out our Lord's thought when I say that the indefinite manyis practically all. And, brother, if all, then you; if all, then me; if all, then each. Think of a man, nineteen centuries ago, away in a little insignificant corner of the world, standing up and saying, My death is the price paid in exchange for the world!That is meekness and lowliness of heart, is it? That is humility, so beautiful in a teacher, is it? How any man can accept the veracity of these narratives, believe that Jesus Christ said anything the least like this, not believe that He was the Divine Son of the Father, the Sacrifice for the world's sin, and yet profess--and honestly profess, I doubt not, in many cases--to retain reverence and admiration, all but adoration, for Him, I confess that I, for my poor part, cannot understand.

But I ask you, what you are going to do with these thoughts and teachings of the Christ of the Gospels. Are you going to take them for true? Are, you going to trust your salvation to Him? Are you going to accept the ransom and say, O Lord, truly I am Thy servant; Thou hast loosed my bonds? Brethren, the Christ of the Gospels, by all means; but the Christ that said, The Son of Man came to ... give His life a ransom for many. My Christ, and your Christ, and the world's Christ is 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.