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

**MATTHEW-131**. **SEE THOU TO THAT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"4.* *I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? See thou to that. 24. I am innocent of the blood of this just Person: see ye to it."*

*Matthew 27:4, 24*

So, what the priests said to Judas, Pilate said to the priests. They contemptuously bade their wretched instrument bear the burden of his own treachery. They had condescended to use his services, but he presumed too far if he thought that that gave him a claim upon their sympathies. The tools of more respectable and bolder sinners are flung aside as soon as they are done with. What were the agonies or the tears of a hundred such as he to these high-placed and heartless transgressors? Priests though they were, and therefore bound by their office to help any poor creature that was struggling with a wounded conscience, they had nothing better to say to him than this scornful gibe, What is that to us? See thou to that.

Pilate, on the other hand, metes to them the measure which they had meted to Judas. With curious verbal correspondence, he repeats the very words of Judas and of the priests. Innocent blood, said Judas. I am innocent of the blood of this just Person, said Pilate. See thou to that, answered they. See ye to it, says he. He tries to shove off his responsibility upon them, and they are quite willing to take it. Their consciences are not easily touched. Fanatical hatred which thinks itself influenced by religious motives is the blindest and cruellest of all passions, knowing no compunction, and utterly unperceptive of the innocence of its victim.

And so these three, Judas, the priests, and Pilate, suggest to us, I think, a threefold way in which conscience is perverted. Judas represents the agony of conscience, Pilate represents the shuffling sophistications of a half-awakened conscience, and those priests and people represent the torpor of an altogether misdirected conscience.

**I. Judas, or the agony of conscience.**

I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. We do not need to enter at any length upon the difficult question as to what were the motives of Judas in his treachery. For my part I do not see that there is anything in the Scripture narrative, simply interpreted, to bear out the hypothesis that his motives were mistaken zeal and affection for Christ; and a desire to force Him to the avowal of His Messiahship. One can scarcely suppose zeal so strangely perverted as to begin by betrayal, and if the object was to make our Lord speak out His claims, the means adopted were singularly ill-chosen. The story, as it stands, naturally suggests a much less far-fetched explanation.

Judas was simply a man of a low earthly nature, who became a follower of Christ, thinking that He was to prove a Messiah of the vulgar type, or another Judas Maccabaeus. He was not attracted by Christ's character and teaching. As the true nature of Christ's work and kingdom became more obvious, he became more weary of Him and it. The closest proximity to Jesus Christ made eleven enthusiastic disciples, but it made one traitor. No man could live near Him for three years without coming to hate Him if he did not love Him. Then, as ever, He was set for the fall and for the rise of many. He was the savour of life unto life, or of death unto death.

But be this as it may, we have here to do with the sudden revulsion of feeling which followed upon the accomplished act. This burst of confession does not sound like the words of a man who had been actuated by motives of mistaken affection. He knows himself a traitor, and that fair, perfect character rises before him in its purity, as he had never seen it before--to rebuke and confound him.

So this exclamation of his puts into a vivid shape, which may help it to stick in our memories and hearts, this thought--what an awful difference there is in the look of a sin before we do it and afterwards! Before we do it the thing to be gained seems so attractive, and the transgression that gains it seems so comparatively insignificant. Yes! and when we have done it the two change places; the thing that we win by it seems so contemptible--thirty pieces of silver! pitch them over the Temple enclosure and get rid of them!--and the thing that we did to win them dilates into such awful magnitude!

For instance, suppose we do anything that we know to be wrong, being tempted to it by a momentary indulgence of some mere animal impulse. By the very nature of the case, that dies in its satisfaction and the desire dies along with it. We do not wish the prize any more when once we have got it. It lasts but a moment and is past. Then we are left alone with the thought of the sin that we have done. When we get the prize of our wrong-doing, we find out that it is not as all-satisfying as we expected it would be. Most of our earthly aims are like that. The chase is a great deal more than the hare. Or, as George Herbert has it, Nothing between two dishes--a splendid service of silver plate, and when you take the cover off there is no food to eat--such are the pleasures here.

Universally, this is true, that sooner or later, when the delirium of passion and the rush of temptation are over and we wake to consciousness, we find that we are none the richer for the thing gained, and oh! so infinitely the poorer for the means by which we gained it. It is that old story of the Veiled Prophet that wooed and won the hearts of foolish maidens, and, when he had them in his power in the inner chamber, removed the silver veil which they had thought hid dazzling glory and showed hideous features that struck despair into their hearts. Every man's sin does that for him. And to you I come now with this message: every wrong thing that you do, great or small, will be like some of those hollow images of the gods that one hears of in barbarian temples--looked at in front, fair, but when you get behind them you find a hollow, full of dust and spiderswebs and unclean things. Be sure of this, every sin is a blunder.

