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

**MATTHEW-130**. **JESUS CHARGED WITH BLASPHEMY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses?"*

*Matthew 26:65*

Jesus was tried and condemned by two tribunals, the Jewish ecclesiastical and the Roman civil. In each case the charge corresponded to the Court. The Sanhedrin took no cognisance of, and had no concern with, rebellion against Caesar; though for the time they pretended loyalty. Pilate had still less concern about Jewish superstitions. And so the investigation in each case turned on a different question. In the one it was, Art Thou the Son of God?in the other, Art Thou the King of Israel?The answer to both was a simple Yes!but with very significant differences. Pilate received an explanation; the Sanhedrin none. The Roman governor was taught that Christ's title of King belonged to another region altogether from that of Caesar, and did not in the slightest degree infringe upon the dominion that he represented. But Son of Godwas capable of no explanation that could make it any less offensive; and the only thing to be done was to accept it or to condemn Him.

So this saying of the high priest differs from other words of our Lord's antagonists, which we have been considering in recent pages, in that it is no distortion of our Lord's characteristics or meaning. It correctly understands, but it fatally rejects, His claims; and does not hesitate to take the further step, on the ground of these, of branding Him as a blasphemer.

We may turn the high priest's question in another direction: What further need have we of witnesses?These horror-stricken judges, rending their garments in simulated grief and zeal, and that silent Prisoner, knowing that His life was the forfeit of His claims, yet saying no word of softening or explanation of them, may teach us much. They are witnesses to some of the central facts of the revelation of God in Christ. Let us turn to these for a few moments.

**I. First, then, they witness to Christ's claims.**

The question that was proposed to Jesus, Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the living God?was suggested by the facts of His ministry, and not by anything that had come out in the course of this investigation. It was the summing up of the impression made on the ecclesiastical authorities of Judaism by His whole attitude and demeanour. And if we look back to His life we shall see that there were instances, long before this, on which, on the same ground, the same charge was flung at Him. For example, when He would heal the paralytic, and, before He dealt with bodily disease, attended to spiritual weakness, and said, Thy sins be forgiven thee, ere He said, Take up thy bed and walk, there was a group of keen-eyed hunters after heresy sitting eagerly on the watch, who snatched at the words in a moment, and said, Who is this that forgiveth sins? No man forgiveth sins, but God only! This man speaketh blasphemies!And they were right. He did claim a divine prerogative; and either the claim must be admitted or the charge of blasphemy urged.

Again, when He infringed Rabbinical Sabbath law by a cure, and they said, This Man has broken the Sabbath day, His vindication was worse than His offence, for He answered, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. And then they sought the more to kill Him, because He not only brake the Sabbath, but also called God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. And again, when He declared that the safety of His sheep in His hands was identical with their safety in His Father's hands, and vindicated the audacious parallelism by the tremendous assertion, I and My Father are One, the charge of blasphemy rang out; and was inevitable, unless the claim was true.

These outstanding instances are but, as it were, summits that rise above the general level. But the general level is that of One who takes an altogether unique position. No one else, professing to lead men in paths of righteousness, has so constantly put the stress of His teaching, not upon morality, nor religion, nor obedience to God, but upon this, Believe in Me; or ever pushed forward His own personality into the foreground, and made the whole nobleness and blessedness and security and devoutness of a life to hinge upon that one thing, its personal relation to Him.

People talk about the sweet and gentle wisdom that flowed from Christ's lips, and so on; about the lofty morality, about the beauty of pity and tenderness, and all the other commonplaces so familiar to us, and we gladly admit them all. But I venture to go a step further than all these, and to say that the outstanding differentia, the characteristic which marks off Christ's teaching as something new, peculiar, and altogether per se, is not its morality, not its philanthropy, not its meek wisdom, not its sweet reasonableness, but its tremendous assertions of the importance of Himself.

