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

**MATTHEW-108**. **THE VINEYARD AND ITS KEEPERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"33.* *Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: 34. And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. 35. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. 36. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. 37. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. 38. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. 39. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. 40. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh what will he do unto those husbandmen? 41. They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons. 42. Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? 43. Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. 44. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. 45. And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard His parables, they perceived that He spake of them. 46. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitude, because they took Him for a prophet.--."*

*Matthew 21:33-46*

This parable was apparently spoken on the Tuesday of the Passion Week. It was a day of hand-to-hand conflict with the Jewish authorities and of exhausting toil, as the bare enumeration of its incidents shows. It included all that Matthew records between verse 20 of this chapter and the end of the twenty-fifth chapter--the answer to the deputation from the Sanhedrin; the three parables occasioned by it, namely, those of the two sons, this one, and that of the marriage of the king's son; the three answers to the traps of the Pharisees and Herodians about the tribute, of the Sadducees about the resurrection, and of the ruler about the chief commandment; Christ's question to His questioners about the Son and Lord of David; the stern woes hurled at the unmasked hypocrites; to which must be added, from other gospels, the sweet eulogium on the widow's mite, and the deep saying to the Greeks about the corn of wheat, with, possibly, the incident of the woman taken in adultery; and then, following all these, the solemn prophecies of the end contained in Matthew xxiv. and xxv., spoken on the way to Bethany, as the evening shadows were falling. What a day! What a fountain of wisdom and love which poured out such streams! The pungent severity of this parable, with its transparent veil of narrative, is only appreciated by keeping clearly in view the circumstances and the listeners. They had struck at Jesus with their question as to His authority, and He parries the blow. Now it is His turn, and the sharp point goes home.

**I. The first stage is the preparation of the vineyard, in which three steps are marked. It is planted and furnished with all appliances needful for making wine, which is its great end.**

The direct divine origin of the religious ideas and observances of Judaismis thus asserted by Christ. The only explanation of them is that God enclosed that bit of the wilderness, and with His own hands set growing there these exotics. Neither the theology nor the ritual is of man's establishing. We need not seek for special meanings for wall, wine-press, and tower. They simply express the completeness of the equipment of the vineyard, as in Isaiah's song, which lies at the foundation of the parable, and suggest his question, What could have been done more?Thus furnished, the vineyard is next handed over to the husbandmen, who, in Matthew, are exclusively the rulers, while in Luke they are the people. No doubt it was like people, like priest. The strange dominion of the Pharisees rested entirely on popular consent, and their temper accurately indexed that of the nation. The Sanhedrin was the chief object at which Christ aimed the parable. But it only gave form and voice to the national spirit, and the people loved to have it so. National responsibilities are not to be slipped out of by being shifted on to the broad shoulders of governments or influential men. Who lets them be governments and influential?

Guv'ment ain't to answer for it,

God will send the bill to you.

Christ here teaches both rulers and ruled the ground and purpose of their privileges. They prided themselves on these as their own, but they were only tenants. They made their boast of the law; but they forgot that fruit was the end of the divine planting and equipment. Holiness and glad obedience were what God sought, and when He found them, He was refreshed as with grapes in the wilderness.

Having installed the husbandmen, the owner goes into another country. The cluster of miracles which inaugurate an epoch of revelation are not continued beyond its beginning. Centuries of comparative divine silence followed the planting of the vineyard. Having given us our charge, God, as it were, steps aside to leave us room to work as we will, and so to display what we are made of. He is absent in so far as conspicuous oversight and retribution are concerned. He is present to help, love, and bless. The faithful husbandman has Him always near, a joy and a strength, else no fruit would grow; but the sin and misery of the unfaithful are that they think of Him as far off.

