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

**MATTHEW-128**. **THE LAST PLEADING OF LOVE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come?"*

*Matthew 26:50*

We are accustomed to think of the betrayer of our Lord as a kind of monster, whose crime is so mysterious in its atrocity as to put him beyond the pale of human sympathy. The awful picture which the great Italian poet draws of him as alone in hell, shunned even there, as guilty beyond all others, expresses the general feeling about him. And even the attempts which have been made to diminish the greatness of his guilt, by supposing that his motive was only to precipitate Christ's assumption of His conquering Messianic power, are prompted by the same thought that such treason as his is all but inconceivable. I cannot but think that these attempts fail, and that the narratives of the Gospels oblige us to think of his crime as deliberate treachery. But even when so regarded, other emotions than wondering loathing should be excited by the awful story.

There had been nothing in his previous history to suggest such sin, as is proved by the disciplesquestion, when our Lord announced that one of them should betray Him. No suspicion lighted on him--no finger pointed to where he sat. But self-distrust asked, Lord, is it I?and only love, pillowed on the Master's breast, and strong in the happy sense of His love, was sufficiently assured of its own constancy, to change the question into Lord! who is it?The process of corruption was unseen by all eyes but Christ's. He came to his terrible pre-eminence in crime by slow degrees, and by paths which we may all tread. As for his guilt, that is in other hands than ours. As for his fate, let us copy the solemn and pitying reticence of Peter, and say, that he might go to his own place--the place that belongs to him, and that he is fit for, wherever that may be. As for the growth and development of his sin, let us remember that we have all of us one human heart, and that the possibilities of crime as dark are in us all. And instead of shuddering abhorrence at a sin that can scarcely be understood, and can never be repeated, let us be sure that whatever man has done, man may do, and ask with humble consciousness of our own deceitful hearts, Lord, is it I?These remarkable and solemn words of Christ, with which He meets the treacherous kiss, appear to be a last appeal to Judas. They may possibly not be a question, as in our version--but an incomplete sentence, What thou hast come to do--leaving the implied command, That do, unexpressed. They would then be very like other words which the betrayer had heard but an hour or two before, That thou doest, do quickly. But such a rendering does not seem so appropriate to the circumstances as that which makes them a question, smiting on his heart and conscience, and seeking to tear away the veil of sophistications with which he had draped from his own eyes the hideous shape of his crime. And, if so, what a wonderful instance we have here of that long-suffering love. They are the last effort of the divine patience to win back even the traitor. They show us the wrestle between infinite mercy and a treacherous, sinful heart, and they bring into awful prominence the power which that heart has of rejecting the counsel of God against itself. I venture to use them now as suggesting these three things: the patience of Christ's love; the pleading of Christ's love; and the refusal of Christ's love.

**I. The patience of Christ's love.**

If we take no higher view of this most pathetic incident than that the words come from a man's lips, even then all its beauty will not be lost. There are some sins against friendship in which the manner is harder to bear than the substance of the evil. It must have been a strangely mean and dastardly nature, as well as a coarse and cold one, that could think of fixing on the kiss of affection as the concerted sign to point out their victim to the legionaries. Many a man who could have planned and executed the treason would have shrunk from that. And many a man who could have borne to be betrayed by his own familiar friend would have found that heartless insult worse to endure than the treason itself. But what a picture of perfect patience and unruffled calm we have here, in that the answer to the poisonous, hypocritical embrace was these moving words! The touch of the traitor's lips has barely left His cheek, but not one faint passing flush of anger tinges it. He is perfectly self-oblivious--absorbed in other thoughts, and among them in pity for the guilty wretch before Him. His words have no agitation in them, no instinctive recoil from the pollution of such a salutation. They have grave rebuke, but it is rebuke which derives its very force from the appeal to former companionship. Christ still recognises the ancient bond, and is true to it. He will still plead with this man who has been beside Him long; and though His heart be wounded yet He is not wroth, and He will not cast him off. If this were nothing more than a picture of human friendship it would stand alone, above all other records that the world cherishes in its inmost heart, of the love that never fails, and is not soon angry.