And if I am asked to state the ground upon which such an assertion may be vindicated, I would point you to such facts as these, that this Man took up a position of equality with, and of superiority to, the legislation which He and the people to whom He was speaking regarded as being divinely sent, and said, Ye have heard that it hath been said to them of old timeso and so; but I say unto you: that this Man declared that to build upon His words was to build upon a rock; that this Man declared that He--He--was the legitimate object of absolute trust, of utter submission and obedience; that He claimed from His followers affiance, love, reverence which cannot be distinguished from worship, and that He did not therein conceive that He was intercepting anything that belonged to the Father. This Man professed to be able to satisfy the desires of every human heart when He said, If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink. This Man claimed to be able to breathe the sanctity of repose in the blessedness of obedience over all the weary and the heavy laden; and assured them that He Himself, through all the ages, and in all lands, and for all troubles, would give them rest. This Man declared that He who stood there, in the quiet homes of Galilee, and went about its acres with those blessed feet for our advantage, was to be Judge of the whole world. This Man said that His name was Son of God; and this Man declared, He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.

And then people say to us, Oh! your Gospel narratives, even if they be the work of men in good faith, telling what they suppose He said, mistook the Teacher; and if we could strip away the accretion of mistaken reverence, and come to the historical person, we should find no claims like these.

Well, this is not the time to enter into the large questions which that contention involves, but I point you to the incident which makes my text, and I say, What need we any further witnesses?Nobody denies that Jesus Christ was crucified as the result of a combination of Sanhedrin and Pilate. What set the Jewish rulers against Him with such virulent and murderous determination? Is there anything in the life of Jesus Christ, if it is watered down as the people, who want to knock out all the supernatural, desire to water it down--is there anything in the life that will account for the inveterate acrimony and hostility which pursued Him to the death? The fact remains that, whether or not Evangelists and Apostles misconceived His teaching when they gave such prominence to His personality and His lofty claims, His enemies were under the same delusion, if it were a delusion; and the reason why the whole orthodox religionism of Judaism rejoiced when He was nailed to the Cross was summed up in the taunt which they flung at Him as He hung there, If He be the Son of God, let Him come down, and we will believe Him.

So, brethren, I put into the witness-box Annas and Caiaphas and all their satellites, and I say, What need we any further witnesses?He died because He declared that He was the Son of God.

And I beseech you ask yourselves whether we are not being put off with a maimed version of His teaching, if there is struck out of it this its central characteristic, that He, the sage and humble, declared that He was likewise One with the Creator.

**II. Secondly, note how we have here the witness that Jesus Christ assented always to the loftiest meaning that men attached to His claims.**

I have already pointed out the remarkable difference between the explanations which He condescended to give to the Roman governor as to the perfectly innocent meaning of His claim to be the King of Israel, and His silence before the Sanhedrin. That silence is only explicable because they rightly understood the meaning of the claim which they contemptuously and perversely rejected. Jesus Christ knew that His death was the forfeit, as I have said, and yet He locked His lips and said not a word.

In like manner when, on the other occasion to which I have already referred, the Pharisees stumbled at His claims to forgive sins, He said nothing to soften down that claim. If He had meant then only what some people would desire to make Him mean when He said, Thy sins be forgiven thee--viz., that He was simply acting as a minister of the divine forgiveness, and assuring a poor sinner that God had pardoned him--why in common honesty, in discharge of His plain obligations of a teacher, did He not say so--not for His own sake, but for the sake of preventing such a tremendous misunderstanding of His meaning? But He let them go away with the conviction that He intended to claim a divine prerogative, and vindicated the assertion by doing what only a divine power could do: That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power enough on earth to forgive sins, He saith unto the sick of the palsy, Take up thy bed and walk. There was no need for Him to have wrought a miracle to establish His right to tell a poor soul that God forgave sin. And the fact that the miracle was supposed to be the demonstration and the vindication of His right to declare forgiveness shows that He was exercising that prerogative which belongs, as they rightly said, to God only.

And in precisely the same manner, the commonest obligations of honesty, the plain duty of a misunderstood Teacher, to say nothing of the duty of self-preservation, ought to have opened His lips in the presence of the Jewish authorities, if they understood wrongly and set too high their estimate of the meaning of His claims. His silence establishes the fact that they understood these aright.