**II. Then comes the habitual ill-treatment of the messengers.**

These are, of course, the prophets, whose office was not only to foretell, but to plead for obedience and trust, the fruits sought by God. The whole history of the nation is summed up in this dark picture. Generation after generation of princes, priests, and people had done the same thing. There is no more remarkable historical fact than that of the uniform hostility of the Jews to the prophets. That a nation of such a sort as always to hate and generally to murder them should have had them in long succession, throughout its history, is surely inexplicable on any naturalistic hypothesis. Such men were not the natural product of the race, nor of its circumstances, as their fate shows. How did they spring up? No philosophy of Jewish historyexplains the anomaly except the one stated here,--He sent His servants. We are told nowadays that the Jews had a natural genius for religion, just as the Greeks for art and thought, and the Romans for law and order, and that that explains the origin of the prophets. Does it explain their treatment?

The hostility of the husbandmen grows with indulgence. From beating they go on to killing, and stoning is a specially savage form of killing. The opposition which began, as the former parable tells us, with polite hypocrisy and lip obedience, changed, under the stimulus of prophetic appeals, to honest refusal, and from that to violence which did not hesitate to slay. The more God pleads with men, the more self-conscious and bitter becomes their hatred; and the more bitter their hatred, the more does He plead, sending other messengers, more perhaps in number, or possibly of more weight, with larger commission and clearer light. Thus both the antagonistic forces grow, and the worse men become, the louder and more beseeching is the call of God to them. That is always true; and it is also ever true that he who begins with I go, sir, and goes not, is in a fair way to end with stoning the prophets.

Christ treats the whole long series of violent rejections as the acts of the same set of husbandmen. The class or nation was one, as a stream is one, though all its particles are different; and the Pharisees and scribes, who stood with frowning hatred before Him as He spoke, were the living embodiment of the spirit which had animated all the past. In so far as they inherited their taint, and repeated their conduct, the guilt of all the former generations was laid at their door. They declared themselves their predecessorsheirs; and as they reproduced their actions, they would have to bear the accumulated weight of the consequences.

**III. Verses 37-39 tell of the mission of the Son and of its fatal issue.**

Three points are prominent in them. The first is the unique position which Christ here claims, with unwonted openness and decisiveness, as apart from and far above all the prophets. They constitute one order, but He stands alone, sustaining a closer relation to God. They were faithful as servants, but He as a Son, or, as Mark has it, the only and beloved Son. The listeners understood Him well enough. The assertion, which seemed audacious blasphemy to them, fitted in with all His acts in that last week, which was not only the crisis of His life, but of the nation's fate. Rulers and people must decide whether they will own or reject their King, and they must do it with their eyes open. Jesus claimed to fill a unique position. Was He right or wrong in His claim? If He was wrong, what becomes of His wisdom, His meekness, His religion? Is a religious teacher, who made the mistake of thinking that He was the Son of God in a sense in which no other man is so, worthy of admiration? If He was right, what becomes of a Christianity which sees in Him only the foremost of the prophets?

The next point marked is the owner's vain hope, in sending his Son. He thought that He would be welcomed, and He was disappointed. It was His last attempt. Christ knew Himself to be God's last appeal, as He is to all men, as well as to that generation. He is the last arrow in God's quiver. When it has shot that bolt, the resources even of divine love are exhausted, and no more can be done for the vineyard than He has done for it. We need not wonder at unfulfilled hopes being here ascribed to God. The startling thought only puts into language the great mystery which besets all His pleadings with men, which are carried on, though they often fail, and which must, therefore, in view of His foreknowledge, be regarded as carried on with the knowledge that they will fail. That is the long-suffering patience of God. The difficulty is common to the words of the parable and to the facts of God's unwearied pleading with impenitent men. Its surface is a difficulty, its heart is an abyss of all-hoping charity.