But we, I hope, dear brethren, think more loftily and more truly of our dear Lord than as simply a perfect manhood, the exemplar of all goodness. How He comes to be that, if He be not more than that, I do not understand, and I, for one, feel that my confidence in the flawless completeness of His human character lives or dies with my belief that He is the Eternal Word, God manifest in the flesh. Certainly we shall never truly grasp the blessed meaning of His life on earth until we look upon it all as the revelation of God. The tears of Christ are the pity of God. The gentleness of Jesus is the long-suffering of God. The tenderness of Jesus is the love of God. He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and all that life so beautiful but so anomalous as to be all but incredible, when we think of it as only the life of a man, glows with a yet fairer beauty, and corresponds with the nature which it expresses, when we think of it as being the declaration to us by the divine Son of the divine Father--our loftiest, clearest, and authentic revelation of God.

How that thought lifts these words before us into a still higher region! We are now in the presence of the solemn greatness of a divine love. If the meaning of this saying is what we have suggested, it is pathetic even in the lower aspect, but how infinitely that pathos is deepened when we view it in the higher!

Surely if ever there was a man who might have been supposed to be excluded from the love of God, it was Judas. Surely if ever there was a moment in a human life, when one might have supposed that even Christ's ever open heart would shut itself together against any one, it was this moment. But no, the betrayer in the very instant of his treason has that changeless tenderness lingering around him, and that merciful hand beckoning to him still.

And have we not a right to generalise this wonderful fact, and to declare its teaching to be--that the love of God is extended to us all, and cannot be made to turn away from us by any sins of ours? Sin is mighty; it can work endless evils on us; it can disturb and embitter all our relations with God; it can, as we shall presently have to point out, make it necessary for the tenderest grace of God to come disciplining--to come with a rod, just because it comes in the spirit of meekness. But one thing it cannot do, and that is--make God cease to love us. I suppose all human affection can be worn out by constant failure to evoke a response from cold hearts. I suppose that it can be so nipped by frosts, so constantly checked in blossoming, that it shrivels and dies. I suppose that constant ingratitude, constant indifference can turn the warmest springs of our love to a river of ice. Can a mother forget her child?--Yea, she may forget. But we have to do with a God, whose love is His very being; who loves us not for reasons in us but in Himself; whose love is eternal and boundless as all His nature; whose love, therefore, cannot be turned away by our sin--but abides with us for ever, and is granted to every soul of man. Dear brethren, we cannot believe too firmly, we cannot trust too absolutely, we cannot proclaim too broadly that blessed thought, without which we have no hope to feed on for ourselves, or to share with our fellows--the universal love of God in Christ.

Is there a worst man on earth at this moment? If there be, he, too, has a share in that love. Harlots and thieves, publicans and sinners, leprous outcasts, and souls tormented by unclean spirits, the wrecks of humanity whom decent society and respectable Christianity passes by with averted head and uplifted hands, criminals on the gibbet with the rope round their necks--and those who are as hopeless as any of these, self-complacent formalists and Gospel-hardened professors--all have a place in that heart. And that, not as undistinguished members of a class, but as separate souls, singly the objects of God's knowledge and love. He loves all, because He loves each. We are not massed together in His view, nor in His regard. He does not lose the details in the whole; as we, looking on some great crowd of upturned faces, are conscious of all but recognise no single one. He does not love a class--a world--but He loves the single souls that make it up--you and me, and every one of the millions that we throw together in the vague phrase, the race. Let us individualise that love in our thoughts as it individualises us in its outflow--and make our own the exceeding broadpromises, which include us, too. God loves me; Christ gave Himself for me. I have a place in that royal, tender heart.

Nor should any sin make us doubt this. He loved us with exceeding love, even when we were dead in trespasses. He did not begin to love because of anything in us; He will not cease because of anything in us. We change; He abideth faithful, He cannot deny Himself. As the sunshine pours down as willingly and abundantly on filth and dunghills, as on gold that glitters in its beam, and jewels that flash back its lustre, so the light and warmth of that unsetting and unexhausted source of life pours down on the unthankful and on the good. The great ocean clasps some black and barren crag that frowns against it, as closely as with its waves it kisses some fair strand enamelled with flowers and fragrant with perfumes. So that sea of love in which we live, and move, and have our being, encircles the worst with abundant flow. He Himself sets us the pattern, which to imitate is to be the children of our Father which is in heaven, in that He loves His enemies, blessing them that curse, and doing good to them that hate. He Himself is what He has enjoined us to be, in that He feeds His enemies when they hunger, and when they thirst gives them drink, heaping coals of fire on their heads, and seeking to kindle in them thereby the glow of answering love, not being overcome of their evil, so that He repays hate with hate and scorn with scorn, but in patient continuance of loving kindness seeking to overcome evil with good. He is Himself that charitywhich is not easily provoked, is not soon angry, beareth all things, hopeth all things, and never faileth. His love is mightier than all our sins, and waits not on our merits, nor is turned away by our iniquities. God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

