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

**MATTHEW-129**. **THE REAL HIGH PRIEST AND HIS COUNTERFEIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"57.* *And they that had laid hold on Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. 58. But Peter followed Him afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end. 59. Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put Him to death; 60. But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, 61. And said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days. 62 And the high priest arose, and said unto Him, Answerest Thou nothing? what is it which these witness against Thee? 63. But Jesus held His peace. And the high priest answered and said unto Him, I adjure Thee by the living God, that Thou tell us whether Thou be the Christ, the Son of God. 64. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. 65. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard His blasphemy. 66. What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death. 67. Then did they spit in His face, and buffeted Him; and others smote Him with the palms of their hands, 68. Saying, Prophesy unto us, Thou Christ, Who is he that smote Thee?"*

*Matthew 26:57-68*

John's Gospel tells us that Jesus was brought before Annas first, probably in the same official priestly residence as Caiaphas, his son-in-law, occupied. That preliminary examination brought out nothing to incriminate the prisoner, and was flagrantly illegal, being an attempt to entrap Him into self-accusing statements. It was baffled by Jesus being silent first, and subsequently taking His stand on the undeniable principle that a charge must be sustained by evidence, not based on self-accusation. Annas, having made nothing of this strange criminal, sent Him bound unto Caiaphas.

A meeting of the Sanhedrin had been hastily summoned in the dead of night, which was itself an illegality. Now Jesus stands before the poor shadow of a judicial tribunal, which, though it was all that Rome had left a conquered people, was still entitled to sit in judgment on Him. Strange inversion, and awful position for these formalists! And with sad persistence of bitter prejudice they proceeded to try the prisoner, all unaware that it was themselves, not Him, that they were trying.

They began wrongly, and betrayed their animus at once. They were sitting there to inquire whether Jesus was guilty or no; they had made up their minds beforehand that He was, and their effort now was but to manufacture some thin veil of legality for a judicial murder. So they sought false witness, ... that they might put Him to death. Matthew simply says that no evidence sufficient for the purpose was forthcoming; Mark adds that the weak point, was that the lies contradicted each other. Christ's presence has a strange, solemn power of unmasking our falsehoods, both of thought and deed, and it is hard to speak evil of Him before His face. If His calumniators were confused when He stood as Prisoner, what will they be when He sits as a Judge?

Only Matthew and Mark tell us of the two witnesses whose twisted version of the word about destroying the Temple and rebuilding it in three daysseemed to Caiaphas serious enough to require an answer. Their mistake was one which might have been made in good faith, but none the less was their travesty false witness. Their version of His great word shows how easily the teaching of a lofty soul, passed through the popular brain, is degraded, and made to mean the opposite of what he had meant by it. For the destruction of the Temple had appeared in the saying as the Jewswork, and Jesus had presented Himself in it as the Restorer, not the Destroyer, of the Temple and of all that it symbolised. We destroy, He rebuilds. The murder of Jesus was the suicide of the nation. Caiaphas and his council were even now pulling down the Temple. And that murder was the destruction, so far as men could effect it, of the true Temple of His body, in which the fulness of the Godhead dwelt, and which was more gloriously reconstituted in the Resurrection. The risen Christ rears the true temple on earth, for through Him the Holy Ghost dwells in His Church, which is collectively the Temple, and in all believing spirits, which are individually the templesof God. So the false witnesses distorted into a lie a great truth.

The Incarnate Word was dumb all the while. He was still and refrainedHimself. It was the silence of the King before a lawless tribunal of rebels, of patient meekness, as a sheep before her shearers; of innocence that will not stoop to defend itself from groundless accusations; of infinite pity and forbearing love, which sees that it cannot win, but will not smite. Jesus is still silent, but one day, with the breath of His lips shall He slay the wicked. Caiaphas seems to have been annoyed as well as surprised at Jesussilence, for there is a trace of irritation, as at contempt of court, in his words. But our Lord's continued silence appears to have somewhat awed him, and the dawning consciousness of his dignity is, perhaps, the reason for the high priest's casting aside all the foolery of false witnessing, and coming at last to the real point,-- the Messianic claims of Jesus.

Caiaphas was doing his duty as high priest in inquiring into such claims, but he was somewhat late in the day, and he had made up his mind before he inquired. What he wished to get was a plain assertion on which the death sentence could be pronounced. Jesus knew this, and yet He answered. But Luke tells us that He first scathingly pointed to the unreality and animus of the question by saying, If I tell you, ye will not believe. But yet it was fitting that He should solemnly, before the supreme court, representative of the nation, declare that He was the Messiah, and that, if He was to be rejected and condemned, it should be on the ground of that declaration. Before Caiaphas He claimed to be Messiah, before Pilate He claimed to be King. Each rejected Him in the character that appealed to them most. The many-sidedness of the perfect Revealer of God brings Him to each soul in the aspect that most loudly addresses each. Therefore the love in the appeal and the guilt in its rejection are the greater.

But Christ's self-attestation to the council was not limited to the mere claim to the name of Messiah. It disclosed the implications of that name in a way altogether unlike the conceptions held by Caiaphas. When Caiaphas put in apposition the Christand the Son of God, he was not speaking from the ordinary Jewish point of view, but from some knowledge, of Christ's teaching, and there are two charges combined into one.

But Jesusanswer, while plainly claiming to be the Messiah, expands itself in regard to the claim to be Son of God, and shows its tremendous significance. It involves participation in divine authority and omnipotence. It involves a future coming to be the Judge of His judges. It declares that these blind scribes and elders will see Him thus exalted, and it asserts that all this is to begin then and there (henceforth), as if that hour of humiliation was to His consciousness the beginning of His manifestation as Lord, or, as John has it, the hour that the Son of Man should be glorified. Nor must we leave out of sight the fact that it is the Son of Manof whom all this is said, for thereby are indicated the raising of His perfect humanity to participation in Deity, and the possibility that His brethren, too, may sit where He sits. Much was veiled in the answer to the council, much is veiled to us. But this remains,--that Jesus, at that supreme moment, when He was bound to leave no misunderstandings, made the plainest claim to divinity, and could have saved His life if He had not done so. Either Caiaphas, in his ostentatious horror of such impiety, was right in calling Christ's words blasphemy, and not far wrong in inferring that Jesus was not fit to live, or He is the everlasting Son of the Father, and will come to be our Judge.