And so, all through His life, we note this peculiarity, that He never puts aside as too lofty for truth men's highest interpretations of His claims, nor as too lowly for their mutual relation the lowest reverence which bowed before Him. Peter, in the house of Cornelius, said, Stand up! for I myself also am a man. Paul and Barnabas, when the priests brought out the oxen and garlands to the gates of Lystra, could say, We also are men of like passions with yourselves. But this meek Jesus lets men fall at His feet; and women wash them with their tears and wipe them with the hairs of their head; and souls stretch out maimed hands of faith, and grasp Him as their only hope. When His apostle said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God, His answer was, Blessed art thou, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, and when another exclaimed, My Lord and my God!this Pattern of all meekness accepted and endorsed the title, and pronounced a benediction on all who, not having seen Him, should hereafter attain a like faith.

Now I want to know whether that characteristic, which runs through all His life, and is inseparable from it, can be vindicated on any ground except the ground that He was God manifest in the flesh. Either Jesus Christ had a greedy appetite for excessive adoration, was a victim to diseased vanity and ever-present self-regard--the most damning charge that you can bring against a religious teacher--or He accepted love and reverence and trust, because the love and the reverence and the trust knit souls to the Incarnate God their Saviour.

**III. And so, lastly we have here witness to the only alternative to the acceptance of His claims.**

He hath spoken blasphemy, not because He had derogated from the dignity of divinity, but because He had presumed to participate in it. And it seems to me, with all deference, that this rough alternative is the only legitimate one. If Jesus Christ did make such claims, and His relation to the Jewish hierarchy and His death are, as I have shown you, apart even from the testimony of the Evangelists, strong confirmation of the fact that He did--if Jesus Christ did make such claims, and they were not valid, one of two things follows. Either He believed them, and then, what about His sanity? or He did not believe them, and then, what about His honesty? In either case, what about His claims to be a Teacher of religion? What about His claims to be the Pattern of humanity? That part of His teaching and character is either the manifestation of His glory or it is like one of those fatal black seams that run through and penetrate into the substance of a fair white marble statue, marring all the rest of its pale and celestial beauty. Brethren, it seems to me that, when all is said and done, we come to one of three things about Jesus Christ. Either He blasphemethif He said these things, and they were not true, or He is beside Himselfif He said these things and believed them, or

Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ;

Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.

Now I know that there are many men who, I venture to say, are far better than their creed, and who, believing it impossible to accept, in their plain meaning, the plain claims of Jesus Christ to divinity, do yet cleave to Him with a love and a reverence and an obedience which more orthodox men might well copy. And far be it from me to say one word which might seem even to quench the faintest beam of light that, shining from His perfect character, draws any heart, however imperfectly, to Himself. Only, if I speak to any such at this time, I beseech them to follow the light which draws them, and to see whether their reverence for that fair character should not lead them to accept implicitly the claims that came from His own lips. I humbly venture to say that if we know anything at all about Jesus Christ, we know that He lived declaring Himself to be the Everlasting Son of the Father, and that He died because He did so declare Himself. And I beseech you to ponder the question whether reverence for Him and admiration of His character can be logically and reasonably retained, side by side with the repudiation of that which is the most distinctive part of His message to men.

Oh, brethren, if it is true that God has come in the flesh, and that that sweet, gracious, infinitely beautiful life is really the revelation of the heart of God, then what a beam of sunshine falls upon all the darkness of this world! Then God is love; then that love holds us all; did not shrink from dying for us, and lives for ever to bless us. If these claims are true, what should our attitude be but that of infinite trust, love, submission, obedience, and the shaping of our lives after the pattern of His life?

These rejectors, when they said, He speaketh blasphemies, were sealing their own doom, and the ruined Temple and nineteen centuries of wandering misery show what comes to men who hear Christ declaring that He is the Son of the living God and the Judge of the world, and who find nothing in the words but blasphemy. On the other hand, if we will answer His question, Whom say ye that I am?as the apostle answered it, we shall, like the apostle, receive a benediction from His lips, and be set on that faith as on a rock against which the gates of hellshall not prevail.