**II. Then, secondly, we have here--the pleading of Christ's patient love.**

I have been trying to say as broadly and strongly as I can, that our sins do not turn away the love of God in Christ from us. The more earnestly we believe and proclaim that, the more needful is it to set forth distinctly--and that not as limiting, but as explaining the truth--the other thought, that the sin which does not avert, does modify the expression of, the love of God. Man's sin compels Him to do what the prophet calls his strange work--the work which is not dear to His heart, nor natural, if one may so say, to His hands--His work of judgment.

The love of Christ has to come to sinful men with patient pleading and remonstrance, that it may enter their hearts and give its blessings. We are familiar with a modern work of art in which that long-suffering appeal is wonderfully portrayed. He who is the Light of the world stands, girded with the royal mantle clasped with the priestly breastplate, bearing in His hand the lamp of truth, and there, amidst the dew of night and the rank hemlock, He pleads for entrance at the closed door which has no handle on its outer side, and is hinged to open only from within. I stand at the door and knock. If any man open the door, I will come in.

And in this incident before us, we see represented not only the endless patience of God's pitying love, but the method which it needs to take in order to reach the heart.

There is an appeal to the traitor's heart, and an appeal to his conscience. Christ would have him think of the relations that have so long subsisted between them; and He would have him think, too, of the real nature of the deed he is doing, or, perhaps, of the motives that impel him. The grave, sad word, by which He addresses him, is meant to smite upon his heart. The sharp question which He puts to him is meant to wake up his conscience; and both taken together represent the two chief classes of remonstrance which He brings to bear upon us all--the two great batteries from which He assails the fortress of our sins.

There is first, then--Christ's appeal to the heart. He tries to make Judas feel the considerations that should restrain him. The appellation by which our Lord addresses him does not in the original convey quite so strongly the idea of amity, as our word Frienddoes. It is not the same as that which He had used a few hours before in the upper chamber, when He said, Henceforth I call you not servants, but I have called you friends.--Ye are My friends if ye do whatsoever I command you. It is the same as is put into the lips of the Lord of the vineyard, remonstrating with his jealous labourer, Friend, I do thee no wrong. There is a tone, then, of less intimate association and graver rebuke in it than in that name with which He honours those who make His will theirs, and His word the law of their lives. It does not speak of close confidence, but it does suggest companionship and kindness on the part of the speaker. There is rebuke in it, but it is rebuke which derives its whole force from the remembrance of ancient concord and connection. Our Lord would recall to the memory of the betrayer the days in which they had taken sweet counsel together. It is as if He had said--Hast thou forgotten all our former intercourse? Thou hast eaten My bread, thou hast been Mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted--canst thou lift up thy heel against Me?What happy hours of quiet fellowship on many a journey, of rest together after many a day of toil, what forgotten thoughts of the loving devotion and the glow of glad consecration that he had once felt, what a long series of proofs of Christ's gentle goodness and meek wisdom should have sprung again to remembrance at such an appeal! And how black and dastardly would his guilt have seemed if once he had ventured to remember what unexampled friendship he was sinning against!

Is it not so with us all, dear brethren? All our evils are betrayals of Christ, and all our betrayals of Christ are sins against a perfect friendship and an unvaried goodness. We, too, have sat at His table, heard His wisdom, seen His miracles, listened to His pleadings, have had a place in His heart; and if we turn away from Him to do our own pleasure, and sell His love for a handful of silver, we need not cherish shuddering abhorrence against that poor wretch who gave Him up to the cross. Oh! if we could see aright, we should see our Saviour's meek, sad face standing between us and each of our sins, with warning in the pitying eyes, and His pleading voice would sound in our ears, appealing to us by loving remembrances of His ancient friendship, to turn from the evil which is treason against Him, and wounds His heart as much as it harms ours. Take heed lest in condemning the traitor we doom ourselves. If we flush into anger at the meanness of his crime, and declare, He shall surely die, do we not hear a prophet's voice saying to each, Thou art the man?