That is the first lesson that lies in these words of this wretched traitor; but again, here is an awful picture for us of the hell upon earth, of a conscience which has no hope of pardon. I do not suppose that Judas was lost, if he were lost, because he betrayed Jesus Christ, but because, having betrayed Jesus Christ, he never asked to be forgiven. And I suppose that the difference between the traitor who betrayed Him and the other traitor who denied Him, was this, that the one, when he went out and wept bitterly, had the thought of a loving Master with him, and the other, when he went out and hanged himself, had the thought of nothing but that foul deed glaring before him. I pray you to learn this lesson--you cannot think too much, too blackly, of your own sins, but you may think too exclusively of them, and if you do they will drive you to madness of despair.

My dear friend, there is no penitence or remorse which is deep enough for the smallest transgression; but there is no transgression which is so great but that forgiveness for it may come. And we may have it for the asking, if we will go to that dear Christ that died for us. The consciousness of sinfulness is a wholesome consciousness. I would that every man and woman listening to me now had it deep in their consciences, and then I would that it might lead us all to that one Lord in whom there is forgiveness and peace. Be sure of this, that if Judas Iscariot, when his soul flared forth in the dark, died without hope and without pardon, it was not because his crime was too great for forgiveness, but because the forgiveness had never been asked. There is no unpardonable sin except that of refusing the pardon that avails for all sin.

**II. So much, then, for this first picture and the lessons that come out of it. In the next place we take Pilate, as the representative of what I have ventured to call the shufflings of a half-awakened conscience.**

I am innocent of the blood of this just Person, says he: see ye to it. He is very willing to shuffle off his responsibility upon priests and people, and they, for their part, are quite as willing to accept it; but the responsibility can neither be shuffled off by him nor accepted by them. His motive in surrendering Jesus to them was probably nothing more than the low and cowardly wish to humour his turbulent subjects, and so to secure an easy tenure of office. For such an end what did one poor man's life matter? He had a great contempt for the accusers, which he is scarcely at the pains to conceal. It breaks out in half-veiled sarcasms, by which he cynically indemnifies himself for his ignoble yielding to the constraint which they put upon him. He knows perfectly well that the Roman power has nothing to fear from this King, whose kingdom rested on His witness to the Truth. He knows perfectly well that unavowed motives of personal enmity lie at the bottom of the whole business. In the words of our text he acquits Christ, and thereby condemns himself. If Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, he knew that he, as governor, was guilty of prostituting Roman justice, which was Rome's best gift to her subject nations, and of giving up an innocent man to death, in order to save himself trouble and to conciliate a howling mob. No washing of his hands will cleanse them. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten that hand. But his words let us see how a man may sophisticate his conscience and quibble about his guilt.

Here, then, we get once more a vivid picture that may remind us of what, alas! we all know in our own experience, how a man's conscience may be clearsighted enough to discern, and vocal enough to declare, that a certain thing is wrong, but not strong enough to restrain from doing it. Conscience has a voice and an eye; alas! it has no hands. It shares the weakness of all law, it cannot get itself executed. Men will get over a fence, although the board that says, Trespassers will be prosecutedis staring them in the face in capital letters at the very place where they leap it. Your conscience is a king without an army, a judge without officers. If it had authority, as it has the power, it would govern the world, but as things are, it is reduced to issuing vain edicts and to saying, Thou shalt not, and if you turn round and say, I will, though, then conscience has no more that it can do.

And then here, too, is an illustration of one of the commonest of the ways by which we try to slip our necks out of the collar, and to get rid of the responsibilities that really belong to us. See ye to itdoes not avail to put Pilate's crime on the priestsshoulders. Men take part in evil, and each thinks himself innocent, because he has companions. Half-a-dozen men carry a burden together; none of them fancies that he is carrying it. It is like the case of turning out a platoon of soldiers to shoot a mutineer--nobody knows whose bullet killed him, and nobody feels himself guilty; but there the man lies dead, and it was somebody that did it. So corporations, churches, societies, and nations do things that individuals would not do, and each man of them wipes his mouth and says, I have done no harm. And even when we sin alone we are clever at finding scapegoats. The woman tempted me, and I did eat, is the formula universally used yet. The schoolboy's excuse, Please, sir, it was not me, it was the other boy, is what we are all ready to say.

Now I pray you, brethren, to remember that, whether our consciences try to shuffle off responsibility for united action upon the other members of the firm, or whether we try to excuse our individual actions by laying blame on our tempers, or whether we adopt the modern slang, and talk about circumstances and heredity and the like, as being reasons for the diminution or the extinction of the notion of guilt, it is sophistical trifling; and down at the bottom most of us know that we alone are responsible for the volition which leads to our act. We could have helped it if we had liked. Nobody compelled us to keep in the partnership of evil, or to yield to the tempter. Pilate was not forced by his subjects to give the commandment that it should be as they required. They had their own burden to carry. Each man has to bear the consequences of his actions. There are many burdenswhich we can bear for one another, and so fulfil the law of Christ; but every man has to bear as his own the burden of the fruits of his deeds. In that harvest, he that soweth and he that reapeth are one, and each of us has to drink as we ourselves have brewed. You have to pay for your share, however many companions you may have had in the act.