The last point is the vain calculation of the husbandmen. Christ puts hidden motives into plain words, and reveals to these rulers what they scarcely knew of their own hearts. Did they, in their secret conclaves, look each other in the face, and confess that He was the Heir? Did He not Himself ground His prayer for their pardon on their ignorance? But their ignorance was not entire, else they had had no sin; neither was their knowledge complete, else they had had no pardon. Beneath many an obstinate denial of Him lies a secret confession, or misgiving, which more truly speaks the man than does the loud negation. And such strange contradictions are men, that the secret conviction is often the very thing which gives bitterness and eagerness to the hostility. So it was with some of those whose hidden suspicions are here set in the light. How was the rulersor the people's wish to seize on His inheritancetheir motive for killing Jesus? Their great sin was their desire to have their national prerogatives, and yet to give no true obedience. The ruling class clung to their privileges and forgot their responsibilities, while the people were proud of their standing as Jews, and careless of God's service. Neither wished to be reminded of their debt to the Lord of the vineyard, and their hostility to Jesus was mainly because He would call on them for fruits. If they could get this unwelcome and persistent voice silenced, they could go on in the comfortable old fashion of lip-service and real selfishness. It is an account, in vividly parabolic language, not only of their hostility, but of that of many men who are against Him. They wish to possess life and its good, without being for ever pestered with reminders of the terms on which they hold it, and of God's desire for their love and obedience. They have a secret feeling that Christ has the right to ask for their hearts, and so they often turn from Him angrily, and sometimes hate Him.

With what sad calmness does Jesus tell the fate of the son, so certain that it is already as good as done! It was done in their counsels, and yet He does not cease to plead, if perchance some hearts may be touched and withdraw themselves from the confederacy of murder.

**IV. We have next the self-condemnation from unwilling lips.**

Our Lord turns to the rulers with startling and dramatic suddenness, which may have thrown them off their guard, so that their answer leaped out before they had time to think whom it hit. His solemn earnestness laid a spell on them, which drew their own condemnation from them, though they had penetrated the thin veil of the parable, and knew full well who the husbandmen were. Nor could they refuse to answer a question about legal punishments for dishonesty, which was put to them, the fountains of law, without incurring a second time the humiliation just inflicted when He had forced them to acknowledge that they, the fountains of knowledge, did not know where John came from. So from all these motives, and perhaps from a mingling of audacity, which would brazen it out and pretend not to see the bearing of the question, they answer. Like Caiaphas in his counsel, and Pilate with his writing on the Cross, and many another, they spoke deeper things than they knew, and confessed beforehand how just the judgments were, which followed the very lines marked out by their own words.

**V. Then come the solemn application and naked truth of the parable.**

We have no need to dwell on the cycle of prophecies concerning the corner-stone, nor on the original application of the psalm. We must be content with remarking that our Lord, in this last portion of His address, throws away even the thin veil of parable, and speaks the sternest truth in the nakedest words. He puts His own claim in the plainest fashion, as the corner-stone on which the true kingdom of God was to be built. He brands the men who stood before Him as incompetent builders, who did not know the stone needed for their edifice when they saw it. He declares, with triumphant confidence, the futility of opposition to Himself--even though it kill Him. He is sure that God will build on Him, and that His place in the building, which shall rise through the ages, will be, to even careless eyes, the crown of the manifest wonders of God's hand. Strange words from a Man who knew that in three days He would be crucified! Stranger still that they have come true! He is the foundation of the best part of the best men; the basis of thought, the motive for action, the pattern of life, the ground of hope, for countless individuals; and on Him stands firm the society of His Church, and is hung all the glory of His Father's house.

Christ confirms the sentence just spoken by the rulers on themselves, but with the inversion of its clauses. All disguise is at an end. The fatal youis pronounced. The husbandmen's calculation had been that killing the heir would make them lords of the vineyard; the grim fact was that they cast themselves out when they cast him out. He is the heir. If we desire the inheritance, we must get it through Him, and not kill or reject, but trust and obey Him. The sentence declares the two truths, that possession of the vineyard depends on honouring the Son, and on bringing forth the fruits. The kingdom has been taken from the churches of Asia Minor, Africa, and Syria, because they bore no fruit. It is not held by us on other conditions. Who can venture to speak of the awful doom set forth in the last words here? It has two stages: one a lesser misery, which is the lot of him who stumbles against the stone, while it lies passive to be built on; one more dreadful, when it has acquired motion and comes down with irresistible impetus. To stumble at Christ, or to refuse His grace, and not to base our lives and hopes on Him is maiming and damage, in many ways, here and now. But suppose the stone endowed with motion, what can stand against it? And suppose that the Christ, who is now offered for the rock on which we may pile our hopes and never be confounded, comes to judge, will He not crush the mightiest opponent as the dust of the summer threshing-floor?