The loving hand laid on the heart-strings is followed by a strong stroke on conscience. The heart vibrates most readily in answer to gentle touches: the conscience, in answer to heavier, as the breath that wakes the chords of an Aeolian harp would pass silent through the brass of a trumpet. Wherefore art thou come?--if to be taken as a question at all, which, as I have said, seems most natural, is either, What hast thou come to do?--or, Why hast thou come to do it?Perhaps it maybe fairly taken as including both. But, at all events, it is clearly an appeal to Judas to make him see what his conduct really is in itself, and possibly in its motive too. And this is the constant effort of the love of Christ--to get us to say to ourselves the real name of what we are about.

We cloak our sins from ourselves with many wrappings, as they swathe a mummy in voluminous folds. And of these veils, one of the thickest is woven by our misuse of words to describe the very same thing by different names, according as we do it, or another man does it. Almost all moral actions--the thing to which we can apply the words right or wrong--have two or more names, of which the one suggests the better and the other the worse side of the action. For instance what in ourselves we call prudent regard for our own interest, we call, in our neighbour, narrow selfishness; what in ourselves is laudable economy, in him is miserable avarice. We are impetuous, he is passionate; we generous, he lavish; we are clever men of business, he is a rogue; we sow our wild oats and are gay, he is dissipated. So we cheat ourselves by more than half-transparent veils of our own manufacture, which we fling round the ugly features and misshapen limbs of these sins of ours, and we are made more than ever their bond-slaves thereby.

Therefore, it is the office of the truest love to force us to look at the thing as it is. It would go some way to keep a man from some of his sins if he would give the thing its real name. A distinct conscious statement to oneself, Now I am going to tell a lie--This that I am doing is fraud--This emotion that I feel creeping with devilish warmth about the roots of my heart is revenge--and so on, would surely startle us sometimes, and make us fling the gliding poison from our breast, as a man would a snake that he found just lifting its head from the bosom of his robe. Suppose Judas had answered the question, and, gathering himself up, had looked his Master in the face, and said--What have I come for?I have come to betray Thee for thirty pieces of silver!Do you not think that putting his guilt into words might have moved even him to more salutary feelings than the remorse which afterwards accompanied his tardy discernment of what he had done? So the patient love of Christ comes rebuking, and smiting hard on conscience. The grace of God that bringeth salvation to all men hath appeared disciplining--and His hand is never more gentle than when it plucks away the films with which we hide our sins from ourselves, and shows us the rottenness and dead men's bonesbeneath the whited walls of the sepulchres and the velvet of the coffins.

He must begin with rebukes that He may advance to blessing. He must teach us what is separating us from Him that, learning it, we may flee to His grace to help us. There is no entrance for the truest gifts of His patient love into any heart that has not yielded to His pleading remonstrance, and in lowly penitence has answered His question as He would have us answer it, Friend and Lover of my soul, I have sinned against Thy tender heart, against the unexampled patience of Thy love. I have departed from Thee and betrayed Thee. Blessed be Thy merciful voice which hath taught me what I have done! Blessed be Thine unwearied goodness which still bends over me! Raise me fallen! forgive me treacherous! Keep me safe and happy, ever true and near to Thee!