So do not you sophisticate your consciences with the delusion that your responsibility may be shifted to any other person or thing. These may diminish, or may modify your responsibility, and God takes all these into account. But after all these have been taken into account there is this left--that you yourselves have done the act, which you need not have done unless you had so willed, and that having done it, you have to carry it on your back for evermore. See thou to that, was a heartless word, but it was a true one. Every one of us shall give an account of himself to God, and as the old Book of Proverbs has it, If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself: and if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it.

**III. And so, lastly, we have here another group still--the priests and people. They represent for us the torpor and misdirection of conscience.**

Then answered all the people and said, His blood be on us and on our children. They were perfectly ready to take the burden upon themselves. They thought that they were doing God servicewhen they slew God's Messenger. They had no perception of the beauty and gentleness of Christ's character. They believed Him to be a blasphemer, and they believed it to be a solemn religious duty to slay Him then and there. Were they to blame because they slew a blasphemer? According to Jewish law--no. They were to blame because they had brought themselves into such a moral condition that that was all which they thought of and saw in Jesus Christ. With their awful words they stand before us, as perhaps the crowning instances in Scripture history of the possible torpor which may paralyse consciences.

I need not dwell, I suppose, even for a moment, upon the thought of how the highest and noblest sentiments may be perverted into becoming the allies of the lowest crime. O Liberty! what crimes have been done in thy name!you remember one of the victims of the guillotine said, as her last words. O Religion! what crimes have been done in thy name!is one of the lessons to be gathered from Calvary.

But, passing that, to come to the thing that is of more consequence to each of us, let us take this thought, dear brethren, as to the awful possibility of a conscience going fast asleep in the midst of the wildest storm of passion, like that unfaithful prophet Jonah, down in the hold of the heathen ship. You can lull your consciences into dead slumber. You can stifle them so that they shall not speak a word against the worst of your sins. You can do so by simply neglecting them, by habitually refusing to listen to them. If you keep picking all the leaves and buds off the tree before they open, it will stop flowering. You can do it by gathering round yourself always, and only, evil associations and evil deeds. The habit of sinning will lull a conscience faster than almost anything else. We do not know how hot a room is, or how much the air is exhausted, when we have been sitting in it for an hour and a half. But if we came into it from outside we should feel the difference. Styrian peasants thrive and fatten upon arsenic, and men may flourish upon all iniquity and evil, and conscience will say never a word. Take care of that delicate balance within you; and see that you do not tamper with it nor twist it.

Conscience may be misguided as well as lulled. It may call evil good, and good evil; it may take honey for gall, and gall for honey. And so we need something outside of ourselves to be our guide, our standard. We are not to be contented that our consciences acquit us. I know nothing against myself, yet I am not hereby justified, says the apostle; he that judgeth me is the Lord. And it is quite possible that a man may have no prick of conscience and yet have done a very wrong thing. So we want, as it seems to me, something outside of ourselves that shall not be affected by our variations. Conscience is like the light on the binnacle of a ship. It tosses up and down along with the vessel. We want a steady light yonder on that headland, on the fixed solid earth, which shall not heave with the heaving wave, nor vary at all. Conscience speaks lowest when it ought to speak loudest. The worst man is least troubled by his conscience. It is like a lamp that goes out in the thickest darkness. Therefore we need, as I believe, a revelation of truth and goodness and beauty outside of ourselves to which we may bring our consciences that they may be enlightened and set right. We want a standard like the authorised weights and measures that are kept in the Tower of London, to which all the people in the little country villages may send up their yard measures and their pound weights, and find out if they are just and true. We want a Bible, and we want a Christ to tell us what is duty, as well as to make it possible for us to do it.

These groups which we have been looking at now, show us how very little help and sympathy a wounded conscience can get from its fellows. The conspirators turn upon each other as soon as the detectives are amongst them, and there is always one of them ready to go into the witness-box and swear away the lives of the others to save his own neck. Wolves tear sick wolves to pieces.

Round us there stand Society, pitiless and stern, and Nature, rigid and implacable; not to be besought, not to be turned. And when I, in the midst of this universe of fixed law and cause and consequence, wail out, I have sinned, a thousand voices say to me, What is that to us? See thou to that. And so I am left with my guilt--it and I together. There comes One with outstretched, wounded hands, and says, Cast all thy burden upon Me, and I will free thee from it all. 'Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows!Trust in Him, in His great sacrifice, and you will find that His innocent bloodhas a power that will liberate your conscience from its torpor, its vain excuses, its agony and despair.