**III. Notice the possible rejection of the pleading of Christ's patient love.**

Even that appeal was vain. Here we are confronted with a plain instance of man's mysterious and awful power of frustrating the counsel of God--of which one knows not whether is greater, the difficulty of understanding how a finite will can rear itself against the Infinite Will, or the mournful mystery that a creature should desire to set itself against its loving Maker and Benefactor. But strange as it is, yet so it is; and we can turn round upon Sovereign Fatherhood bidding us to its service, and say, I will not. He pleads with us, and we can resist His pleadings. He holds out the mercies of His hands and the gifts of His grace, and we can reject them. We cannot cease to be the objects of His love, but we can refuse to be the recipients of its most precious gifts. We can bar our hearts against it. Then, of what avail is it to us? To go back to an earlier illustration, the sunshine pours down and floods a world, what does that matter to us if we have fastened up shutters on all our windows, and barred every crevice through which the streaming gladness can find its way? We shall grope at noontide as in the dark within our gloomy house, while our neighbours have light in theirs. What matters it though we float in the great ocean of the divine love, if with pitch and canvas we have carefully closed every aperture at which the flood can enter? A hermetically closed jar, plunged in the Atlantic, will be as dry inside as if it were lying on the sand of the desert. It is possible to perish of thirst within sight of the fountain. It is possible to separate ourselves from the love of God, not to separate the love of God from ourselves.

The incident before us carries another solemn lesson--how simple and easy a thing it is to repel that pleading love. What did Judas do? Nothing; it was enough. He merely held his peace--no more. There was no need for him to break out with oaths and curses, to reject his Lord with wild words. Silence was sufficient. And for us--no more is required. We have but to be passive; we have but to stand still. Not to accept is to refuse; non-submission is rebellion. We do not need to emphasise our refusal by any action--no need to lift our clenched hands in defiance. We have simply to put them behind our backs or to keep them folded. The closed hand must remain an empty hand. He that believeth not is condemned. My friend, remember that, when Christ pleads and draws, to do nothing is to oppose, and to delay is to refuse. It is a very easy matter to ruin your soul. You have simply to keep still when He says Come unto Me--to keep your eyes fixed where they were, when He says, Look unto Me, and be ye saved, and all the rest will follow of itself.

Notice, too, how the appeal of Christ's love hardens where it does not soften. That gentle voice drove the traitor nearer the verge over which he fell into a gulf of despair. It should have drawn him closer to the Lord, but he recoiled from it, and was thereby brought nearer destruction. Every pleading of Christ's grace, whether by providences, or by books, or by His own word, does something with us. It is never vain. Either it melts or it hardens. The sun either scatters the summer morning mists, or it rolls them into heavier folds, from whose livid depths the lightning will be flashing by mid-day. You cannot come near the most inadequate exhibition of the pardoning love of Christ without being either drawn closer to Him or driven further from Him. Each act of rejection prepares the way for another, which will be easier, and adds another film to the darkness which covers your eyes, another layer to the hardness which incrusts your hearts.

Again, that silence, so eloquent and potent in its influence, was probably the silence of a man whose conscience was convicted while his will was unchanged. Such a condition is possible. It points to solemn thoughts, and to deep mysteries in man's awful nature. He knew that he was wrong, he had no excuse, his deed was before him in some measure in its true character, and yet he would not give it up. Such a state, if constant and complete, presents the most frightful picture we can frame of a soul. That a man shall not be able to say, I did it ignorantly; that Christ shall not be able to ground His intercession on, They know not what they do; that with full knowledge of the true nature of the deed, there shall be no wavering of the determination to do it--we may well turn with terror from such an awful abyss. But let us remember that, whether such a condition in its completeness is conceivable or not, at all events we may approach it indefinitely; and we do approach it by every sin, and by every refusal to yield to the love that would touch our consciences and fill our hearts.

Have you ever noticed what a remarkable verbal correspondence there is between these words of our text, and some other very solemn ones of Christ's? The question that He puts into the lips of the king who came in to see his guests is, Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having on a wedding garment?The question asked on earth shall be repeated again at last. The silence which once indicated a convinced conscience and an unchanged will may at that day indicate both of these and hopelessness beside. The clear vision of the divine love, if it do not flood the heart with joy and evoke the bliss of answering love, may fill it with bitterness. It is possible that the same revelation of the same grace may be the heaven of heaven to those who welcome it, and the pain of hell to those who turn from it. It is possible that love believed and received may be life, and love recognised and rejected may be death. It is possible that the vision of the same face may make some break forth with the rapturous hymn, Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him!and make others call on the hills to fall on them and cover them from its brightness.

But let us not end with such words. Rather, dear brethren, let us yield to His patient beseechings; let Him teach us our evil and our sin. Listen to His great love who invites us to plead, and promises to pardon--Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.